



EUROPEAN  
ASSOCIATION FOR  
THE EDUCATION  
OF ADULTS

# **Country Report on Adult Education in SWITZERLAND**

Helsinki, 2011



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## Introduction

This Report covers the situation of Adult Education and Lifelong Learning in Switzerland. It is divided into two sections. The section *Policy and Politics* gives an overview of the key policy currently in force, and also outlines the main legislation or political situation in the country. *Structure and Providers* gives a more detailed look at the organizational structures, and also outlines the main adult education providers, mainly looking at non-formal and informal learning.

We want to thank our members for their contributions to this reflection on the adult education situation in Switzerland as far as possible as of 2010/2011. Inevitably there will be new things emerging within the ever changing situation of adult education, but we believe the majority of the information provided will be relevant and useful for the foreseeable future. However, to keep the resource accurate and up to date we are open to suggestions to improve the texts. If you feel there is something you can add about your country please contact us via email at [eaea-info\[at\]eaea.org](mailto:eaea-info[at]eaea.org).



## Overview

Since 1997 the Swiss Confederation started to adopt acts concerning adult education, especially regarding vocational education. With the new **Vocational Education Law** and the **Vocational Education Decree**, both of which were implemented in 2004 [1], all areas of vocational education and training have a **uniform legal framework**. This law takes into account the growing number of careers and introduces new qualification procedures, which contribute to the openness of the educational system.

Switzerland is divided into 26 **cantons**, which are the **member states** of the federal state of Switzerland. Each canton has to create its own cantonal law on the basis of the national guidelines. As some cantons need more time than others for this, the process of implementing new cantonal laws on vocational education is still in progress. Due to the federal structure and the **lack of national competences** in the field of adult education, legislation in areas of adult education varies [2].

However, a specific **act on adult continuing education still does not exist**. The decision to adopt a federal act concerning adult continuing education began in 2006, but the path for its realisation and legalisation is still ongoing. In May 2006, Swiss people decided to amend the articles of the Constitution on education, the Federal Council was instructed to develop a federal law to regulate this issue, but the discussion is currently (2011) still ongoing [3].

## Politics and Law

The situation in the field of adult learning and education (ALE) is set to change, as a result of the **new amendment of the constitutional articles governing education**. Adult learning is now mentioned specifically in the Swiss constitution for the first time, the corresponding law, which will determine "areas and criteria" according to the constitutional article, is due to be drafted by the end of 2011. This means that the first national law on adult continuing education will probably not be in force before 2014, but it might well take even longer. However it is currently unclear whether the new law will be based on a broad or narrow definition of ALE, and therefore what it will cover. In the field of vocational training, the **revised Vocational Education Law** provides new and improved ways of promoting vocational education. It takes into account the growing number of careers and introduces new qualification procedures, which contribute to the improvement of the educational system. Moreover, more funding is available from the Confederation for continuing education [4].



Several political initiatives have been undertaken to incite new measures in favour of specific target groups such as those with few qualifications, **women** planning re-entry into the job market, or people with **low literacy and basic skills**. In some of these areas new measures have been planned or implemented, yet currently most of these initiatives have not led to a real change. However, Several project proposals have been submitted to the government departments responsible for education and training or employment.

The first priority is the new national law on continuing education is to determine areas and criteria as well as the preconditions for **promoting and funding continuing education**. This includes defining the field of continuing education, which can lead to a broad definition in terms of lifelong learning or a narrower one focused on vocational continuing education. Goals of high strategic importance are the implementation of a closer connection between ALE, other sectors of the Swiss education and training system, and the economic and social system. Some examples of this development can be seen in the report on economic growth (published by the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs SECO in April 2008) [5] as well as in the guidelines for promotion of education, research and technology (ERI) 2008 - 2011 written by the Federal Office for Professional Education and Technology BBT) [6].

**ALE is a highly decentralised** and heterogeneous field, which is **regulated by several** ministries on the national and cantonal levels. Switzerland **does not have a Ministry of Education**. Therefore, the responsibilities are sometimes split and not always well co-ordinated. This results in various ministries being responsible for different parts of academic continuing education, literacy, unemployment education, and continuing education for the disabled. This distribution of competencies makes the furthering of ALE difficult and for decades the Confederation has maintained a certain distance from adult learning with the federal structure of Switzerland in educational matters [7].

**The Federal Office for Professional Education and Technology (BBT)** [8] is in charge of vocational continuing education in the major professions, except for continuing education at the university level, which is the responsibility of the **State Secretariat for Education and Research (SBF)** [9]. **The Federal Office for Culture (BAK)** is in charge of literacy policies [10]. **The State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO)** mandates continuing education for the unemployed. Other Federal Offices are in charge of specific ALE segments, such as the education of the disabled, migrants, or the elderly.

As far as the organisation of the system is concerned, this situation has remained basically unchanged since 1997, except for the efforts regarding the co-ordination and strategic planning of ALE measures. In 1997, the parliamentary Commission for Science, Education and Culture (WBK) submitted a position paper titled "**Report on the situation, development, requirements for support**



and measures in the general and cultural adult learning from a federal viewpoint: the division of duties with the cantons is to be clarified and the content, structural and financial links to vocational education are to be highlighted " to the Federal Council [11]. The first concrete result was that the Federal Council commissioned the two Federal Offices BBT and BAK to submit an expert report on the situation and development of the continuing education sector in Switzerland, which was done in 1998. On this basis, the Federal Council mandated the **foundation of the Swiss Forum for Adult Learning (Forum Weiterbildung Schweiz)** in the summer of 2000. The Forum is a stage for debate concerning the development of a coherent policy on adult learning in Switzerland. It is an advisory board composed of representatives from federal offices (education and training, employment, culture, research, statistics), cantons, social partners and ALE providers. In 2005 the government established a second committee, the **Swiss Coordination Conference for Adult Learning (SKW)**. This advisory board coordinates the consideration of ALE related matters between which concern the Confederation and the cantons. The SKV aims for close cooperation between administration, research, providers and social partner organisations. The Forum supports the SKV through its recommendations and through its activity as a sounding board for policy developments. The common aim of the Forum and the SKW is the **structural foundation of adult learning** [12].

## Future trends/key concerns/directions

The Government supports ALE projects in the context of the Grundtvig and Leonardo programs. There has been an increase of efforts and projects in this field so that a certain continuity of **international cooperation** has been established. A major shift in policy is due for 2011: From then on Switzerland, though still not a member of the EU, **will participate in the European programmes as a full partner**. As an effect of this change, Switzerland is obliged to establish a national agency to deal with the European programmes. This process brings about new collaboration opportunities, which is particularly interesting for Swiss NGOs that are concerned with future developments in continuing education and training.

In the economic sector, development challenges focus on **competitiveness and innovation** and ALE goals are part of these strategies. The goals are usually defined with reference to economic growth. Until now they have focused on strictly work-related ALE, but there are also attempts to widen the perspective and consider **basic skills or key competences** as useful contributions to competitiveness [13].

Other important issues are quality assurance, professionalization in the training of adult educators, or **recognition of prior learning**. In all these fields, there are



developments under way which are considered crucial for the future of the Swiss education system.

However, the main challenge concerning adult education policies for the next few years will be the **creation of a national law on continuing education**. This law will be the first national law on adult education ever implemented in Switzerland. An optimistic date for its introduction is 2014. For now, the only precise information available is that the first draft should be submitted for consultation by the end of 2011.

## Structure overview

The level of initial education in Switzerland is high; one of the most important features is the large proportion of **students channelled into vocational training**, in the form of apprenticeships. Moreover, one of the leading features of adult education in Switzerland is the **high participation rate**, as it has one of the highest enrolment rates in the OECD area in both general education and vocational training.

Adult education is developing mainly in the private sector, on market principles. This means that the decision to participate (or not) in adult education is left to the individual and that adult education issues are **usually managed by private enterprises**, organisations, and associations. The relationship between providers is therefore mainly competitive.

There is a wide range of providers, who compete in a completely free market. Private providers vary in terms of legal status, type or training provided, they can be divided into three categories: **private training institutions**, offering vocational retraining and diploma courses; **privately run institutions**, which are numerous in offering training courses and different kinds of activities; and **trade unions, political or ethical institutions** which also provide a large number of training courses for their members or the general public.

These providers differ in terms of the typology of courses they offer. Some of them specialise in particular markets (e.g. music, visual arts, etc.), others offer more socially oriented courses on major political and social issues [14].

However, periodical participant surveys have shown that only 20% of course lessons fall under public providers, another 20% are provided by employers, while the remaining 60% of the course lessons fall upon either private schools or private non-profit organisations.



## Key Providers/Main institutions/Sources for Adult Education

### 'Non-Formal' Learning

An important role is played by associations and umbrella organisations, which configure a solid structure to the Swiss adult education system, and providing education and training. There are many associations and institutions concerned by this kind of activity, however some have a particular relevance within the Swiss adult education system.

**The Federal Office of Culture (BAK)** supports 7 umbrella organisations in the field of ALE:

- The Swiss Federation for Adult Learning SVEB ,
- The Swiss Association of Popular Universities VHS (Volkshochschulverband),
- The national Adult Literacy Association (Verband Lesen und Schreiben),
- The Education and Training Center Movendo, which is run by the trade unions' umbrella organisation Travail,
- The Swiss Association for Parent Education (Elternbildung CH),
- and the Federation for Catholic Adult Learning in Switzerland and Liechtenstein (KAGEB)

**The Swiss Association of Popular Universities (VHS)** runs diploma courses for teaching staff and work as a link between many other universities in Switzerland and abroad. They work towards promoting adult education and the development of a **conception of lifelong learning**, as well as promoting the development of popular universities and cooperation and collaboration between them. They also aim to attribute more importance to the **role of popular university** and enhancing the cooperation with Swiss and international institutions.

**The Association Suisse des Universites Populaires** promotes the development of the concept of adult education and increase its awareness at all level. At the same time it develops coordinated and coherent policies to promote the role of popular universities and organises training courses for teaching and administrative staff. It also controls the professional quality and administrative management of popular universities and promotes the collaboration with associations abroad [15].

Popular universities therefore have a major role in the promotion of adult education in Switzerland. The first of these universities was founded during the





1920s by a group of academics, but they gradually became **private institutions approved by the government**. Courses are usually given by university lecturers and high school teachers. Their aim is to develop continuing education and access to educational resources by promoting different kinds of activities, including courses related to ageing and healthcare, the labour market, etc. They are financed both by voluntary donations and by cantonal contributions, but these are different from one canton to another.

An example of popular university is the **Université Ouvrière de Genève**, which runs numerous foundation courses to provide **basic skills and enhance cultural standards**. It runs **literacy** classes for both French and non-French speakers: this helps adults to progress to progress in the language until they are ready to start vocational training. The Université Ouvrière de Genève also provides second language courses and refresh classes in French and mathematics before vocational training [16].

**The Education and Training Center Movendo** is another important adult education provider. It provides different kinds of courses which are mostly related to the economic and social sphere (law, economics, etc.), but it also helps the development of communication techniques, and project management. Education is addressed to members of Swiss trade unions and to the general public. Movendo offers education in French, German and Italian and tries to be flexible according to individual needs [17].

**The Conferenza Cantonale Genitori** (Swiss Association for Parent Education) promotes the meeting, the cooperation between members, the promotion of activities that benefit **children and parents**. The CCG works by lobbying, in order to represent the interests of parents and institutions that deal with parenthood ("give a voice to parents") as well as training parents by taking on (for the Italian-speaking Swiss) the authority granted by the Swiss Confederation for the training of parents (FSFG - SBE). It provides **support for parents** via different actions: coordination of training for parent teachers; representation of the parents' education at a national and supranational level; and the promotion of continuing education. In particular, educative competencies concern the capability of parents to learn academic and practical skills in order to promote the education and in general the well-being of their children They also support services for members on matters of general interest. The CCG provides information on its activities through public statements, general meetings, a website and by sending information via an electronic newsletter. [18].

**The Association for Catholic Adult Learning KAGEB** is a federation that defends the interests of its members and provides services in the field of adult education. Thirty Catholic houses of formation throughout Switzerland are members of the KAGEB; they offer a wide range of courses in areas as diverse



as spirituality, politics, religion and practical activities such as painting, or travel [19].

Other important Swiss institutions involved in adult education are the **Adult Learning Centers Migros (Klubschule Migros)**, one of the largest providers of continuing education in Switzerland. These learning centres are not supported by the BAK, but by the Federation of Migros Cooperatives (Migros Genossenschafts-Bund), which is one of the largest supermarket chains in the country. About one percent of the annual turnover is spent on cultural and educational initiatives, including the Adult Learning Centres. Due to this background, Migros courses can be offered at relatively low fees. The range of courses and training at Migros Adult Learning Centers is divided, essentially, into two main areas: languages and leisure (Languages , Design, Food and Drink, Personal Development, Sport, Dance, Music, Art and Literature, Beauty and Style) and business courses (Management, IT, Training, etc) [20].

### Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)

NGOs have an extremely important role for the enhancement of adult education in Switzerland. Many associations and organisations are currently involved, so here we will only outline some of them, in order to give a general idea of how they work and the kinds of services they provide.

Perhaps the most important the **Swiss Federation for Adult Learning (SVEB)**. It represents the interests of stakeholders concerned about adult education, training providers and interested individuals. As an **umbrella association** for continuing education, SVEB is committed to the development of the training system to promote efficiency. The SVEB is an association composed of about **510 members**, including about 230 institutions, that are themselves part of the umbrella organizations in specific areas, and 283 individual members. The SVEB is branched throughout the Switzerland, has a national secretariat in Zurich and two regional secretariats in the French speaking and in the Italian speaking parts of Switzerland and Ticino. The SVEB is supported in its work by the Federal Office of Culture (BAK) and the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education (EDK). The SVEB defends the concept of continuing education as an instrument for the development of personality, without differences in ages or purpose. It seeks to coordinate all the public and private education and training bodies managing adult education. It has also mandate to promote international relations and collaborate on an ongoing basis with the European Association for the Education of Adults [21].

Another association financed by the BAK is the **Swiss Adult Literacy Association**, committed in fighting the problem of illiteracy, so that people can exercise their right to basic education. It also organises training courses which allow adults to better manage their social life and family and awareness



campaigns to disseminate the purposes of the organisation and face the reality of illiteracy. Further research aimed at developing an appropriate pedagogy for adults with literacy problems and the use of new technologies in training are provided.

The association works in partnership with various agencies and institutions which are in contact with illiterate people: associations involved in adult education, institutions engaged with the problem of social exclusion, etc [22].

## Vocational Institutions and career-related training

**Vocational and Professional Education and Training (VET/PET)** plays an important role in the Swiss education system. In Switzerland there is a distinction between **VET programmes (Vocational Education and Training, VET)**, which take place at **upper-secondary level**, and **PET programmes (Professional Education and Training)**, which take place at **tertiary level**. The entire education system has various pathways enabling people to shift from one part of the system to another. In addition, though they are not seen as part of Switzerland's VET/PET system, **universities of applied sciences (*Fachhochschulen*)** offer vocational type education at tertiary level and are therefore here. VET programmes (upper-secondary level) are mainly provided in what is often referred to in Switzerland as a "**dual-track approach to learning**", which combines part-time studies at a vocational school and part-time apprenticeships at a host company. [23]

In Switzerland, all vocational teachers (at vocational schools), vocational trainers (at host companies) and vocational instructors (at industry training centres) must meet certain standards. Most of them are **trained and certified centrally at the Swiss Federal Institute for Vocational Education (SFIVET)**, a tertiary level institution that also offers an MSc in VET for staff involved in steering Switzerland's VET/PET system. SFIVET mainly provides basic and continuing training to VET professionals (mostly vocational teachers and vocational trainers who work in a full-time or part-time capacity) [24].

### VET

**The Federal Vocational Baccalaureate, FVB (*Berufsmaturität*)** is an optional general education qualification available to VET students wishing to enrol in a Swiss university of applied sciences or (if they take a University Aptitude Test after obtaining their FVB) a Swiss cantonal university, federal institute of technology or university of teacher education. The FVB can be obtained either by attending general education courses while enrolled in a VET programme (upper-secondary level), in 3-4 semesters while working, or by attending a one-year full-time preparatory course for the FVB Examination after graduating from the VET



programme. The proportion of VET students obtaining the Federal Vocational Baccalaureate has steadily increased since its introduction in 1994.

## PET

Switzerland offers two different ways to obtain tertiary professional education and training (PET) qualifications. With the first approach, learners prepare for one of two national professional examinations: **the Federal PET Diploma Examination (*Eidgenössische Berufsprüfung*)** and **the Advanced Federal PET Diploma Examination (*höhere Fachprüfung*)**. This is an exclusively exam-based arrangement handled by the professional organisations of each sector. There are currently about 400 different national professional examinations developed by professional organisations. Alternatively, learners can enrol in a tertiary degree programme at a Swiss professional college (*höhere Fachschule*). These degree programmes are open to holders of a Federal VET Diploma (upper-secondary level) with some years of experience working in their occupation. Here, learners can obtain more specialised or more management-oriented knowledge in their field. It is common practice in PET programmes for learners to study and work in parallel.

Unlike other parts of the Swiss education system, which are mainly a cantonal responsibility, Switzerland's VET/PET system is managed at national level by three partners: the Confederation, the cantons and professional organisations (employers, trade associations and trade unions). This collaborative partnership arrangement is stipulated by law and roles and responsibilities are distributed as follows: the Confederation (through the Federal Office for Professional Education and Technology, OPET) ensures quality and strategic planning and development of VET/PET programmes. Switzerland's VET/PET system continues to evolve. A new Federal Vocational and Professional Education and Training Act (VPETA) came into force in 2004 [25].

## Universities

Swiss universities offer a wide range of continuing education according to the Bologna system. **Every university is obliged to run a continuing education center.** Some of the courses are available to people who do not hold a university degree. For courses which are not, there is the possibility of admission, but there is no official validation procedure for this purpose. The umbrella organisation **Swiss University Continuing Education** aims to promote and spread university continuing education. It consists of continuing education centres in Swiss universities and institutes of technology.

All training programmes offered to professionals by Swiss university institutions (*hautes écoles universitaires*) are listed in Swissuni database. [26]



## e-learning

**SFIVET's R&D Division** helps in the promotion of the use of ICT and e-learning in VET and PET programmes by providing VET and PET professionals with continuing training as well as assistance with e-learning implementation projects.

It is constantly active in the field of information and communication technologies: innovative projects for the training of adults and young people; research and publications on the impact of technology on daily life, training and working environments; development of multimedia-based educational materials; training of managers and experts.

SFIVET's R&D Division provides the following services: provision of guidance and support to vocational schools and host companies wishing to introduce e-learning in VET programmes; provision of e-learning platforms for work and training; provision of a web-conferencing system; provision of staff to film conferences, with the possibility of live web streaming and production of DVDs; provision of a series of educational materials and training environments for the development and management of distance; production of multimedia materials and interactive videos [27].

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