Switzerland after graduation? What are the policies of the Swiss government towards them?

Rising Numbers of International Students

According to OECD data, nearly five million students studied abroad in 2015 – the figures have more than doubled since 2000. In recent years, global ISM has grown by about 8% annually, much faster than total international migration. Analyses of the Swiss Federal Statistical Office and OECD data show that in 2015, 17% of students enrolled at tertiary educational institutions in Switzerland had completed their secondary studies abroad. This makes Switzerland a top destination for international students, comparable to New Zealand (21%) and Great Britain (18%). ISM in Switzerland is even more prominent if disaggregated by level of study: In 2015, it ranked second worldwide for doctoral students (54% international students), fourth for master's students (28%), and fifth for undergraduate students (10%). From 1990 to 2016, the population of international students rose from 9,200 to 33,000, thus making the Swiss case relevant to understand ISM.

Messages for Decision-Makers

– International students are key players in international migration: they produce knowledge that is beneficial to Switzerland's international reputation of excellence in research, and represent highly skilled labor resources.

– There is great potential to develop and implement measures supporting students' social and economic integration, and foster their contributions to international development and Switzerland's global presence.

A Neglected Topic

ISM was key to the development of the university system during the Middle Ages and continues to be an important phenomenon today, yet scholars and policymakers do not pay sufficient attention to it. ISM is often seen as devoid of the crucial stakes associated with economic or asylum migration, which possibly explains why ISM remains a neglected research topic. This project aims to address this gap by answering the following questions: Which international students come to Switzerland? How are they represented in political discourse? Do they stay in
matching their qualifications. This fascinating case of policy openness can be explained by a combination of factors: parliamentarian Jacques Neyrinck’s framing of international students as economic assets, support from most political parties, and support from lobbyists. By contrast, progressive policies regarding asylum seekers and low-skilled immigrants remain unaddressed.

**Do students stay after graduating?**

Due to the original longitudinal database set up by this project, it is now possible to calculate “stay rates” of international students after graduation. These rates indicate the proportion of students staying in Switzerland, or respectively leaving, after graduating. The result – close to 50:50 – shows that these students are not simply temporary residents, but have longer-term migration potential.

**What motivates students to come to Switzerland?**

A survey of international students at the University of Bern shows that ISM into Switzerland appears strongly linked to broader aspirations of experiencing a new culture. In this context, the quality of life in Bern is particularly appreciated. This finding is contrary to the human capital perspective, which sees international students as simply trying to improve their future career prospects through obtaining a prestigious diploma.

**Remaining open questions**

This project sheds new light on the neglected topic of ISM. Some fields of study need further investigation, including Switzerland’s scholarship policies, the experiences of international students in regards to local integration and international interconnectedness, and the extent to which their new skills can be used after leaving Switzerland.

**Key Publications**