

A guide to the Swiss educational system

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For parents with a UK
or international background

Robin Hull

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Preface

I have read this guide with much interest and find it very useful. It gives a good, differentiated overview of the Swiss educational system, with witty and appreciative comments and insights. The comparison with the UK system is both very informative and insightful.

Ich habe diesen Text mit viel Interesse und Gewinn studiert. Er gibt einen guten, differenzierten Überblick über das schweizerische Schulsystem, mit wertschätzenden und pointierten Aussagen und Einschätzungen. Der Vergleich mit dem UK-System ist sehr informativ und lehrreich.

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On a personal note

I grew up in a little village in the Zurich Oberland in the sixties as the only foreigner and was apparently seen on many occasions at the age of nine or ten carrying an umbrella to school in bright weather. I must have taken this to be English when it may well have been viewed as a sign of mental instability. When I turned thirteen, my father became Swiss and I was also given a Swiss passport. The UK Embassy claimed our UK passports from the Swiss authorities as the property of Her Royal Britannic Majesty – Switzerland in those days forbade dual citizenships – and popped them in the post for us.

As the village school was about a year behind academically by the time I reached Year 6 (UK Year 7), sitting the “Gymitest” (entrance test for Swiss academic elite schools in some German-speaking cantons) was inconceivable and I spent a few years at the Katholisches Gymnasium, an excellent private Swiss Gymnasium in Zurich, where I plunged enthusiastically into Latin, classical history, philosophy and Middle German poetry.

From there I switched to Kantonsschule Wetzikon (“Kantonsschule” = “Gymnasium”), where I spent further happy years preparing for the Swiss “Maturität” (university entrance exam for traditional universities), barely surviving in mathematics and physics, but shining in other subjects. I beg lovers of mathematics and physics to forgive the author of this text for any remarks about these subjects. I am indebted to both Swiss schools for their compendious curricula with thirteen or more mandatory subjects and the extraordinary teachers I was lucky enough to study under in an intellectually stimulating environment.

Very much to my delight, I made friends at Swiss “Gymnasia” (plural of “Gymnasium”, Swiss academic elite school, also called “lycée”, “liceo”, “Kantonsschule”, “Kollegium” or “college”) with peers who read Karl Marx in their free time, knew about Richard Wagner or Andy Warhol and had views on alternative lifestyles and organic farming.

Graduating from Kantonsschule Wetzikon in those days, you knew very little about Swiss universities and nothing at all about universities elsewhere. It was Switzerland before the bilaterals, the Bologna reform and the Erasmus programme. This might have been one of the many reasons I joined a Zurich University fraternity, the Zürcher Singstudenten. I also knew very little about the majority of the population who had served apprenticeships.



However, two years in the Swiss Army provided many a helpful insight, to the point where I lost some of my interest in Marx. I ended up taking a Licentiate degree in Anglistik (English Philology and English Literature) and Germanistik (German Philology and German Literature) and prepared for the Swiss equivalent of the PGCE, the “Höheres Lehramt”, as it is called in German-speaking Switzerland.

In the two following decades I divided my time between proudly running my father’s language school, a very reputable institution established in 1945, doing yet more military service as a senior officer and starting a large English-Latvian-speaking family with five children. I also took the qualification for training commercial apprentices (“KV Lehrmeister”).

My new family would soon afford first-hand experience of Swiss schools as an English-speaking parent with a Latvian-speaking wife, herself a former university teacher of English at Riga University. My wife and I decided that it would be best for our children to go to the local “Kindergarten” and “Primarschule” in order to learn enough German and take root in Swiss society. Our children did well as far as Year 6 (end of “Primarschule”). Some did not fit the Swiss “Matura” mould and spent a few years at Salem, one of the leading German boarding schools, in order to continue in the UK system at my school, while others opted for the Swiss “Gymi” system at SAMD (Schweizerische Alpine Mittelschule), a truly wonderful Swiss boarding school in Davos, which I am proud to be associated with as a trustee.

Shortly after my father’s death in the year 2000, I was invited to succeed him as curator of the International Aldous Huxley Association. This association has kept me on my academic toes and forged exciting ties with literary research all over the world.

In the early 2000s, I started Zurich’s first English sixth-form college for Swiss students and students from international families who had completed Swiss “Sekundarschule” (lower secondary school, Years 7 to 9). In the year 2008, Hull’s School ceased to be the name of my former language school and came to stand for what is now Zurich’s largest private sixth-form college (“Kurzgymnasium”).

I soon understood that I needed to combine the breadth of the Swiss “Humanistische Bildung” (liberal education) prevalent at the Swiss “Gymnasia” (plural of “Gymnasium”) with the flexibility and the depth of the UK GCSE/A-levels system, which led me to spend some time researching the educational history of Switzerland and the UK. The insights fed into a practical attempt to design a curriculum that meets the expectations both of Swiss universities and the UK Russell Group. This was a necessity, as half of the students would continue at Swiss universities while a sizeable proportion (about 30% in 2019) would move on to a UK university. I also woke up to the fundamental differences in school culture between Swiss and UK schools, the role of the teacher in both sys-



tems, and the differences in assessment, materials and management. Shortly after the founding of the college, a teacher appeared in my office and asked me about access arrangements (“Nachteilsausgleich”, “compensation des désavantages”, “compensazione degli svantaggi”) for a student with dyslexia. I tried not to show that neither were items of my vocabulary and it dawned on me that this might have to do with the fact that I had trained as a Swiss “Gymnasium” teacher. I spent

many months researching these matters in the UK A-levels, the US AP (Advanced Placement, similar to UK A-levels), the IB and Swiss “Matura” systems only to discover that international university entrance examinations boasted sixty-page manuals governing access arrangements while the Swiss “Matura” lacked national regulations.

I found out that the UK was one of the world’s most dyslexia-friendly countries and that Switzerland, dyslexia-friendly until the very early 2000s, had lost sight of the issue and even more of dyscalculia. After learning that about 10% of the population has dyslexia or dyscalculia I joined the Swiss Dyslexia Association (VDS) and later became its chairman.

As chairman of a national educational association, I made contacts with the Swiss educational establishment at all levels and found to my great surprise that compulsory education in Switzerland was even more complex than I had suspected.

Though over the years the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education (EDK, CDIP, CDEP, CDPE) has collectively evolved a curriculum shared by 21 cantons out of 26 (hence its name, “Lehrplan 21” or “curriculum 21”), who have agreed to harmonise the structure of their educational systems, cantonal and regional differences remain astounding even to someone like me, who has been professionally involved for many decades. This means, for instance, that Swiss primary school teachers frequently have to write their own teaching materials, that local authorities in Canton Zurich choose from three different “Sekundarschule” (lower secondary school) systems and that Swiss “Gymnasium” teachers at “Kantonsschulen” with what is called a “Hausmatura” (internal university entrance exam) write and assess their own final university entrance examinations. All this would be completely unthinkable in the UK, where education is largely centralised on the basis of a detailed national curriculum and university entrance examinations are externally assessed not just for the UK, but for many countries throughout the world using the UK IGCSE/A-level system.

When I became an examiner in German literature at the KV Business School in Zurich, one of Switzerland's state-of-the-art and excellently managed commercial colleges, I saw that most education after the end of compulsory education (with the exception of "Gymnasia"), including all vocational training, was centralised and governed by federal standards, very much like general education in the UK. Clearly, when it came to plumbing, IT and financial accounting, nothing was left to chance in Switzerland. How very different to the UK, where chance seems to govern what little is left of vocational training.

I am deeply fond of Switzerland and its educational system and very much hope that this guide will not be seen as an attempt by the owner of a private school to put it down. Instead, I hope that it will perhaps prove of some use to the educational debate and to parents and their children. I also believe that a comparison between educational systems may benefit both sides and may do something to strengthen the Swiss state school establishment, which will doubtless remain the backbone of one of the world's most successful countries. As someone professionally wedded to UK A-levels, I also have great respect for the International Baccalaureate and the US Advanced Placement system. If I have accorded more room to A-levels, it may be because this guide has been written largely with ex-UK families in mind. As for US AP examinations, it seems to me that they are academically first class, but perhaps less in use internationally than either A-levels or the IB. In the United States and countries in its immediate orbit, however, APs are an educational lynchpin.

Who this guide is for and what it aims to achieve

This guide is for parents of international families, particularly from the UK and Ireland, who see their long-term future in Switzerland and are planning to or are already sending their children to Swiss schools. The number of such families has dramatically increased since the bilaterals opened Switzerland up to the EU in the early 2000s.

It is not intended for expat families who are only spending a few years in Switzerland and will quite rightly have chosen international schools.

The main focus is on comparing the educational systems of Switzerland and the UK. While most examples from the Swiss system will be taken from German-speaking Switzerland and the Greater Zurich Area, the content of this guide applies to Switzerland as a whole, including “la Romandie” (the French-speaking cantons of Switzerland), the Rurmantsch areas of Graubünden, and Ticino. It is hoped that it will be of service to families with children in the Swiss system and a help in coping with the differences in school culture and curriculum.

The aim will be to make parents aware of the neuralgic points in the Swiss educational system, such as the last year of primary school or the final two years of lower secondary schools (“Sekundarschule”, “école secondaire”, “scuola media”), when children and youngsters are selected for academic elite schools (“Gymnasium”, “lycée”, “liceo”).

I also hope to show which students do well in the Swiss “Gymnasium” system and who might encounter problems, and to provide a resource for the parents of youngsters who are soon to finish lower secondary school, particularly if they do not fit the mould of the Swiss “Gymnasium” and show little or no interest in apprenticeships.

As this guide is written by a practitioner for parents, it may be of less value to educational research than the author would wish and may not have done sufficient justice to a number of issues which are highly controversial, such as the question as to how to cultivate creativity and critical thinking. Finally, this guide hopes to offer helpful advice to parents whose children may wish to study at top UK universities, such as the members of the Russell Group.

Author's note

Educational terms will normally be given in English, with their most customary German, French and Italian equivalents. For instance, the term “academic elite school” will be translated as “Gymnasium”/“lycée”/“liceo”. To include all relevant terms in all cantons (“école de maturité”, “Kollegium”, “collège”, “Gymnasium” in “la Romandie”) would make the text unwieldy. I have added translations in the text, rather than putting them in footnotes or expecting the reader to turn to the relevant glossaries. Though this may make the text less readable at some points, it saves the reader time.

The main sources of information for this book are (see bibliography):

- the official Swiss education report of 2018 (“Bildungsbericht”)
- the website of the Federal Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education (EDK, CDIP, CDEP, CDPE)
- the cantonal websites pertaining to education (each canton has its own educational system)
- Berufsberatung.ch (an educational website in German, Italian and French, a treasure trove of information)

In addition to the above I have listed 20 or 30 publications in the bibliography on a range of educational topics from permeability in the Swiss educational system to studies of European university entrance examination systems, from dyslexia and dyscalculia to cultural literacy.

I have kept chapters as short as possible, adding a large number of headings. The table of contents is detailed in order to enable readers to access information about specific questions without having to read the whole text.

I would like to thank Professor Daniel Siegenthaler, lecturer in didactics at the Fachhochschule Nordwestschweiz, for his invaluable feedback and his helpful comments.