

Make them stay: keeping young librarians in the profession

Britta Biedermann

University of Zurich, Institute of Sociology, Library, Zurich, Switzerland
biedermann@soziologie.uzh.ch



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Abstract:

Abstract: Even after a successful vocational training as a librarian most of the young Swiss professionals do not stay on in the profession. A mobility project tried to counteract this trend. Two young librarians search an internship in European libraries. This internship for trainees was financially supported by the “ch Foundation for Federal Cooperation”. To find a library that was willing to mentor those young professionals as volunteers was a tough challenge. Supporting young professionals by providing them with a good start into the work environment and labor market is an investment in the future. To those who have to make a vocational decision the profession of a librarian becomes attractive because a rewarding follow-up can be offered after the VET Diploma (Vocational Education Training) can be offered. Mentors and teachers who provide care beyond the VET Diploma and a Library Association who offers a mobility program, are working for a sustainable librarian education.

Keywords: librarianship, vocational education and training (VET), mobility, foreign exchange, Switzerland

Introduction

The Swiss education system has a high degree of permeability and flexibility. It is possible to enter a school by more than one path and transfers between schools are possible too. There are even ways for obtaining missing qualifications later on through training programs. With the necessary commitment and effort everyone can attend the course of his or her choice.

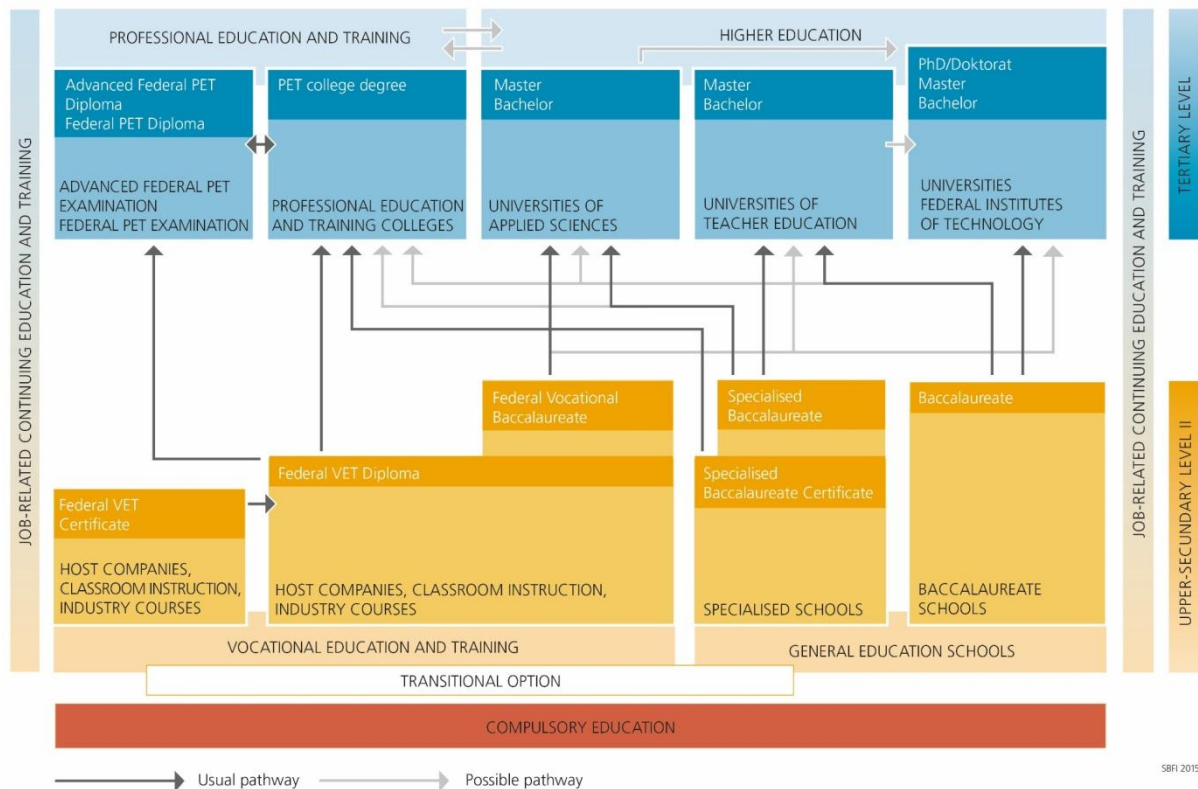
The education is government responsibility from kindergarten over compulsory education onwards up to the tertiary level. The 26 cantons and the federal government each have their own responsibilities regarding education.

At the end of their compulsory nine years of school two-thirds of adolescents chose to enter a profession via the dual-track system of education. In Switzerland, apprenticeships combine classroom instruction at a vocational school with training on the job in a training company.

Additionally a baccalaureate from a baccalaureate school, a specialised baccalaureate or a Federal Vocational Baccalaureate all allow for further education at university level.

The search for a suitable apprenticeship in a library or archive begins around the ages of 13 to 14 when the pupils are still in compulsory education. Switzerland has about 160 libraries and archives offering apprenticeships, but some of them have only have an opening every three years – and then only when the last apprentice leaves will there be space for the next one. With help from their teachers and parents or professional vocational guidance counsellors, pupils apply for a trial week or trial days in a library or archive. Normally that is at the place where they later sign an apprenticeship contract. The library or archive pays the apprentice a low salary for the entire duration of the apprenticeship. The salary increases from year to year to honour their progress.

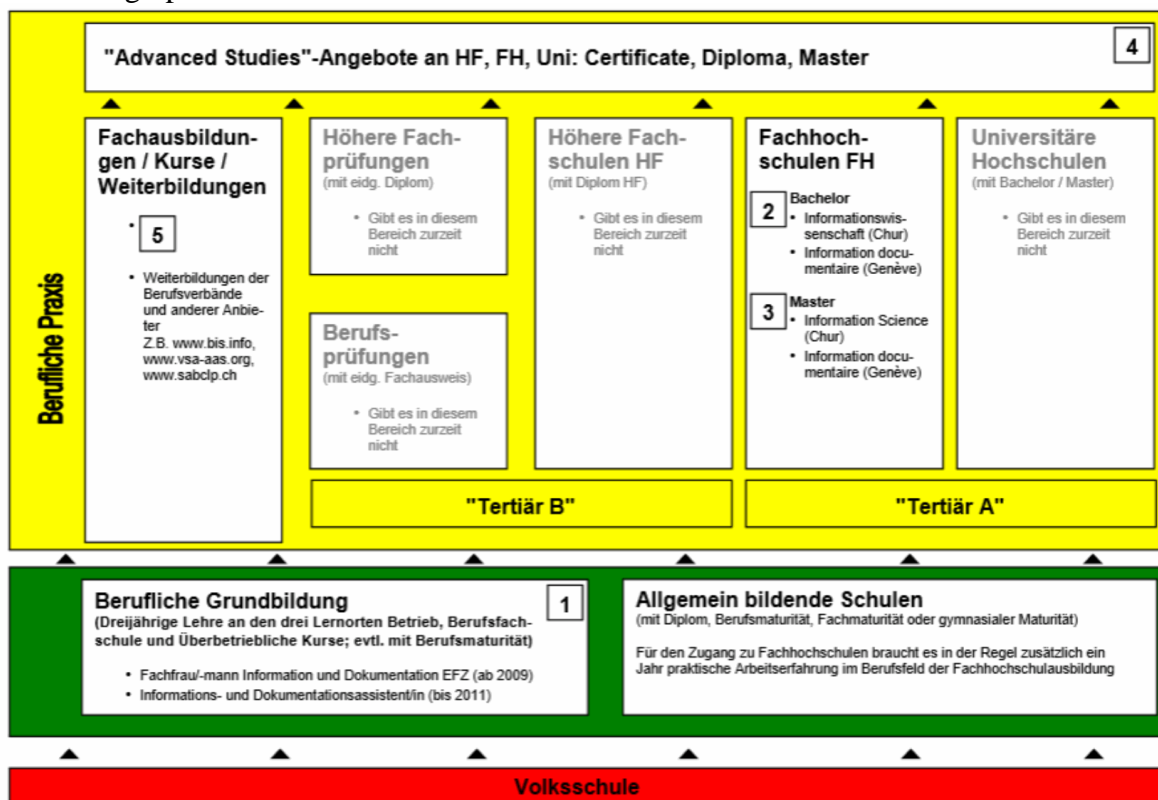
The graphic below shows the Swiss education system.



Source: SBFI, 2015

There are three forms of education for librarians (Master, Bachelor and VET). The Swiss VET system is rather unique in its dual-track set-up compared to most foreign systems. It requires three days of practical training per week at a library, archive or other information service center and two days of theoretical classes in a VET (vocational education and training) school. In addition, during the entire three years of training there are a further thirty days of specialized courses (cataloguing, acquisition, information literacy, customer relations, etc.) to attend and two work experience placements outside the home library/archive that add up to at least three months. When they pass their exams these young librarians are between 19 and 21 years old.

The graphic below shows the education for librarians.



Source:

http://www.ausbildungid.ch/fileadmin/redaktion/Dokumente/Home/03_Dokumente/01_Allgemein/120109_bildungsschema-information-dokumentation.pdf (15.5.2015)

The project: “Librarians without Borders” (I+D Fachleute ohne Grenzen), targets those librarians completing their apprenticeship with a Federal VET Diploma - with or without Federal Vocational Baccalaureate¹. In the graphic above, this group is to be found on the left side of the green square, marked “1”.

In the summer of 2015, twenty librarians will have completed their apprenticeship in Zurich, Switzerland. Only six of them stayed on in a library and continued to work in the profession. It is poignant to speculate what happened to the other 14, and why they failed to take up the profession they had trained in. A survey with three questions was sent to those twenty young professionals just finishing their apprenticeship. The first question was: “What

¹ The Federal Vocational Baccalaureate can be attained either during apprenticeship or in a one-year-course after the apprenticeship. It qualifies for higher education at a University of Applied Science.

are your plans after the final exam?” From the thirteen surveys returned, six said they would continue to work in a library, however, most of them chose only temporary and part time placements. Librarians who had not already acquired the Federal Vocational Baccalaureate during their apprenticeship stated that they intended to do so in a one year course. When asked why they - or why they will not - stay on in the profession, the variety of answers given was remarkable. Those who continued in the profession have either been offered a challenging task at their new job or start an undergraduate (B.A.) course in library and information science while working part time in a library. Further reasons given for staying in the profession were the wish for independence from parents and/or to gain work experience.

Regarding this project the answers to the last question were of most interest. When asked: “Would you be interested in an internship in a foreign (European) library?” only one person replied that she was not interested in working abroad. Most of them agreed that this would present a welcome possibility to attain language skills, especially in English. They were curious to get to know the daily work in a foreign library - they wanted to meet new colleagues and would love to gain first-hand experience in another culture. Some young professional also mentioned their career opportunities as they pointed out that having a work place experience abroad on their curriculum vitae (CV) could be helpful in finding a new job.

Reading those twelve positive responses, realizing the high level of interest this projects attracted, ensured that I will continue the project in 2016. Learning across boundaries is a highly required future prospect for young librarians who have just completed their apprenticeship. The project is in keeping with the character of this generation of young Swiss librarian (Generation Y or millennials) which is known to be mobile, engaged, teamwork orientated and wanting actively to shape the future.

The mobility project

When looking at the form of education common in the 19th century or even in the story of Heidi², we see that after years of theoretical learning a phase of travelling follows. This project offers young professionals the chance to gather work experience in a European Library outside of Switzerland. In this phase of their lives, self-reliance and confidence in what they have learned will grow. Besides that, going abroad will improve their language skills and broaden their cultural knowledge. This option of going abroad after the apprenticeship is provided for by the ch-Foundation who is funded by the Swiss Confederation. The Leonardo da Vinci European vocational training program “is open to schools, companies and other vocational education and training institutions, offering them the opportunity to work with partners from all over Europe. Within a project context, participants are also able to organize international internships for trainees and qualified apprentices. Interns benefit from financial support towards their subsistence expenses, as well as a flat-rate travel allowance. Since the program is aimed at legal entities, individuals cannot be placed directly in internships, or offered direct financial support.”³

As before mentioned, the apprenticeship for librarians has three compulsory learning sites:

1. Workplace (library, archive or information/documentary center)
2. The VET School with classroom instruction

² Heidi is a work of fiction written in 1880 by Swiss author Johanna Spyri originally published in two parts as Heidi's years of learning and travel and Heidi makes use of what she has learned. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heidi> (15.5.2015)

³ <http://www.ch-go.ch/en/meta/programme-overview/europe/leonardo-da-vinci/internship-opportunities-for-trainees/> (15.5.2015)

3. Specialized courses (“überbetriebliche Kurse”) provided at a training centers for the purpose of complementing work-based training and classroom instruction.

Those specialized courses, like cataloguing, customer relations ... etc. are organized by the so-called “Ausbildungsdelegation I+D”⁴ (Education Delegation for Information and Documentation). The Education Delegation for Information and Documentation is responsible for all aspects of vocational training in the areas of archives, libraries and documentation.

The Delegation operates as an independent organization of the Professional Association “Library Information Swiss” (BIS) and the Association of Swiss Archivists (VSA)⁵.

Applying for financial support of the ch-Foundation for the Leonardo da Vinci European Program has to be done by the Education Delegation for Information and Documentation because individuals cannot be offered direct financial support. The idea of applying to the Leonardo da Vinci European program was approved by the Delegation, the application form was submitted and the project accepted.

Simultaneously the search for internship placements started. There were two young professionals interested in going on an internship abroad. As their preferred language was English I started looking for partner libraries in the UK willing to offer an internship.

I started with a contact I had from the last IFLA Congress in Lyon 2014. But this Library in Scotland unfortunately could not take a trainee. CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals) also gave a negative response. This was very disappointing. In January 2015 I tried again and asked two Swiss colleagues: Alice Keller (former Head of Collection Management Oxford University Library Services) and Genevieve Clavel-Merrin (Member of the IFLA Governing Board) if they could help me out finding libraries who would be willing to mentor a young librarian from Switzerland.

With the help of those colleagues a contact with two Oxford Bodleian Libraries was established. After a few emails exchanges and phone calls we could secure an internship place at two Bodleian Libraries: the Library at Said Business School and the Education Library. In the beginning of June the head librarian from the Said Business School was in Switzerland for a meeting. We decided to accompany her on the train to the town where the meeting was held. During the one-hour train ride from Zurich Airport to St. Gallen we could discuss details of the internship in Oxford. For example we mentioned that accommodation was difficult to find in Oxford. We also looked at potential themes and librarian tasks the trainee could get involved in. Always keeping in mind that agreed on plans could change quickly if something urgent interferes.

We agreed on a two month internship in each library. So, in total there will be a four month internship for one trainee from September to December 2015 at those two Oxford Bodleian Libraries (see Appendix: Learning Agreement)

Further contacts to libraries in the UK and Ireland remained unsuccessful. A phone call to another Library started out was very promising, although there was a need for a lot of detail clarifications, CVs, letter of motivation etc. Finally, after all the effort, the reason why we were turned down was surprising and we could not understand the short negative response after two months of intensive exchange of ideas and information.

On the other hand, the young Swiss female candidate suddenly changed her mind and decided to go travelling after the exam, followed by studying at the University of Applied Science. Luckily I found a replacement for her surprisingly quickly. Meanwhile Gladstone Library answered positively and the Oxford Libraries suggested taking both young men at the same time. Finally the decision was left to the trainee, and he decided to go to Oxford. So the

⁴ <http://www.ausbildung-id.ch/> (15.5.2015)

⁵ <http://www.bis.info/> (15.5.2015)

two trainees will go to the Bodleian Libraries from September to December 2015. I hope to set up an internship with Gladstone Library for 2016.

Matching those young professional with suitable libraries who offer an internship was a challenge with up and downs going on for more half a year. At first there was no library interested in hosting “free workers”, then all of sudden there were all of sudden three libraries but only one young professional left – and it turned out to be three libraries and two trainees which is a good match for this pilot project.

In October 2015 I will visit the Gladstone Library and the two trainees in Oxford. I hope to recruit two or three further libraries for the program. To visit library partners personally might be helpful in establishing for a robust contact.

For 2016 a selection process with a job profile has to be established for the young Swiss professional who wants to apply for an internship in the UK. The number of unexcused absences in school and a reference of the training company about the reliability of the intern will be relevant when choosing candidates. Their marks in the school will be looked at and an interview with the applicant must take place.

First steps are made towards offering an internship for incomings. Some colleagues in Zurich would be willing to take a trainee for two weeks or longer. Details have to be settled as soon as there will be incoming applicants.

This project evolves in two groups: Sending and recipient exchange students. So far there have only been two trainees sent from Switzerland. This project does have the potential for expansion however and could become an regular exchange program.

Benefits from the project

First of all the young professionals will benefit in numerous ways from a work placement abroad. During their stay in a foreign library various skills and their know-how will increase. Social capital in form of a bigger professional network will be one of the things these librarians bring back home. These young professionals will have an extensive knowledge of library practice when they return, through their experiences with foreign patrons and their needs. With this knowledge they can be of great use to a library in Switzerland that has a lot of patrons from foreign countries (20% of the population of Switzerland are foreigners). They might get a better start in the work environment, probably will earn a higher salary, and are most likely to secure a better job because of the additional experience and skills they gained abroad.

Beside the professional competency one has also to mention the personal development. Being away from home has an impact on self-dependence and to go abroad, they have to be courageous young adults in the first place – a fact such an internship highlights. Those soft skills are valuable at the future work environment, where employees have to be open minded, flexible, innovative and work solution-oriented.

“Just think of how much we all take home as benefit from taking part in an international congress like this one. How much bigger must the benefit of working in a foreign library be for young librarian?”

The Education Delegation Information and Documentation and the Swiss Library Association (BIS) benefit as well. It shows that the Education Delegation cares about the fully qualified librarians and about their future in the working environment. The reputation of the Association increases and the Swiss education system is made known to libraries outside

the country. The apprenticeship as librarian becomes more attractive when there is a challenging follow-up possibility. Mobility on the job is a very attractive option for young people. Becoming a librarian is accompanied by lifelong learning - continuing to work in the once chosen field creates a bond with the profession.

This pilot project is also an example which might encourage other libraries to think about their own exchange projects, or participation in this one. To offer a connection after finishing education is sustainable education and will be a signal to those who have to choose a profession, and mobility is attractive to those who intend to become a librarian.

Mentoring a young professional in house takes up time and interrupts our day-to-day routine, but I believe the return on the investment is immense.

Acknowledgments

Alice Keller (Zentralbibliothek, Zürich), Chris Flegg (Sainsbury Library, Oxford), Catherine Scutt (Education Library, Oxford), Herbert Staub (President of the Swiss Library Association), Dominik Sievi (Trainee) and Pascal Pfister (Trainee)

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Appendix

Annex I

Institutions asked for an internship and reason for rejection (or acceptance):

Library	First contact	Date	Answer
Library Number 1	21 Nov 2014	8 Dec 2014	No because: Movement in libraries
CILIP	16 Dec 2014	8 Jan 2015	No because: The program doesn't exist anymore
Library Number 3	19 January 2015	25 Mars 2015	No because: I'm sorry, we are implementing the new library program at the moment, and then it will be live over the summer and in to the start of the new academic year in September. I am sorry we are not able to help on this occasion.
Oxford Bodleian Said Business School	05 February 2015		Yes
Oxford Bodleian Education Library	05 February 2015		Yes
UCL Institute of Education University College London	28 April 2015	28 April 2015	No because: Unfortunately we don't have any suitable openings at the moment but we will keep your details on file
Gladstone Library	16 June	23 June 2015	Yes

Annex II

Standard-Mail to establish a first contact:

Dear ...

My name is Britta Biedermann and I am the head librarian at the Institute of Sociology (University of Zurich, Switzerland).

On behalf of our trainee Dominik Sievi (born 1996) I am looking for a library which is willing to accompany Dominik as an intern or volunteer. Dominik is employed at our library and he wants to gain international work experience. A Swiss foundation (CH-Stiftung) will provide about CHF 6.900 (GBP 4.500) for a four months stay in Great Britain. Dominik is a librarian who knows to catalogue (AACR2) using the library system ALEPH. During his vocational training in the different libraries of the faculty of philosophy at the University of Zurich he has learned all the core librarian skills such as circulation desk, reference desk, acquisition, etc. The Swiss education is a dual track system including practical training in a library (three days) and two days of theoretical courses in a VET (Vocational Education and Training) school.

At the moment we are looking for a library that is willing to employ a young Swiss professional for four months and to support him. Dominik is a very good student and we are very satisfied with his work in our library. He is reliable and he works very accurately and carefully. His language skills are good (Level B2). His CV is attached to this mail.

We would be delighted if you could offer him a work experience placing from September until December 2015. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have further questions.

Best regards,
Britta Biedermann

Annex III

Learning agreement for VET mobility (Extract) Details of the proposed training program abroad

Knowledge, skills and competence to be acquired:
Activities/tasks carried out
<p>Day-to-day activities related to the provision of services in the Education Library and the Business School Library of the Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford and to the use of those libraries and their collections.</p> <p>In addition to the daily site maintenance tasks, this will include provision of circulation services and assistance with the print and photocopy services to library patrons; assisting with circulation record inquiries; provision of first level information assistance to library users; assisting in the preparation, distribution and display of guides and other library publications; and contributing to ongoing projects, such as collection development and open access initiatives; reading lists processing; and other special digital or online projects.</p>
Job-related skills and competences
<p>Knowledge of specialist subject information sources and of computerised library systems; working understanding of principles and applications of cataloguing and acquisitions standards; understanding of service delivery concepts and practices, development of skills in use of circulation and other online systems and learning platforms; understanding of design requirements for production of services tailored to the user communities; knowledge of libraries and information services UK and Library related associations (CILIP); understanding of academic research environment, including open access mandates and publishing norms.</p>
Language skills and competences
<p>Written and oral communication skills, using everyday English with patrons and colleagues; familiarity with library service terminology and ability to explain and interpret library service matters to library users; ability to produce clear and relevant documentation.</p>
Computer skills and competences
<p>A good level of IT literacy, including use of email, social media, learning platforms, internet searching, and general IT applications such as Microsoft Office, especially Word and Excel; appreciation of web design for the delivery of content and communication; familiarity with various SaaS (Software as a service) applications, such as Slack or Basecamp.</p>
Organisational skills and competences
<p>Ability to and undertake a range of routine tasks while able to prioritise tasks and time manage under time constraints; ability to work both collaboratively in a team situation and to work independently; development of good customer care skills and ability to convey a commitment to providing quality service excellence; ability to apply a keen eye for detail with ability to produce accuracy and consistency of output.</p>
Social skills and competences
<p>Ability to communicate effectively and courteously with readers and colleagues, and to collaborate effectively with others on joint projects. Use of good interpersonal skills, with an ability to interact well with all users, including students, lecturers, researchers, external visitors</p>

<p>and other members of the University and departmental staff. Ability to convey a calm, assured and empathetic persona when in public roles as well as when working with colleagues in real situations. Ability to make constructive suggestions and provide constructive input to joint discussions and projects.</p>
<p>Other skills and competences</p>
<p>Intercultural competences, lifelong learning; networking opportunities.</p>
<p>Detailed program of the training period:</p> <p>Cataloguing rules Circulation Desk/Information Desk/Handbook costumer service Acquisition Open Access Department Open access project – involvement in preparation for the Education Department’s roll out of Symplectic to academic staff The Sainsbury Welcome Pack revise Marketing for libraries Databases in different search fields Visit in the Printing, Scanning and Copying Centre Reading list support Information literacy training via workshops plus online guidance</p>
<p>Tasks of the trainee:</p> <p>To gain profound knowledge about the tasks in the program mentioned above.</p>
<p>Monitoring and Mentoring of the participant:</p> <p>The Head Librarians Chris Flegg and Catherine Scutt will supervise Dominik during his internship offering encouragement and support. They will delegate day to day training and task allocation to colleagues within the libraries, so that Dominik will feel a full part of the library teams.</p>
<p>Evaluation and Validation of the training placement:</p> <p>First certificate of English in 2016, Transfer of innovations.</p>