

Careers in Switzerland for Foreign Graduates from Swiss Universities

FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions)

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DISCLAIMER

This document is for informational purposes only and has no legal status. It may contain errors or misinterpretations. Only the original legal texts have force of law.

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Aspects

Q1.1 I am a foreigner and I will obtain a degree from a Swiss higher education institution. What are the possibilities for me to work in Switzerland?

For a salaried employment, you should make the distinction between two situations, relative to your nationality:

1. If you are a citizen of an **EFTA** country (Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein), or of the **EU-27** (all European Union countries, including the UK, **except Croatia**), you may work freely in Switzerland and you will obtain a residence permit upon signature of your employment contract. The contract must provide for at least 12 hours of work per week. Your employer must make the request for a permit to the *Service de la population*. The permit will be short-term (type **L** EU/EFTA) for a work contract with validity up to one year, or long-term (type **B** EU/EFTA for five years) for a work contract of more than one year, and is **not subject to a quota**. While seeking work, you can stay in Switzerland for 3 months without any further formality. Beyond that, you must ask for a jobseeker residence permit. Overall, your stay in Switzerland as a jobseeker must not exceed one year after graduation.
2. If you are a citizen of any country other than those mentioned in Paragraph 1, you can work in Switzerland, but your access to the job market will be more restricted. Your future employer will need to request a permit for residence and gainful employment from the Employment Service (*Service de l'emploi*), and show that your employment has a significant scientific or economic interest, or that a satisfactory candidate from workers with priority (Swiss, Swiss residents, citizens of EU-27 or EFTA) could not be found. The permit will be short-term (L) or long-term (B for one year, renewable) according to the duration of your contract, and **will be subject to a quota** (i.e. the number of permits delivered each year is limited). While seeking work, you can stay in Switzerland for six months as long as you have sufficient financial resources: you will need to ask for a residence permit for seeking work ("*titre de séjour pour recherche d'emploi*") (see Q 2.1)

If you are not seeking salaried employment in Switzerland but would like to work as an independent (freelancer) or to create your own company, see question 1.3.

Q1.2 I will obtain a postgraduate (continuing education) diploma from a Swiss higher education institution (MAS, Executive Master, etc.). What are my possibilities for work in Switzerland?

The same conditions as those mentioned in Q 1.1 normally apply to holders of a postgraduate diploma from a Swiss higher education institution.

Q1.3 I would like to work as an independent (freelancer) or create my own company in Switzerland after my degree. What are the possibilities?

Again, you need to distinguish between two situations, according to your nationality.

1. If you are a citizen of an **EFTA** (Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein) or of a **European Union** country including the UK (with the exception of **Croatia**), you can in principle work in Switzerland as an independent. You will receive a residence authorization for five years after providing proof that the basic requirements for engaging in such an activity are fulfilled (e.g. obtaining an independent status from a *Caisse de compensation* AVS, incorporating your company and registering it with the Commercial Registry, etc.) You should make your request to the *Service de la population*.
2. If you are a citizen of any country other than those mentioned in paragraph 1, you may still obtain a permit for an independent activity. Your activity can be one of two types:
 - a. Activity under your own name (independent)
 - b. Company with limited responsibility (SARL), or public limited company (SA), where you hold the majority of shares and of which you are an employee.

Whichever type you chose, in order to obtain your permit, you must demonstrate to the authorities that your business proposal is viable. The authorities will evaluate this on the basis of its financial strength, the credibility of your business plan, and the economic or scientific interest it presents for the canton or for Switzerland. Unlike the case of EFTA/UE-27 nationals, the nature of the activity is thus of great importance. The request should be made to the *Service de l'Emploi*. The permit is **subject to a quota** and its validity is usually linked to your reaching of **specific business objectives** (e.g. minimum turnover, number of jobs created, etc.) in a given timeframe.

Q1.4 What are the legislative changes in vigor since 1 January 2011?

There are four changes which specifically concern non-European holders of a degree from a Swiss higher education institution:

- They will no longer be asked to commit to leaving the country at the end of their studies.
- They will now be able to stay in Switzerland for six months after obtaining their degree, in order to seek work. To do so, they need to ask for a specific temporary residence permit for seeking work ("*Autorisation de séjour pour recherche d'emploi en Suisse*"). See Section II for further details.
- Their future employer may now legally ignore the priority principle for Swiss citizens, Swiss residents, EU-27 and EFTA nationals. It will be sufficient to show that the job to be filled has a **significant scientific or economic interest**. This rather vaguely-termed formulation in the law has been clarified by an Ordinance on its application, but nevertheless remains subject to the interpretation of the authorities who deliver the permit.
- Years spent studying in Switzerland may now be taken into account in obtaining a permanent residence permit (C permit) if a residence permit (B permit) was held for at least two consecutive years. This also applies to EU-27 and EFTA citizens.

II. Administrative Aspects

The temporary permit for seeking employment (non-European Graduates)

Q2.1 What should I do to obtain the temporary permit for seeking employment ("Autorisation de séjour pour recherche d'emploi en Suisse")?

The request must be made by the degree-holder to the *Contrôle des habitants* of his/her place of residence. He/she must be able to show that he/she has **successfully passed the final exams** and that he/she has sufficient revenue (either at least CHF 2,100 per month, or a total of CHF 12,600) and somewhere to live. This residence permit is valid for a maximum of six months.

Warning: *You need to obtain this temporary residence permit in order to remain in Switzerland after your studies. It is not delivered automatically or tacitly, and may be refused if some of the conditions detailed above are not met, or if the applicant falls foul of Article 62 of the Law on Foreigners (i.e. if he/she has made false declarations, if he/she has been condemned to a prison sentence, if he/she has threatened public security or order, if he/she is dependent on social assistance, etc.).*

Q2.2 When does the six-month period start? What happens when the six months are up?

The six-month period starts from the moment when the **student has been informed by the Registrar (Service académique) that they have successfully passed their final exams**, and not from the moment at which the degree is actually received. For Master degree holders from EPFL, successful completion of degree requirements is usually advised in February or in July, while the degree is formally discerned at the *Magistrale* ceremony the following October. For EPFL PhDs, a certificate of successful completion established by the Registrar is available on the student's IS-Academia account the day after the **private** defense.

Attention: *the six-month period runs from the date at which success has been notified, even if the request is submitted afterwards. In other words, if you submit your request two months after being informed of your successful completion, you will only have four months on your permit!*

This type of residence permit is not renewable. This means that you will need to leave the country when it expires, unless you have a legal right to stay in Switzerland.

Q2.3 My Student Permit B is valid until after I obtain my degree. Can I stay on in Switzerland with this permit after my degree, and then request a temporary residence permit to seek work?

If you complete your studies before your student permit expires, the outstanding period (up to 6 months) will be included within the duration of the residence permit for seeking work as, as explained above in Q2.2, the six-month period begins as soon as you have been notified of your successful completion.

Q2.4 What are the obligations linked to this permit?

You must hold sufficient financial resources and have somewhere to live. In addition, the holder cannot work more than 15 hours per week with this permit. Longer working hours are considered incompatible with your search for work. On the other hand, there is no need for you to show proof of your search for work, and you can enter and leave Switzerland without losing the permit.

Q2.5 If I leave Switzerland after my degree, can I come back later and take up my right to this permit?

No, not if you leave for more than six months, since the six-month period runs from the moment you are notified of your successful completion of your final exams. If you leave for a shorter period, you can take advantage of the outstanding time, up to the deadline of six months – as long as you make the request in advance of leaving the country.

Q2.6 If I take advantage of this permit, do I have any rights to unemployment insurance (including allowances, courses, etc.) during my search for work?

A priori no, since you are not considered as "eligible to work" on the job market in the legal sense of unemployment insurance. You would have to have held a work permit beforehand. Nevertheless, the regional unemployment offices will decide on a case-by-case basis.

The resident permit based on employment (known as the “permis de travail”)

Q2.4 If I find a job, what should I do to obtain a permit?

Your future employer has to make the request and will have to supply the required documents. Your role is limited to finding a job. In order for the request to be valid, an employment contract must have been signed, but it will only come into force once the permit has been granted.

Q2.5 If I am refused a permit once, is there any impact on my future chances to find another job?

In theory no, since the permit is refused to the employer – not to you. The refusal is often linked to the position itself (not of significant scientific or economic interest, part-time work, salary too far below the customary conditions for that sector, etc.).

III. Practical Aspects

Q3.1 What are my chances of finding a job in Switzerland?

In general, the chances are fairly high. Around 20% of jobs in Switzerland are held by foreigners of all origins. This proportion is much higher in some cantons, such as in Geneva or Vaud. The Swiss market is very open in this respect. Holding a degree from a Swiss higher education institution considerably increases your chances of employment and the process of obtaining a work permit is simplified.

The major obstacle comes above all from the fact that some employers are not sufficiently aware of the conditions for obtaining a work permit for a degree-holder of a Swiss higher education institution, and don't try to recruit non-Europeans out of fear they will not obtain the permit.

The other obstacle is that the number of permits is limited. If the annual quota has already been exhausted, the request for a permit will be put on a waiting list or will be refused – even if all the other conditions have been satisfied.

Q3.2 Do you have any special advice to give to foreign degree holders?

If you want to work in Switzerland, it is important that you know the legal aspects with regard to obtaining residence permits through employment. Employers themselves are often not fully aware of these.

The other advice we can give you will unfortunately come a little late if you are already looking for work:

- Take advantage of your studies in Switzerland to learn or improve your language skills in French, in German, or even in English. Expectations in this respect are very high on the Swiss job market.
- Find out more about the companies in the sector in which you would like to start your career. The knowledge you gain in this way will enormously help you in your search and will help you to convince employers to hire you.

IV. Legal Texts

- Federal Act on Foreign Nationals (RS 142.20) : https://www.admin.ch/ch/e/rs/c142_20.html
- Ordinance with regard to admission, residence and exercise of a lucrative activity (RS 142.201) https://www.admin.ch/ch/f/rs/c142_201.html (not available in English)

V. Other useful information

State Secretariat for Migration

- EU and EFTA nationals (incl. Croatia): [FAQ](#)
- Nationals of other countries: [information and process](#)