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Statement issued by the Swiss Science and Technology Council (SSTC):

The internationalism of Switzerland as a research centre and the principle of brain circulation

1 April 2010

In connection with the recurrent debates on the proportion of foreign teaching staff at Swiss universities, the Swiss Science and Technology Council (SSTC) wishes to present some fundamental reflections on the internationalism of the Swiss higher education system and – in order to promote a more objective public discussion – to highlight certain points which are less well known or have received insufficient attention.

Since they were first established in the High Middle Ages, Europe's universities have formed an open international community, vitally dependent on the circulation of scholars and the communication of their ideas across national boundaries. The term *universitas* itself refers, not to the universality of knowledge, but to the whole body of nations united by knowledge. Scientists, after all, are citizens of the world who generate new knowledge through the open exchange of arguments and methods, thereby contributing decisively to progress and prosperity. Long before the Enlightenment was ushered in by the *république des savants* in the age of Newton, Leibniz and Voltaire, mobility and internationalism were key components of Europe's scientific culture.

Today's universities are engaged in a global competition for the world's leading researchers. For Switzerland as a scientific centre whose research performance is far above the international average in terms of quality, attracting the most talented academic researchers from all over the world – regardless of their national origins – is therefore a matter of strategic importance.

The fact that Switzerland's higher education system benefits from its international orientation and openness is demonstrated, for example, by the results of the second call for proposals for the prestigious European Research Council (ERC) Advanced Grants: Swiss research institutions received 29 of the 236 grants (each worth from EUR 2 to 3.5 million) awarded for pioneering research. Switzerland thus ranks in fourth place overall.

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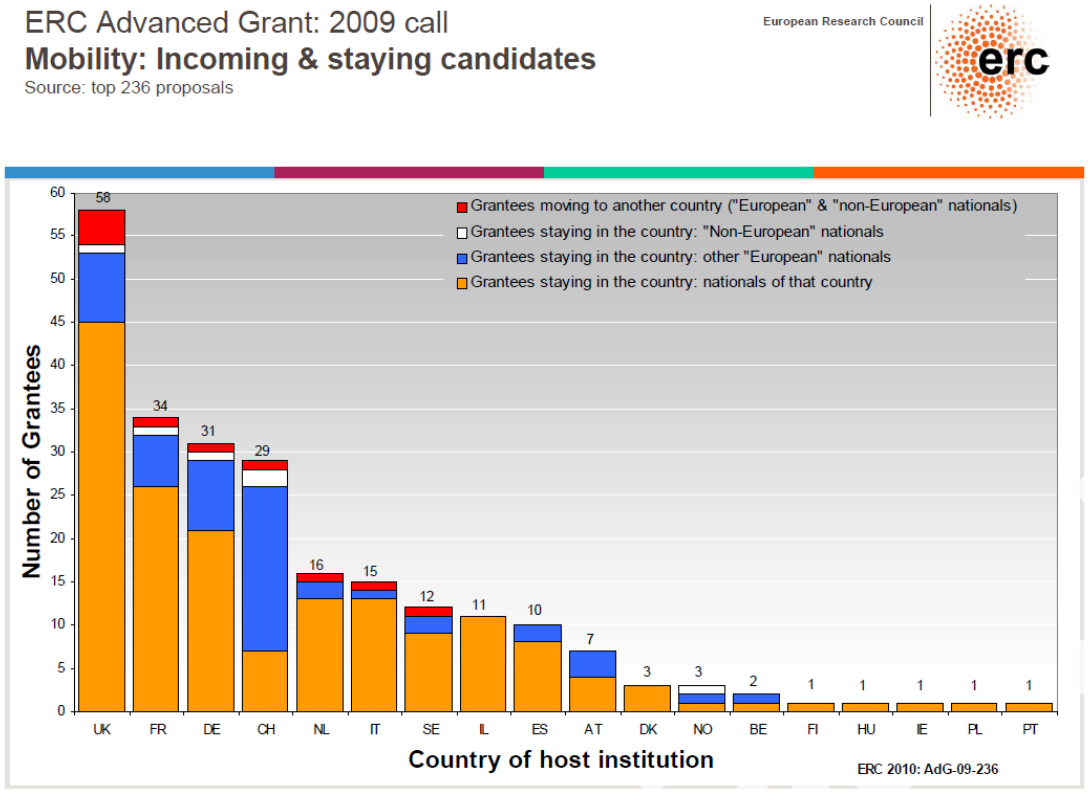

Source: ERC

This success for Switzerland as a research centre is largely due to international researchers, who represent more than 75% of the ERC grant recipients at Swiss host institutions. It should therefore not be forgotten that, to a considerable extent, Switzerland also owes its leading international position in R&D to non-Swiss researchers; without this international contribution, it would rank in tenth place.

Thanks to the successful participation of its research institutions in the 6th EU Framework Programme, Switzerland has not only achieved a positive net financial return but also enjoys a large number of economic benefits in the form of new jobs and increased attractiveness for national and international companies, serving to promote the health of the Swiss economy over the long term.

The environment of international excellence is beneficial both for Swiss researchers and for students at Swiss higher education institutions. While international comparisons of institutions in this sector need to be interpreted with caution, it may be noted that more than 70% of all students in Switzerland are taught at a “top 200” institution, making Switzerland the undisputed leader in this respect. In the US, which accounts for around half of the top 200 universities in the Shanghai Academic Ranking, the proportion is only 20%.

For a small, natural resource-poor country like Switzerland, it is vitally important to maintain an open market for academics. “Full free movement of persons”, which has been applicable to citizens of the “old” EU member states since 2007, is to be seen as a significant opportunity. Without the immigration of highly skilled employees from abroad, Switzerland’s higher education system would cease to be competitive and essential service sectors such as healthcare would collapse.

However, excellent academics are not only “imported” into, but also “exported” from Switzerland – with a wide variety of positive social, political and economic consequences. Although the data available on the emigration of Swiss academics is patchy, it is known that, with regard to the academic employment market in Germany alone, more than 770 Swiss professors and lecturers currently hold positions at

German universities. In fact, this total exceeds the number of German professors working at Swiss universities, which stood at 674 in 2008. Rather than weighing up the incoming and outgoing numbers, however, it is important to consider all the positive effects of the internationalization of research which are not quantifiable. The brain circulation on which the higher education system is dependent creates added value whose economic effects transcend national boundaries, playing a key role in opening up international markets.

In the view of the SSTC, therefore, it is important that the skills- and quality-oriented appointment procedures already established in university practice should be maintained, and that the quality of the environment for the recruitment of international researchers and teaching staff should be further enhanced. In addition, the SSTC will seek to ensure that Switzerland fulfils its (all too easily neglected) responsibility to make an appropriate contribution to promoting the development of young researchers in this country.