

Federal Budget Cuts and Rising Tuition Fees – A Dangerous Cycle Begins

Higher education in Switzerland is characterized by aspects, some of which benefit students more than others. One distinct advantage is Switzerland's relatively low tuition fees. In a country where the cost of living is the primary barrier to affordable, socially accessible higher education, it is a positive aspect that tuition fees collected by the Cantons and the federal government at the start of each semester are comparatively low on an international scale.

A longstanding political principle has maintained this stability: any student can begin their studies in Switzerland at a low cost, with the expectation that they will later contribute to education funding through taxes. This funding model has the key advantage of deferring financial commitments until after graduation and workforce entry. Furthermore, the financial foundation is primarily supported by the Cantons and the federal government, rather than burdening current students with a significant share of higher education operating costs. This system reflects a commitment to funding higher education in a spirit of solidarity. However, this era may soon come to an end.

From 2027 to 2030, the federal government plans a series of budget cuts totaling 5 billion Swiss francs, with 500 million of these cuts directed at education, research, and innovation. In its 2025–2028 message, Parliament has already anticipated these cuts by setting an insufficient spending cap for the education and research sector, forcing higher education institutions to reduce services and potentially endangering the quality of teaching.

Among these budget measures, referred to as the "Gaillard Report," four points pose a serious threat not only to the stability of higher education but also to the sustainability of youth representative organizations in Switzerland, including VSS–UNES–USU. Specifically:

1. Transfer of costs to students through a doubling of tuition fees for Swiss students and a quadrupling for international students.
2. Reduction of contributions to higher education institutions under the Higher Education Act (LEHE).
3. Decrease in project-based grants (PGB).
4. Reduction of subsidies allocated to national youth representative organizations.

With respect to student contributions, many higher education institutions have, over the past decade, raised tuition fees significantly and introduced differentiated fees based on students' origins. The main identified causes include:

1. Competition among higher education institutions under the Higher Education Act (LEHE).
2. Decrease in per-student funding for higher education institutions.
3. Increased operating costs for higher education institutions.

Given that students are already one of the most socio-economically vulnerable groups, that rising living costs heavily impact them, that tuition fees constitute a substantial burden for many low-income students (leading some to abandon higher education), and considering the solidarity-based funding model for higher education in Switzerland, which must be preserved, ESU and VSS-UNES-USU urge all relevant stakeholders to take the necessary actions to escape the vicious cycle that increases students' financial burden without substantively enhancing funding for higher education. It is essential to underscore that:

1. Under no circumstances should the burden of federal or cantonal funding be shifted onto students.
2. Project-based grants (PGB) must be maintained at current levels to continue efforts toward equal opportunity, gender equality, and sustainability.
3. Subsidies to umbrella organisations must be maintained at current levels to ensure student representation.
4. The dilemma of increased tuition fees versus declining teaching quality should not fall on students. It is the responsibility of the federal government and cantons to ensure quality services at a socially sustainable cost.

5. Shifting towards an Anglo-Saxon model will only lead to a gradual erosion of educational quality in Switzerland by reducing overall public funding, to the detriment of society as a whole.
 6. Differentiating tuition fees based on students' origins cannot be justified by the argument of lack of prior tax contribution. Many non-Swiss students reside in Switzerland long-term, contributing significantly to tax revenues that offset the initial investment. Moreover, such a policy would be counterproductive in the context of ongoing negotiations between Switzerland and the European Union.
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