

The University of Basel and international academic life

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The University of Basel, founded in 1460 and described in Part A as the oldest university in Switzerland, taught in Latin for most of its early history. German replaced Latin as the language of instruction in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. English has entered the university gradually since the late twentieth century, first in the natural sciences and then in economics, the life sciences and parts of the humanities. The Biozentrum, founded in 1971 as one of the first interdisciplinary centres for molecular biology in Europe, adopted English early as the language of its research groups and of its doctoral training, because its professors and doctoral students were recruited internationally from the beginning.¹

The Bologna reform accelerated this development. The Bologna Declaration of 1999, which Switzerland signed together with the other European education ministers, introduced the three-cycle structure of bachelor, master and doctorate and promoted the mobility of students across Europe. Swiss universities implemented the reform during the first decade of the twenty-first century. The University of Basel offers most of its bachelor programmes in German, while a growing number of master programmes are taught entirely or mainly in English, particularly in the life sciences, economics, business, sustainable development and European studies. Doctoral programmes in the natural sciences, including the graduate schools of the Biozentrum and the Department of Biosystems Science and Engineering of ETH Zurich in Basel, work almost exclusively in English.²

The internationalisation of the university reflects the needs of the regional economy. The pharmaceutical groups recruit doctoral graduates from the Biozentrum and from the Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute, which moved to Allschwil in 2021 and works in English with partners in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The Friedrich Miescher Institute for

Biomedical Research, affiliated with Novartis, and the Institute of Molecular and Clinical Ophthalmology Basel provide further examples of research institutions whose language of daily work is English. Their scientists move between academic research and industry, which creates a labour market whose shared language is English and whose members may live in Basel for many years without needing more than everyday German.³

The use of English in teaching has also raised questions. Critics within Swiss universities have pointed out that teaching in English may weaken the ability of graduates to write and think about their field in German or French, which matters for professions that serve the local population, such as law, medicine and teaching. Law faculties have therefore kept German and French as their main languages of instruction, while offering courses in English on international commercial law, arbitration and European law. The University of Basel's law faculty offers a master programme in international and comparative law with courses in English and has a long tradition in international economic law and arbitration.⁴

1 Notes

1. See Part A of this book on the founding of the university in 1460. On the Biozentrum, founded in 1971, see the history pages of the University of Basel and Part G of this book. To be verified. ↩
2. Bologna Declaration of 19 June 1999. On the implementation in Switzerland, see the publications of swissuniversities and of the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI). On the language of instruction of individual programmes, see the course catalogue of the University of Basel. ETH Zurich's Department of Biosystems Science and Engineering (D-BSSE) moved into a new building in Basel in about 2024. Status to be verified. ↩
3. On the Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute (Swiss TPH) and its new building in Allschwil, see its annual report. On the Friedrich Miescher Institute (founded 1970) and the Institute of Molecular and Clinical Ophthalmology Basel (IOB, founded 2017), see their websites and Part G of this book. Dates to be verified. ↩

4. On the debate about English as a language of instruction at Swiss universities, see contributions in the Bulletin VSH-AEU of the association of Swiss university teachers and the language policy statements of swissuniversities. On the programmes of the law faculty of the University of Basel, see its course catalogue. To be verified. ↩

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