

Making sense of and comparing university degrees in Switzerland, the US and the UK

This well-written article, 'BA? Liz? Or Diplôme', by Kim Hays, an American living in Switzerland, was published in March 2001 in 'Swiss News' magazine. In a recent email exchange, she explains that very little has changed since then. "As far as I can tell, the only truly outdated bit is that Swiss universities no longer provide a degree called a Lizenziat. As part of trying to make the European degree process conform, they now offer a three-year BA (which is not considered a final degree, as it would be in the US or the UK, but only an interim degree or Grundstudium) and a two-year MA, which follows the BA at the same university. In the US, as you probably know, you have to go through a whole new application process and new standardized exams in order to study for a Master's degree, and it is rarely completed at the same university as the BA."

BA? Liz? Or Diplôme

Making sense of University degrees in Switzerland

by Kim Hays

With a Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree in English from New England liberal arts college, a young American living in Switzerland decided to continue his English studies at the University of Zurich. To his dismay, the university refused to give him more than three semesters of credit for his entire college education.

According to Reka Polgar, who works for the Central Office of Swiss Universities, this is not surprising. Many universities in the German-speaking part of Switzerland do not even give one semester's credit for an American BA but instead treat it as the equivalent of a Matura (Maturité), the qualification received by pupils when they complete a form of secondary school called Gymnasium (Gymnase).

Karl Spälti, a Swiss operations-research expert, who did a year of graduate school in the US before getting a doctorate in Bern, knows that transferring credits can be a nightmare. "With only a BA from a small US college," he says, "you are locked into the US system, because your degree has no meaning in Europe."

A UK undergraduate degree is another story, however. Polgar explains that most students with a BA or BSc from the UK are given credit for at least the first two years of university in

Switzerland. Yet a UK Bachelor's degree generally takes three years to complete, while the American degree takes four.

To understand why a UK degree is given more weight in Switzerland than an American one, and to make sense of many other apparent contradictions and confusions between the UK, US, and Swiss university systems, it is necessary to compare them thoroughly. Such a comparison is complicated, however, in part because education in these three parts of the world is so different.

One problem, for example, is that academically gifted pupils in the UK and Switzerland are separated out of the general school system, sometime between 11 and 16, and are given a different education, so that the percentage of young people that are able to attend university is smaller in those two regions than in the US. On the other hand, the opportunities for other kinds of higher education besides university or college are greater in the UK and Switzerland. This is particularly true in Switzerland, where a person can train for a well-paid and well-respected job without attending either a university or a technical college.

Comparisons are also difficult because colleges and universities within each of the three systems differ a great deal from one

another. This is particularly true in the US, where the quality of education varies radically from college to college.

What follows is an attempt to sort out, nevertheless, some of the most marked differences between the three forms of higher education.

CHOOSING A SPECIALTY

In England and Wales (Scotland is somewhat different), general education ends at 16 when students take exams called GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education). If you have at least five good GCSEs, then you can study for two more years in two to four subjects. At the end of that time, you take A (Advanced)-level exams in these subjects. If you are interested in getting a university degree in biology, for example, you might do A-levels in chemistry, biology and math. But you would apply to university only in biology, and for your Bachelor's degree you would take the courses required by the biology department.

In Switzerland, general education for the academically gifted continues through Gymnasium, where all the pupils are required to take sciences, languages, math, history, economics, and other subjects. You complete *Gymnasium* with a "certificate of maturity" at the age of 19 or 20. If you go on to university, it will be primarily in one subject.

Requirements differ from department to department, but generally a student must choose a major (*Hauptfach/branche principale*) and one or two minors (*Nebenfach/branche secondaire*).

Swiss students enter university already attached to a particular academic department and take courses only in their major and minor subjects for the four-plus years that it takes them to earn their degree, which is called either a *Diplom (diplôme)* or *Lizenziat (licence)*. The first two years of study offer a basic introduction to their chosen field (*Grundstudium/premier cycle d'études*): the remaining years, called the *Hauptstudium* or *deuxième cycle d'études*, are more specialized. At the end of their studies, the level they have obtained can best be compared to a graduate degree rather than a typical Bachelor's.

American students, in contrast to their UK and Swiss counterparts, are not expected to pick a specialty until they have completed one or two years of their four-year Bachelor's degree. Even after they have picked a major, they will continue to take courses in other subjects. An American BA in, say, physics, would therefore represent fewer physics courses than a UK or Swiss physics degree. This is why Swiss university officials treat the American degree with such disdain.

Not every Swiss is negative about American degrees, however. Jacqueline Papo, for example, who graduated from the International School of Geneva, applied to colleges in both the UK and the US. Both her parents are Swiss citizens, her mother originally English and her father Turkish, and her sister and brother attend English universities. But Jacqueline decided to go to Stanford University in California. "In

England, I applied to biology departments, but I didn't really want to do just one subject," explains Jacqueline. "I decided to go to Stanford because I didn't have to major there until my second year. I am interested in psychology, too – maybe I'll decide to do that instead."

Peter Hedley, deputy head of the International School of Bern (ISB), has watched his pupils go off to study within all three systems. "In the US, after you get to college you have time to settle in, work on any academic weaknesses you may have, and think about what you want to do. In the UK and Europe, you have to be much better prepared academically in your chosen subject."

GETTING INTO COLLEGE

If you are Swiss, in order to get into a Swiss university you only need to do one thing: successfully complete *Gymnasium* and receive a certificate of maturity from your school (something which about 18 per cent of Swiss young people accomplish). Anyone with a *Matura* can apply to any department of any Swiss university and be automatically accepted, regardless of grades or previous academic interests. (The exception is the faculty of medicine, which limits the number of acceptances using an entrance test.)

In contrast, young people applying to UK and US universities first have to go through a selection process, whose degree of difficulty depends on the quality and reputation of the place they are applying to. In the UK, all applications are sent to a central organization, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, or UCAS, while in the US pupils apply separately to each place.

Key to admittance at a UK university is the A-level exam; around 27 per cent of the

kingdom's young people take at least one of these exams each year. The tests are national, so your score in a chemistry exam, for example, compares you to pupils all over the UK (as opposed to your score in a Swiss *Matura* level chemistry exam, which only compares you to the pupils at your own *Gymnasium*). UK universities specify exactly what minimum A-level scores they expect from applicants and will accept pupils only conditionally if they have not yet taken their exams. In addition to A-level scores, pupils submit an application that includes a personal essay and a recommendation from their school.

In the US, many factors are taken into account in a university application. Pupils are required to send in their high-school grades, several letters of recommendation, and descriptions of work experiences, hobbies, and extra-curricular activities, as well as personal essays. Like UK applicants, they must take national exams: the SATs (Scholastic Achievement Tests), which rate them in relation to millions of their American peers. (Nothing so elaborate, however, is required of young people applying to many community colleges throughout the US).

Mike Lee is head of student services at the International School of Geneva and advises students from all over 100 countries about their choice of university. "In the US and the UK," he explains, "the selection process happens before you go to university. Once you are accepted, the university is committed to having you for three or four years, and there are all kinds of support systems in place to help you make it through. While at a Swiss university the selection process begins once you arrive."

As a result, the first and second years at a Swiss university are used to weed students out of every department. Sarah Imboden, a medical student in Bern who did her first two years at the University of Fribourg, describes her own experience. "After the preliminary exam, which limited the number of people starting medicine, there were 150 first-year students. By second year all but 60 of them were gone." A high rate of failure among first- and second-year students is not limited to medicine. Luckily, in many departments you are allowed to take your exams a total of three times before you have to give up.

From the point of view of the instructors in the various departments, this weeding out process isn't as brutal as it sounds. "The worst students at a Swiss university are much worse than those in Britain," says Peter Trudgill, a professor in the University of Fribourg's English department. "This is simply because no selection takes place during the Swiss admissions process. In the departments I'm familiar with them, there isn't a malicious attempt to get rid of a certain number of students during the first year. But we have to be honest with them and make the level of difficulty clear."

ASSESSING STUDENT PROGRESS

Ariel Whitworth is a first-year student at Oberlin, a liberal arts college in the US, who thinks she wants to major in biology. During her first semester she took a standard load of four courses: neuroscience, chemistry, psychology, and acting, which met 15 hours each week. Her acting class was graded Pass or Fail, but in her other courses she received marks at the end of the semester that were based on the work of the previous 15 weeks: short tests (a total of 13 during the semester), an 8-page research paper, quizzes, labs, and so on.

This kind of continuous assessment during each semester is standard for American undergraduates. In both the UK and Switzerland, however, students typically receive fewer classroom marks and then are tested at the end of each year – or sometimes even less frequently. Assessment during the economics *Grundstudium* at the University of St. Gallen, for example, is based on five three-hour exams at the end of both the first and second years. In the UK, students there have always been expected to do a great deal more writing than their American or Swiss counterparts, and lately there has been a movement toward more frequent assessment of student progress.

CAMPUS LIFE

In the United Kingdom and the United States, it is normal for students to move onto the college campus when they become undergraduates. Typically, students live in university housing (called 'halls' in the UK and 'dorms' in the US), often with one or two roommates, and are assigned a resident adult or at least an older student to look after them.

Christopher Warren, the college counsellor at ISB, considers this a crucial part of the American and British college experience. "At about 18, you start learning to live on your own in a sheltered environment with someone to look after you. Since you only have 12 to 16 hours of scheduled classes, you have lots of time to read and write – and you have to organise your time yourself. This is very different from the Swiss experience, where students usually continue to sleep in their childhood beds and attend 25 or 30 hours of classes a week. This makes university not very different from *Gymnasium*.

An American with two sons attending the University of

Geneva, Laurie Hubermann finds this continuity between *Gymnasium* and university disturbing. "The US college experience provides an excellent transition between childhood and adulthood. If you go to university and live at home, you have trouble making a move toward adulthood, because you are stuck in the context of your childhood. It's not good for a 24- or 25-year-old to still be at home."

When Jacqueline Papo talks about her first semester at Stanford, one of the States' top universities, the first thing she mentions is the fun of campus life. "I had a wonderful time. The dormitory is just like a big family. There are older students in our dorm that are responsible for bringing us together and organising activities – games, trips, special meals, and dances."

It is hard to imagine a Swiss university student who would talk about her first semester primarily in terms of "fun" and parties. "Campus life in the American sense doesn't exist in Switzerland," says Reka Polgar bluntly. "There are a great many clubs, sports and other activities, but lots of students, especially the ones who commute, just don't have time for that kind of thing."

DIFFERENT PHILOSOPHIES

Min Ku is a Canadian post-doctoral student at the University of Bern's Institute for Cell Biology. She did her undergraduate work at Princeton and her doctorate at Harvard. She thinks that the difference between universities in Switzerland and the US represents disparities between the Swiss and American ways of thinking about job opportunities.

"An American BA is based on the idea that a liberal arts degree will not only give you a well-rounded education but also leave you open to do anything that you choose to

do," says Ku. "Americans are confident that you can study any subject for four years, and as long as you work hard, you will have the skills you need afterwards to take up any kind of career or professional training. In the US, you can major in French and then get accepted to medical school; you can do a BA in anthropology and then go on to business school. The Swiss system reflects a European belief that you need the proper credentials for a job, and that means specialised training from early on and the appropriate degrees."

Another difference in educational philosophy is the US belief that college is everyone. "I admire the US system because it is so inclusive," says ISB's Warren, an Englishman. "There is a place out there for everyone, whether it's Harvard or a tiny college somewhere. Europeans turn up their noses at the US community colleges and say that those degrees aren't worth the paper they are written on, and it's certainly true that standards vary enormously from place to place. But if a student is learning something, that's what matters."

American Donald Hilvert is an organic chemistry professor at Zurich's prestigious Federal Institute of Technology (ETH). He also spent an undergraduate year at the ETH on a Fulbright scholarship. "One of the impressive things about this place is that the faculty is very much engaged in teaching undergraduates. At most well-known research universities in the States, teaching under-

graduates is an onerous responsibility – professors are only interested in research. Here, teaching is really valued, and professors spend a lot of time developing their lectures, which are excellent."

Hilvert sees Swiss students, at least in chemistry, as extremely well-trained, both theoretically and in the lab. "Of course, they don't have much freedom. The best American students might be able to work more independently. But an American would be less focused."

The University of Fribourg's Peter Trudgill would agree about the Swiss students' lack of freedom. "They spend far more time in class and far less time reading and writing than British students," says the Englishman. "But I'm very happy to be teaching in Switzerland," he adds, "where the universities are still dedicated to research and not overwhelmed by bureaucracy, as they are in Britain. I left Britain because I felt like I was spending half my time filling out forms to justify what I had done and the other half filling out forms to justify what I was going to do. Here there is respect for learning, for professors and for the university. And the students seem more mature than British students, not only because they are older, but also because they are willing to accept responsibility in a way that British students aren't."

ETH professor Jürg Dual, a Swiss who has taught mechanics to undergraduates at New York's

Cornell University, considers Swiss students to be better at abstract thinking than their American counterparts. "My American students made it clear that they expected me to show them step-by-step how to solve their homework problems. In Switzerland, the students figure out how to solve the problems by themselves."

Similarities

In 1999 in Bologna, the ministers of education from 29 European countries met to choose a model that would allow them to make their institutions more comparable. Their goal was to bring the different universities sufficiently into line with one another for students to transfer easily from one department to another, not only within the same country but also Europe-wide. It was agreed that a combination of the UK and US models offered the best solution, with the introduction throughout Europe of a separate undergraduate or Bachelor's degree, followed by further study for a Masters or Doctorate. Since the "Bologna Declaration," university administrators and international education consultants have been working to develop a coordinated European university system.

Until that system is in place, however, you should never take it for granted that someone from another country understands the true worth of your college degree! It may be a Bachelor of Science to you, but to them it could just be BS!