

SWITZERLAND THROUGH THE WINDOW



EDUCATE A CHILD AND YOU OPEN A DOOR TO THE WORLD. OFFER A TOP-NOTCH INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION, AND YOU GIVE THEM THE KEY. SWISSLINX MAY BE THE KEY FOR A SWISS EDUCATION

WORDS | GISELLE WHITEAKER

“The whole purpose of education is to turn mirrors into windows,” wrote American columnist Sydney J Harris. The principle idea is to give your child a window to the world. And there can be few better ways to do this than a comprehensive education in an international boarding school.

Whether it’s for a summer camp, a semester, or a degree, time away fosters independence and an international perspective. The educational foundations provided by this intensive form of training can provide a springboard to greater things. “Students learn to be responsible, independent, discover new outdoor life, enjoy nature, meet students from all over the world, and lastly, but most importantly receive an exceptional education,” says Susan Shawwa-Khalil, managing partner of Swisslinx, an organisation dedicated to

providing access to high quality Swiss schools for international students in the Middle East.

Set up by dynamic duo, Susan Shawwa-Khalil and Claudine Maager, Abu Dhabi-based Swisslinx was formally founded in 2005 kicking off with hospitality management, an area of study Switzerland has long been recognised for. Claudine’s Swiss origin and Swiss hospitality degree combined with Susan’s internationally-diverse education resulting in a Continuing Education Degree (Susan is of Palestinian origin, raised and studied in Kuwait, Lebanon and Canada) has given the managing partners

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unique insight into the workings of the Swiss education system for international students.

“We came up with the idea of education in Switzerland as we are living in the UAE, where the nationals visit and like Switzerland. A family

needed help so we decided to guide the parents and ensure their children were left in a safe and friendly environment,” says Claudine. “Historically, trade contact between the Emirates and Switzerland has always thrived,” adds Susan. “The late Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the first president of the UAE, was so fond of Switzerland.” A strong, vibrant, fast-growing hospitality industry in the UAE gave the pair a solid starting foundation and since that time Swisslinx has moved from strength to strength.

“It all began with the hospitality management and after extensive research, we hand-picked schools and institutions that we believed could offer students a safe, comprehensive educational experience in Switzerland,” confirms Claudine. “Since then, our reputation has grown and many schools have approached Swisslinx to represent them in the Middle East.”

Swisslinx’s portfolio now includes hospitality management institutes, art, design, media, and architecture universities, day and boarding schools, and summer and winter camps across eight countries. Capitalising on recent developments in the art world in Abu Dhabi, they have linked with art and design in Milan.

"From an educational aspect, Switzerland welcomes students into a multicultural environment and a world of respect and understanding," explains Susan. "Each student contributes through his or her own language, culture and religion to making our institutions part of an international village. "Students can also benefit from the diverse languages that are spoken there such as French, German and Italian," she continues.

Switzerland is one of the smallest countries in Europe in terms of area and population – a mere 7.9 million people live in an area a ninth the size Germany – but the country has an impressive ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity. Around one-fifth of the tertiary student body, more than half the post-doctoral students and around one-third of the teaching body are non-Swiss nationals, providing for an incredibly multicultural environment. Switzerland also has the Nobel factor. When it comes to Nobel Prize winners, the diminutive country ranks well above average with 26 Swiss nationals honoured to date, seven up on Austria which has a similar population count.



PREVIOUS PAGE: Winter ski camps are a gentle introduction to another country and culture.

TOP TO BOTTOM: Graduates from accredited schools have their degrees authenticated in the UAE; Susan Shawwa-Khalil (left) and Claudine Maager, managing partners of Swisslinx.



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"Swiss teaching methods have been perfected throughout the years," says Claudine. "Add to that the idea that you would be living in a picturesque and safe setting. Who wouldn't want to live there?" Who indeed? The proof, as they say, is in the pudding. From humble beginnings in the first year, where Swisslinx worked with around ten students, the annual average has grown to approximately 250 students. This includes groups of 25-30 school students participating in Ski Camps.

"There always has been a requirement for education in Switzerland and it is more and more in demand because of the attractive programmes students are offered," Susan notes. "We notice this in the number of students we have sent over the years."

Not only the student numbers have increased. The programmes on offer have also expanded and today Swisslinx offers courses catering to age groups from three years all the way up to university level. The camps and boarding schools target students from 3 to 19 while universities and finishing

schools cater for the 18+ age bracket. "Our clients are from a wide range of nationalities and we are proud to announce that our ratio of national students has increased drastically in the recent years," Susan says.

A Bachelor's degree in Switzerland takes around 3.5 years to complete, including internships. This is a long time for a young adult to be away from friends and family. But as with the boarding schools, this is all part of the experience. "Our boarding programmes are becoming more and more popular as parents are realising how much their children grow into little adults from this experience," says Claudine.

"Although many of our students feel homesick the first few weeks they are away from their families, by the end of their journey there are usually in tears, as they don't want to leave their new home and friends," Claudine adds, attributing the relationships the children develop to the fact that most of the boarding schools Swisslinx works with are of a small to medium size and run by the founders, maintaining a family-style atmosphere.

Swisslinx also ensures that study abroad will be recognised on the student's return. As the organisation is accredited through the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, graduates from the accredited schools will have their degree authenticated in the UAE.

"It was a challenge to achieve accreditation through MOHESR as there are strict rules of compliance. However, the staff were extremely helpful and our accreditation was granted," says Susan. "Being accredited is a colossal milestone for Swisslinx because it reflects the quality of the service we provide. It also verifies that our institutions are of impeccable quality and offer high standards of education."

Not content to limit themselves to providing educational assistance, Claudine and Susan are also passionate about corporate social responsibility. "Swisslinx has always believed that helping others is a responsibility and not a choice," says Claudine earnestly. To this end, Swisslinx supports Ewa'a, The Shelters for Women & Children in the UAE through donations and assistance with finding volunteers, and the Special Care Centre, supporting the Donate a Brick Foundation in efforts to build a bigger school for children with special needs in the Capital.

Swisslinx provides the kind of support every family can appreciate when selecting schooling which will provide the cornerstone of their children's future. And there's no cost to the family for these enabling services. With that little bit of help, your child could be gazing in wonder at the Swiss Alps through their educational window. 🇨🇭