



Relationship between public and private schools in Switzerland

Background information

In Switzerland, the education system is largely run by the public sector.

In addition to public schools, there are also many private schools catering primarily to Swiss pupils that are fully integrated within the public education system and therefore publically subsidised. There are also private schools catering primarily to pupils from other countries that are not part of the Swiss public education system. There are also private schools that fall somewhere in between these two ends of the spectrum or that offer differentiated syllabuses depending on the category of pupil.

There is no Swiss-wide system governed by public law to check the professionalism and quality of private education providers.

The schools that are not a part of the public education system or not under government supervision have a different, but not necessarily inferior, level of quality. Some private schools operating in a completely autonomous manner with respect to the Swiss public education system are quite prestigious. However, this is not the case for all private schools. It is primarily the users and the labour market, not so much the state, that judge the quality of education and training. When considering the curricula of private schools catering mainly to pupils from other countries, interested persons are recommended to consult the Swiss Private School Register.

The present document presents in Part 1 the structure and allocation of tasks within the Swiss Education system. Part 2 describes more in detail the relationship between public and private schools as well as the issue of recognition of qualifications granted by these schools.

Part 1: Overview of Swiss education system

The Swiss education system is characterised by **federalism** and is structured in a decentralised manner. Education falls mainly within the purview of Switzerland's 26 cantons (member states). They are responsible for education unless the Federal Constitution assigns a given level or sector of the education system to the Confederation or stipulates that the Confederation and the cantons share responsibility for the given level or sector. Here a distinction is drawn between regulation and execution.

- The cantons and their communes are responsible for both regulation and execution of compulsory education.
- The Confederation and the cantons regulate or co-regulate different sectors of post-compulsory education (i.e. upper-secondary level and tertiary-level). With the exception of federal higher education institutions, it is the cantons that are responsible for execution of post-compulsory education.
- The Confederation regulates upper-secondary level vocational education and training (VET), tertiary-level professional education and training (PET) and continuing education and training (CET). The cantons are responsible for execution.

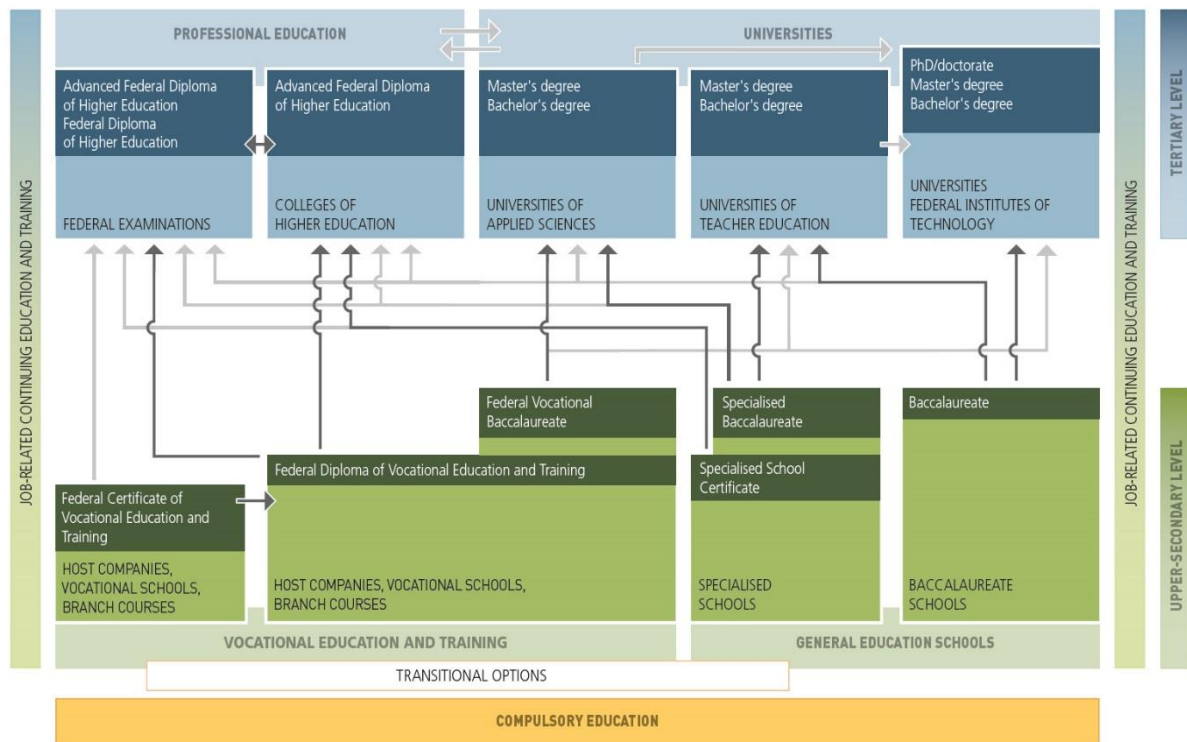
The cantons work closely together whenever the solution to a given matter requires consensus. In certain matters, the cantons are required by the Federal Constitution to coordinate their activities (e.g. intercantonal coordination of compulsory education, cooperation between the Confederation and the cantons within the higher education sector).

Compulsory education lasts for at least eleven years and is divided into primary level and lower-secondary level. In most cantons, primary level lasts for a total of eight years (including two years of pre-school) and lower-secondary level lasts for three years. At lower-secondary level, pupils are streamed to different performance-level groups. Depending on the streaming model used, pupils of different aptitudes will attend different schools, classes and/or subjects. The final year of lower-secondary school marks completion of compulsory education at the age of 15/16.

Upper-secondary level is divided into two sectors: the general education sector and the vocational education and training sector. The general education sector offers two types of schools: baccalaureate schools, which mainly prepare pupils for higher education; and specialised schools, which combine general education with initial training for a specific occupation. The VET sector only prepares learners to work in a specific occupation. Most VET programmes are of the dual-track variety, meaning that learners attend classes at a vocational school part-time and do paid apprenticeships at a host company. Two-thirds of all young people coming out of compulsory education, enrol in a VET programme, which they usually complete by the age of 19/20.

Tertiary level is also divided into two sectors: the higher education sector and the professional education and training sector. The higher education sector offers three types of institution: tier-one universities, universities of applied sciences and universities of teacher education. Alongside these, there are also other institutions within the higher education sector. The result of this division along academic and professional lines is a broad range of study and training programmes. The PET sector enables experienced professionals holding a VET qualification to specialise in their field and deepen their expertise.

Continuing education and training is a cross-cutting sector, spanning different levels of post-compulsory education and training. It is highly diverse in terms of responsibilities, regulation, funding and courses. Private companies play a key role as sponsors, providers and funders of CET. The Confederation and the cantons act mostly in a subsidiary capacity.



(Source: VPET Facts and Figures 2016)

The Swiss foreign network and interested foreigners can address the following points of contact.

Compulsory education

For questions concerning compulsory education, please contact the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education (EDK) (www.edk.ch/dyn/11484.php).

Upper-secondary level

- For questions concerning general education schools and classroom instruction in VET programmes, please contact EDK. (www.edk.ch/dyn/11484.php)
- For questions concerning the Swiss VET sector and (www.sbf.admin.ch/berufsbildung, berufsbildung@sbfi.admin.ch) for questions concerning the Swiss baccalaureate, please contact State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI). (www.sbf.admin.ch/themen/01366/01379, matur@sbfi.admin.ch)

Tertiary level

- For questions concerning the Swiss higher education sector, please contact swissuniversities (www.swissuniversities.ch) or the Swiss Agency of Accreditation and Quality Assurance (AAQ). (<http://aaq.ch/de/>, info@aaq.ch)
- For questions concerning the Swiss professional education and training sector, please contact the SERI. (www.sbf.admin.ch/berufsbildung, berufsbildung@sbfi.admin.ch; www.sbf.admin.ch/bvz, berufsverzeichnis@sbfi.admin.ch)

Private providers of education and training

For questions concerning private providers of education and training, please contact the local cantonal department of education (www.edk.ch/dyn/12372.php) or consult the Swiss Private School Register. (<http://www.swissprivateschoolregister.com/index.php?id=13&L=2>).

Part 2: More detailed information regarding the relationship between public and private schools at individual levels within the Swiss education system

1. Compulsory education

The Federal Constitution (Art. 62 para. 2 Cst) guarantees compulsory education, which can be provided by state-run or private schools. The cantons have the authority to regulate the content of lessons, including those given by private schools. The cantons regulate attendance of private schools for the entire duration of compulsory education.

In all cantons, private schools must obtain a license in order to provide compulsory education. They are also subject to state supervision. The license is granted if the private school offers an equivalent syllabus to that offered by public schools. The criteria considered for this license are the same as those applying to public schools: education objectives, syllabus, teacher qualifications and classroom space. If the lessons taught at a private school do not match legal requirements, then the license may be revoked and an order issued for pupils to be transferred from the private school to a nearby public school.

In some cantons, private schools receive public subsidies. Those with parental authority can also qualify for subsidy to help cover tuition. Compulsory education can also be provided through home-schooling, but this is generally subject to state authorisation and supervision.

95% of all pupils in compulsory education (pre-school/kindergarten, primary school, lower-secondary school, incl. schools with special syllabus) attended a public school during the 2012/2013 school year.

2. Post-compulsory education

2.1 Secondary education: Upper-secondary level

General education sector (baccalaureate schools and specialised schools). Private schools within the general education sector may conduct final examinations that are recognised by the Confederation or the cantons and may issue recognised qualifications if the schools satisfy certain criteria. The school syllabus, admission requirements, conditions whereby pupils are permitted to progress to the next grade, and examination conditions must all match those of public schools. Certain important rules such as the syllabus or examination regulations must be state-approved.

Private schools that are not recognised at the federal and cantonal levels prepare pupils for the Swiss Baccalaureate examination. This Swiss Baccalaureate is subject to the Federal Ordinance on the Swiss Baccalaureate Examination.

2.2 Secondary education: Initial vocational education and training

Initial vocational education and training occurs in the form of an apprenticeship at a host company, usually in manufacturing or services. In order to enrol in a Swiss dual-track VET programme, the young person must apply for and be hired as an apprentice at a host company. Foreign nationals must have a residence or settlement permit. In order to be able to provide apprenticeship training, the providers must first obtain VET accreditation from the cantonal authority. These providers are host companies or providers of school-based VET programmes.

There are also schools that offer training that is not based on federally issued VET ordinances. The qualifications awarded by these schools are not recognised as formal vocational qualifications and it is up to employers to decide what weight to give to them. Likewise, these qualifications are not binding for the authorities.

89.1% of all young people in the general education sector in the 2012/2013 school year were enrolled in a public baccalaureate school or specialised school. At the same time, 85.9% of all young people in

the VET sector were enrolled in a public VET school (either school-based or dual-track VET programme).

3. Tertiary level

3.1 Higher education sector

The Swiss higher education sector is comprised of two federal institutes of technology (EPF in Lausanne and the ETH in Zurich), ten cantonal universities, nine universities of applied sciences, fourteen universities of teacher education (UTEs) and other public institutions. In addition to this, there are also private institutions that provide education at tertiary level (www.swissuniversities.ch/en/higher-education-area/recognised-swiss-higher-education-institutions/).

The Federal Act on the Funding and Coordination of the Higher Education Sector (HEdA, SR 414.20) came into effect on 1 January 2015. With HEdA, the **titles** “university“, “university of applied sciences” or “university of teacher education” and derived titles such as “university college” or “UAS college” can only be used by public or private institutions that have been institutionally accredited by the Swiss Accreditation Council. This also applies to titles in languages other than Swiss national languages.

Other titles (such as “academy”, “school”, “institute”, etc.) remain unreserved and do not require accreditation. Private institutions that do not use any protected titles may continue to pursue their activities and issue qualifications without having to obtain institutional accreditation. The cantons have the authority and autonomy to issue additional rules for such private institutions. This means that a different legal basis (cantonal legislation) may apply depending on the canton in question. For example, some cantons may regulate the opening of a private institution under trade and commerce legislation; other cantons, however, may require accreditation.

The **degrees** issued by “universities”, “universities of applied sciences”, “universities of teacher education” and “other institutions within the higher education sector” accredited by the authorities are protected by corresponding legislation.

The following principles specifically apply to recognition of academic qualifications awarded in Switzerland:

- Authorisation to carry out a regulated profession (e.g. in medicine, law, etc.) is governed by corresponding federal or cantonal legislation, which specifies what qualifications are recognised. Generally speaking, such qualifications are those issued by federally recognised higher education institutions.
- In the case of non-regulated professions (e.g. journalist, entrepreneur, accountant, etc.), it is the employer that decides whether or not to “recognise” a given qualification issued by a higher education institution. In such cases, accreditation or quality certification of the respective academic institution can be handled by a generally recognised private certification body.
- In the case of admission to more advanced studies, the corresponding higher education institution decides whether to recognise lower-level qualifications. As is the case with equivalence of foreign qualifications for which no international treaty exists with the country of origin, Swiss universities tend to rely on the recommendations formulated by the Swiss branch of the European Network of National Information Centres on Academic Recognition and Mobility (Swiss ENIC).

Higher education qualifications may also be issued by Swiss-based private education institutions that do not fall within the scope of HEdA. These qualifications:

- generally do not entitle the holder to gain direct access to subsequent studies within the Swiss (public) higher education sector;
- generally are not recognised as valid qualifications entitling the holder to carry out a regulated profession in Switzerland;
- are left to the discretion of employers as to whether the holder has the knowledge and skills needed to work in a non-regulated occupation or profession.

Generally speaking, there are no international treaties protecting the validity of these qualifications. It is up to the foreign authorities to decide whether or not to recognise them.

The mere fact that a private Institution carries out its activities in Switzerland by virtue of the principle of economic freedom or that it freely uses a title for which no accreditation is required, does not mean that the Swiss authorities recognise the syllabus, examination results or the qualifications awarded by that institution.

There are no general rules concerning the **use** of occupation and qualification titles. The Confederation has enacted provisions to protect certain federal vocational, professional and university qualifications (the latter case being limited to federal institutes of technology). The use of titles by private institutions (outside a working context) is not regulated under federal legislation.

3.2 Professional education and training sector

The Swiss PET sector enables professionals to obtain formal federally recognised competences that are needed to handle challenging technical or managerial tasks. The Swiss PET sector also ensures that the Swiss economy has proven experts in many different fields. Training content is highly practical and closely correlated with the actual needs of the labour market. The PET sector is divided into two branches: preparation for federal examinations (i.e. Federal PET Diploma and Advanced Federal PET Diploma) and enrolment in degree programmes at professional colleges. Training content is largely determined by professional organisations, which are comprised of companies operating within a given branch.

These same professional organisations are also responsible for conducting **federal examinations** for the two qualifications mentioned earlier. Preparatory courses are conducted by cantonal education institutions, training centres, trade associations or private education providers.

Degree programmes at **professional colleges** are also designed by professional organisations, public institutions or private companies.

SERI maintains a list of formal PET qualifications. Any qualifications awarded at this level that are not found in this list are not legally protected.

4. Continuing education and training sector

The pursuit of continuing education and training is largely up to the individual. The highly diverse CET sector is positioned outside of the formal, state-regulated education system and is generally not supervised by government. Private companies play a key role as sponsors, providers and funders of CET. The responsibility for quality assurance is primarily assumed by the providers; relevant quality assurance systems (e.g. ISO 29990, EduQua) are widely spread under providers of a certain size.

5. Private providers of education and training

Swiss Private School Register

The Foundation “Swiss Private School Register” is supervised by the Federal Department of Home Affairs (FDHA). The Foundation “Swiss Private School Register” mainly serves the purpose of certifying that the schools listed are willing and able to provide high-quality training and to fulfil their contractual obligations. Certain criteria must be met in order for a private school to be listed in this register. In particular, they must have a quality assurance system that has been verified and certified by a nationally or internationally accredited certification body. However, the existence of a certification does not guarantee the recognition of the qualifications acquired within these private schools.

(Sources: Euryperia, www.edk.ch/dyn/12961.php)