

Switzerland Traditional Educational Values and Immigration Create Holistic and Inclusive Challenges

Damian Medina, former Swiss Student Affairs professional, damianmedina@gmail.com

Note: From the Perspective of the Ticino Canton in Switzerland

Switzerland follows a very structured academically focused form of higher education. One continuing trend is that Student Affairs/Services is not common and is rare except in instances of certain institutions of higher learning that have American influence such having a direct association with a US campus or are US accredited. If there is a form of student services within Switzerland, it lies within the areas of academic clubs and societies, and certain programs such as special events and lectures which bring in unique performers or speakers. Switzerland's power and decision structure hierarchy has the most power at the bottom with the people, cities, and cantons (states). In addition, Switzerland is divided into three distinctive regions due to their language and historical background, and many educational systems and immigration issues are handled regionally or at the canton level. As some of the issues presented might be applicable throughout all of Switzerland, this essay concentrates on the Ticino Canton, due to author experience being limited to one canton.

One of the main challenges in higher education in the Canton of Switzerland is the issue of diversification in the sense of non-Swiss being able to get an education. Immigration issues have become more persistent and the government has added steps to the process. This presents a challenge to administrators who deal with immigration processes, as most non-Swiss must complete the rigorous process in order to get visa approval and then renew on an annual basis. This has been the most challenging with students who are from countries that have specific issues, such as terrorism and fleeing refugees, due to internal turmoil. The increase in these types of issues occurring in recent years worldwide has added to more individuals wanting access to Europe and Switzerland, possibly adding to wanting access to their higher education systems as well. Connected with the issue of immigration, another trend and challenge in higher education in Switzerland is the challenge for non-traditional students to be given student residencies. The Canton of Ticino, Switzerland has a very structured education system with a specific pathway for people, which has some restrictions and/or challenges for non-traditional students in not only traditional undergraduate degrees, but also in graduate degrees. The traditional pathway begins prior to high school where on average less than about 25% of the population enters a traditional high school education and the majority of individuals enter a specialized professional with apprenticeships. University bound traditional students finish high school around 19 or 20 years old and then university can take 4.5 to 6 years. Most graduate seeking degree students must be within a traditional age following undergraduate graduation, with some work experience if possible.

Even though higher education in Switzerland does not see a high presence of student affairs/services, a committee for the Swiss University Conference [SUK/CUS], the political governing body for higher education in Switzerland, recently acknowledged during a recent university accreditation a need to increase certain types of holistic approaches, such as student clubs and societies and academically natured co-curricular programs, within Swiss Higher Education.