

For the Independent

Switzerland's Universities

Andrew Oswald, Professor of Economics, University of Warwick, and Visiting Professor, Socioeconomic Institute, University of Zurich.

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I did not expect to be living in Switzerland in the month the financial system of the western world splintered.

This episode has reinforced in my mind the need for disinterested intellectual leaders who can offer reliable advice in a crisis. Although the public never think about it, those rare people are all trained in universities, and many work in universities. Whatever one's view of the detailed causes of the crash, and academic economists have to take a share of the blame, this month has shown that human society needs astute thinkers to get us out of a mess. In the time of Plato, they were the star-gazers: the individuals who, to the disbelief of the average sailor, looked up to the sky to work out the position of their ship.

Few Britons or Americans realise that Switzerland has more resident Nobel prize-winners per head of population than any country in the world. Impressively, it has three universities among the world's top-100 universities, according to the most reputable source, which is the World Academic Ranking of Universities produced by Jiao Tong University. Yet Switzerland has a population approximately one fiftieth of the size of that of the United States. Switzerland's universities also happen to be home to some of Europe's best economists.

What is Switzerland's secret?

First, the country runs on a high level of trust and has an uncommon common sense. I see this every morning at my tram stop. The Zurich trams run every 6 minutes and on time; their numbers are colour-coded; the signs show you in a straightforward way where the trams are going; there appear to be no ticket inspectors yet everyone buys a ticket. Because the trams are clean, reliable and quiet, it is pointless to drive. So the air is clean. I am the wrong kind of doctor to be able to be certain, but perhaps that is why almost everyone looks healthy. Crucially, the educated middle classes here happily travel on the trams, and a virtuous equilibrium is the result. This prevents the slow erosion of quality and good behaviour that happens routinely in those nations where middle-class people are disdainful of public transport.

Second, and in the same spirit, Switzerland's universities have a sensible autonomy that a British university would envy. In the 1990s, the University of

Zurich was given much more independence. Universities here have freedom and, being run by fine scholars, use that autonomy shrewdly.

Third, Swiss universities are the product of a unusually democratic structure and this leads to consistent funding from taxpayers. There is agreement about what counts as a desirable outcome. Professor Uschi Backes-Gellner of the University of Zurich has argued persuasively that Switzerland's universities are successful because they are pragmatic and have good quality-control. They are plainly committed to excellence. I have sat through some seminars of fantastic quality. The nation has accepted that it wants world-class universities and will pay what that takes. Faced by the size of countries like the United States, or even the United Kingdom, this takes a courage of the mind, and some thinking through, and Switzerland has that and has done that.

Fourth, even though, in human relations, trust valuably begets trust, it is necessary to have checks. Swiss higher education is carefully evaluated. There is formal comparison against international standards. Quality audits occur in universities every six years. But, importantly, there is nothing as overpoweringly bureaucratic as the UK's Research Assessment Exercise, which exemplifies the alternative low-trust model. In Switzerland, an independent unit is responsible for much of the evaluation. The unit uses judgement, bibliometric measures from the Web of Science, and much else. Yet almost everyone I have spoken to thinks this natural and that assessments are done in an even-handed professional way – and, unlike in Britain, quietly. Switzerland runs on compelling logic rather than compulsion.

Fifth, the salaries are good. But they are also remarkably flat at the top end. As far as I can tell, a Nobel Prize winner does not earn much more than a regular professor. Whether that aspect can be maintained remains to be seen; I suppose I would be surprised, but we must see. One key element is that both young and older scholars are paid well. Postdoctoral researchers can make 40,000 sterling a year in their twenties. This is obvious good sense and tells you part of the secret.

Switzerland offers a glimpse of the way a civilised nation, and university system, can be organized. Small countries need to make it with their heads. This one does. The UK is not the only country that could learn from it.