Impact audit of Swiss schools abroad
Federal Office of Culture

Key facts

Swiss schools abroad are non-profit educational institutions subsidised by the Swiss federal government. They are accredited by the Federal Office of Culture (FOC) on the basis of predefined criteria. The FOC disburses some CHF 18 million a year to support these schools. The aim is to promote Swiss education and culture abroad, as well as to further the education of young Swiss citizens living abroad and strengthen their ties with Switzerland. The schools also give children and young people in the host country an understanding of Switzerland and its culture.

The Swiss Federal Audit Office (SFAO) examined the impact of Swiss schools abroad. The findings show that Swiss education and culture are being successfully communicated, insofar as this can be assessed. However, there are no clear guidelines for the communication of Swiss culture.

More Swiss schools but a lower proportion of Swiss students

The 18 Swiss schools abroad currently have a total of over 8,000 students. This is around 75% more than in 1985. There has been no significant change since then in the number of Swiss students enrolled, which currently stands at around 1,600, or one fifth of the total. According to the school management teams, the proportion of Swiss students is likely to decline further in the future.

Most schools expect to see overall student numbers increase in the coming years.

Confederation has limited scope in the creation of new schools

In all cases, Swiss schools abroad are founded by private initiative in the host country; the Confederation's support is a contribution to their self-reliance. Since first established in the 19th century, the network of schools has evolved over the years. Most of the schools today are in countries which are neither a priority partner for Switzerland nor home to the largest Swiss communities abroad.

The new Swiss Schools Act, in effect since 2015, created a basis for expanding the network. No applications have been made yet for the new establishment financial assistance. Given the considerable barriers to opening a school, there are not likely to be many new schools set up. The SFAO can therefore understand that alternative means of expanding the network are being examined.

No guidelines for communicating Swiss culture

Swiss schools abroad provide tuition at various levels up to the academic baccalaureate, based on the curricula of the patron canton and the host country. Each school has a patron canton which assesses the pedagogical standards on a regular basis and may also provide other support. Every year, around 270 students graduate with an academic baccalaureate, and around 20% of them go on to study in Switzerland.

There are no guidelines for the communication of Swiss culture. It was not possible in the context of this audit to determine objectively whether the teaching of Swiss culture is adequate. The parties involved believe that culture is being successfully communicated. This is done through various means, from the manner of instruction and the content of lessons, to efforts to uphold Swiss customs and promote Swiss values. There are differing opinions as to what exactly is meant by Swiss culture. The SFAO therefore recommends that the FOC should create guidance for the schools, setting out its ideas, expectations and any priorities it may have in this respect, for example.

Swiss teachers are a key factor in promoting Swiss education and culture

The key factors in successfully promoting Swiss education and culture include a curriculum aligned with those followed in Switzerland, a close working relationship with other Swiss institutions in the country and a good infrastructure. It is particularly important to have sufficient and well trained Swiss teaching staff.

On the whole, the schools were found to meet these conditions. Financial support from the FOC facilitates the hiring of Swiss teachers. In some places, recruiting Swiss staff is increasingly difficult, and finding a suitable candidate proves challenging for a quarter of all new appointments. The SFAO is pleased to note that the FOC has recognised this problem and is working to find a solution.

Swiss schools abroad represent Switzerland

Although they are private institutions, Swiss schools abroad are perceived as being representative of Switzerland. They project an image of the country. In contributing to a positive public perception of Switzerland abroad, they achieve an impact that goes beyond the teaching of Swiss education and culture. Therefore, this brand image transfer also poses a risk, and any misconduct in relation to these schools will reflect on Switzerland too.

There is some indication that this is a genuine problem, and the FOC has only very limited means at its disposal to minimise the risk. The SFAO therefore recommends that the FOC examine the possibility of introducing a code of ethics so as to agree on certain principles of conduct with the schools.

Original text in German