

Universities and research

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For most of the federal state's history, Ticino had no university. Young Ticinese who wanted an academic education had to study in the universities north of the Alps or in Italy. The Università della Svizzera italiana (USI) was created in 1996 after the Grand Council of Ticino approved its establishment in October 1995. It has campuses in Lugano and Mendrisio and faculties of communication, culture and society, economics, informatics and biomedical sciences, together with the Academy of Architecture in Mendrisio. It is the only Swiss university whose institutional language is Italian, although many of its programmes are taught in English, and its Faculty of Communication, Culture and Society includes an Institute of Italian Studies.¹ Chapter I.III treats USI's role in finance and technology research.

Outside Ticino, Italian studies are taught at the universities of Zurich, Bern, Basel, Fribourg, Geneva, Lausanne and Neuchâtel and at the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich. The tradition goes back to the founding years of the federal state. When the federal polytechnic school opened in Zurich in 1855, Stefano Franscini sought a chair of Italian language and literature there, unsuccessfully.² The chair went to Francesco De Sanctis, the exiled Neapolitan critic who later became minister of education of the Kingdom of Italy and taught in Zurich from 1856 to 1860.³ In recent decades several universities have reduced their Italian programmes or merged chairs, a development that the Forum per l'italiano in Svizzera and Italian-speaking members of Parliament have repeatedly criticized.⁴

1 Italian in the schools of German- and French-speaking Switzerland

The decisive battleground is the school. Article 15 paragraph 3 of the Languages Act requires that at the end of compulsory schooling students have skills in at least one second national language and one other foreign

language.⁵ In the German-speaking cantons, the second national language is French, and in the French-speaking cantons it is German. English is taught in most cantons from primary school. Italian is therefore, outside Ticino and the Grisons, at most a third foreign language, offered as an optional subject at lower secondary level and as a specific or optional subject at upper secondary level.⁶ Few pupils choose it. In the Canton of St. Gallen only about 5 per cent of upper secondary school students chose Italian, and in February 2011 the cantonal parliament discussed a proposal that would have almost eliminated Italian from the upper secondary schools. The proposal was rejected.⁷

Under the recognition rules of 1995, every recognized upper secondary school had to offer a third national language at least as an optional subject, which outside Ticino and the Grisons as a rule meant Italian. The revision of the federal and intercantonal rules on the recognition of the *Matura* adopted in 2023 is reported to keep this obligation.⁸ Whether that obligation produces students who choose Italian is another question. The weakness of Italian in the schools of German-speaking Switzerland has a direct consequence for the federal administration and for the economy: the pool of German speakers who read Italian is shrinking. In a federal office in Bern, a manager who learnt Italian at school is becoming rarer, and the passive knowledge of a third language that the Languages Ordinance expects from senior managers can no longer be presumed.

2 Notes

1. Wikipedia, "Università della Svizzera italiana", https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universit%C3%A0_della_Svizzera_italiana (used as a last resort). See also Chapter I.III. ↩
2. Marcacci, "Franscini, Stefano" (above). ↩
3. Attilio Marinari, "De Sanctis, Francesco", in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 39 (Rome 1991), [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/francesco-de-sanctis_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/francesco-de-sanctis_(Dizionario-Biografico)/) (teaching of Italian literature at the Zurich Polytechnikum 1856–1860; minister of public education 1861–1862 and 1878–1880). ↩
4. On the situation of Italian at Swiss universities see the Forum per l'italiano in Svizzera, <https://www.forumperlitalianoinsvizzera.ch/>. ↩
5. LangA, Art. 15 para. 3 (above). ↩

6. Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education (EDK), language teaching strategy of 25 March 2004, and the HarmoS Agreement of 14 June 2007, Art. 4. ↩
7. Wikipedia, "Lingua italiana in Svizzera" (above). ↩
8. Ordinance of 15 February 1995 on the Recognition of Upper Secondary School-Leaving Certificates (MAV), SR 413.11, Art. 12, <https://www.droit-bilingue.ch/de-it/4/41/413.11-12-16.html>, for the rule of 1995. ↩

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