



MORE SCIENCE JOBS

Education, research and innovation are more and more accepted as a political priority in Switzerland. In fact, increased public commitment to innovative research is an important condition if the Swiss science and economy is to hold its ground among global competition. More research positions are needed at universities and state-run research institutions. The limited number of such positions is out of proportion to the high number of potential researchers who are seeking a suitable position. A positive funding climate and the targeted support of young academics would act as a draw for foreign researchers. Let us push the brain gain.

THE 'reBrain' INITIATIVE

Area of activity 1999 – 2006
Emigration and remigration of highly qualified Swiss scientists
Programme management: Dr. Philipp Egger

The Swiss GEBERT RÜF STIFTUNG is active in science and transfer projects linked to Swiss universities. The foundation places top priority on synergizing and networking individual projects, which are in turn anchored to specific fields of activity.

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Between 1999 and 2006 the brain drain phenomenon was an area of activity. This leaflet provides a short summary of the findings and shows the conclusion of a cluster of projects dedicated to find out more about the brain drain.

THE BRAIN DRAIN PHANTOM

Learning Points for Switzerland



IS THERE A BRAIN DRAIN AT ALL?

The complaint is often heard in Switzerland, with nationally biased and self-pitying undertones, that precious tax money is spent educating the next generation of researchers only to have them 'funded away' to other countries by public grants. It is claimed that the host country – today mostly the US, perhaps China tomorrow – offers them attractive conditions and prevents their return to Switzerland. They are therefore to be considered as lost sons and daughters, as an investment written off. However, these complaints of a 'brain drain' are invoking a phantom.

SWITZERLAND IS A LAND OF IMMIGRATION

Swiss emigrants are just one element in this equation. Switzerland has been and remains a top destination for immigrants – particularly qualified people. There is, however, no available data, neither about the quantity and quality of science graduates that emigrate from Switzerland, nor on the immigration of similarly qualified people from abroad. Yet such data would provide the basis for an early detection instrument to measure the attractiveness of Switzerland for highly skilled people.

THE GLOBAL PHENOMENON OF BRAIN CIRCULATION

The global scientific community is highly mobile. These migratory movements can correctly be described as 'brain circulation' – and Switzerland is an active participant. As a base for education and research this country is very well connected to 'global academia'. Scientists based in Switzerland are among the best and can hold their own internationally. Switzerland is highly attractive for foreign academics – a quick glance at the list of names in research institutes and universities speaks volumes.

A POSITIVE BRAIN BALANCE IS THE OBJECTIVE

Support for immigration of highly qualified people is a politically accepted idea in many knowledge-based societies. Efforts that are often dramatically described as a 'war for talent' are nothing more than competition for the best and brightest. And, of course, Switzerland has an excellent hand to begin with because, apart from its above-average scientific institutions, it provides excellent working and living conditions. The Swiss immigration incentives should be increased and presented confidently to the outside world. Why not promoting Switzerland?

WHO IS SWISS?

A concordant (from the Latin 'concordia') democratic society based on values of balance and compromise finds it difficult to draw a distinction between unskilled and highly qualified immigrants. While this attitude may be appealing, it is certainly wrong. Anyone who earns a higher educational degree in Switzerland should be offered residency – in fact that person should be offered speedy naturalization. In a country without any resources other than brain cells, the sensible option is to make a clear commitment to a knowledge-based society.

OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND

In Switzerland the promotion of young academic talent is mostly funded through the National Science Foundation. Once grants have been allocated, the task is considered complete. For this reason the issuing of foreign research and study grants often seems like promoting emigration – even in the eyes of the recipients themselves, who often find that they become frustrated with the lack of ongoing communication and contact. A system of tracking individual careers would justify the investment of tax money, would allow for an evaluation based on career trends and would eventually permit faster changes and adaptation of funding practices.

SCIENCE AMBASSADORS

Young academics from Switzerland who remain permanently in the US are not a lost resource for Switzerland as long as they remain connected to the country of their 'alma mater'. Formal and informal Swiss networks already exist in the US, and these can be astonishingly effective like 'swisstalents', the official database and website for scientists abroad, or 'swiss-list', the informal and private network of young Swiss scientists and businesses professional living in the US. Networking is an area where the Swiss government could deliberately invest more in order to stay in contact and exchange with its Science Ambassadors. The global network of Swiss Houses with their new brand 'swissnex' in Boston, San Francisco, Singapore and Shanghai represent promising approaches in this direction.