

working part-time while studying: what international students should know at aelo swiss academy

Almost every international student in Switzerland asks the same question within their first month: can I work here? The answer is yes, but the details matter more than most people expect. Switzerland pays student wages that look generous from abroad, and it also runs some of the strictest rules in Europe on who can work, when, and for how long. Get this right and a part-time job becomes a genuine financial cushion and a door into Swiss working culture. Get it wrong and you can put your residence permit at risk, which is a much bigger problem than a missed rent payment.

I've spent enough time around international students in Switzerland to know that the confusion usually starts with nationality, not effort. Two students sitting side by side in the same classroom at AELO Swiss Academy can face completely different rules depending only on what passport they hold. So before anything else, let's separate the situations cleanly.

the rules that shape everything

If you come from a country outside the EU and EFTA, you live under the framework most people mean when they talk about "student work rules" in Switzerland. You may work up to 15 hours per week during the semester, and you may work full-time during official semester breaks. The catch that surprises people: you have to complete your first six months of study before you start working at all. The clock starts when your studies start, not when you decide you need money.

There's one more layer, and students miss it constantly. You don't apply for work authorization yourself. Your employer does. The company has to get approval from the cantonal authorities before you clock a single hour. In practice this is routine for enrolled students, and many employers in university cities know the process well, but it usually takes a few weeks. Never start working "informally" while the approval is pending, even if the manager seems relaxed about it. The payroll records exist, and they get checked.

If you're from an EU or EFTA country, the picture is friendlier. The free movement agreements give you much more flexibility, and the 15-hour cap and six-month waiting period generally don't apply to you the same way. You may still need to report employment to the canton, or your employer might, depending on where you live, but you won't face the same barriers. Either way, confirm the current requirements with the student services team at AELO Swiss Academy or your cantonal migration office, because the edges of these rules shift from year to year and from canton to canton.

One hard boundary applies across the board for non-EU students: your study permit does not allow self-employment. That rules out freelance graphic design contracts, and it rules out app-based delivery work where you register as an independent contractor. If someone offers you a "freelance" arrangement while you're on a student permit, that's a red flag, not a flexible employer.

the math, done honestly

Here's the part that draws people in. Switzerland has no national minimum wage, but the market has settled into a band most student jobs fall inside. In German-speaking cities, expect roughly CHF 20 to 25 an hour for retail,

hospitality, and warehouse work. Geneva's cantonal minimum sits near CHF 24, among the highest in the country, while smaller towns often pay a franc or two less but come with cheaper rent.

Fifteen hours a week at CHF 22 works out to about CHF 3,300 a month gross. After social contributions, which typically land somewhere between 7 and 10 percent for low earners, plus possible withholding tax depending on your permit and canton, you might see around CHF 2,900 to 3,050 hit your account. Many students end up owing little or no income tax at these earnings, but deductions still show up on every payslip, so don't budget from the gross number.

Now the honest part. A shared flat room in Zurich runs roughly CHF 600 to 900 a month, and less in smaller towns. Health insurance, which is mandatory and non-negotiable, costs a young adult around CHF 200 to 350 depending on the deductible and canton. Groceries for one person cooking at home: CHF 300 to 450. Add a transport pass and a phone plan and a modest student life sits somewhere between CHF 1,300 and 1,800 a month.

So a part-time job covers a big slice of your living costs, often rent plus food, but it rarely covers everything. This matters for a reason beyond budgeting. When your permit comes up for renewal, the canton wants evidence that you can fund your studies independently. Income from part-time work is treated as a supplement, not a foundation. A student who tells the migration office "my job pays for everything" has, in my experience, a harder conversation ahead than one who shows a scholarship, family support, or savings alongside a modest job. Build your financing on stable ground and let the job lighten the load.

where the jobs actually are

Student jobs in Switzerland cluster in a handful of channels, and knowing where to look saves weeks of frustration.

- the big job boards: jobs.ch and students.ch carry most student-facing openings, and you can filter by percentage of workload
- shift platforms like Coople, which match you with hospitality and retail shifts once your profile is approved, useful for fitting work around unpredictable study weeks
- walking in with a printed CV, which still works surprisingly well at cafés, bakeries, hotels, and small shops in city neighborhoods
- internal openings at the academy itself, from student support roles to event help, which are worth asking about directly
- your own network, which sounds vague until you realize how many jobs get filled by a classmate mentioning an opening before it's posted anywhere

Whichever channel you use, learn the local CV conventions. Swiss employers still expect a photo, your nationality and permit status, and copies of reference letters from past employers. Two pages maximum. A CV formatted for the US or UK market, stripped of personal details, reads as evasive here rather than modern. I once watched a well-qualified student lose out to a weaker candidate purely because the employer couldn't tell [reddit.com](https://www.reddit.com) from the CV whether hiring her would require a permit process. Say it upfront: nationality, permit type, eligible to work, authorization straightforward for enrolled students.

jobs that fit around classes

Not all part-time jobs are equal when your real job is passing your program. Retail at Migros or Coop offers steady hours, staff discounts, and large employers who understand student schedules and already know the

authorization process. Hospitality pays comparably and hires constantly, but evening and weekend shifts can eat the exact hours you need for group work and exam prep. Warehouse and logistics work through temp agencies tends to be early mornings or block shifts, which suits some students and destroys others.

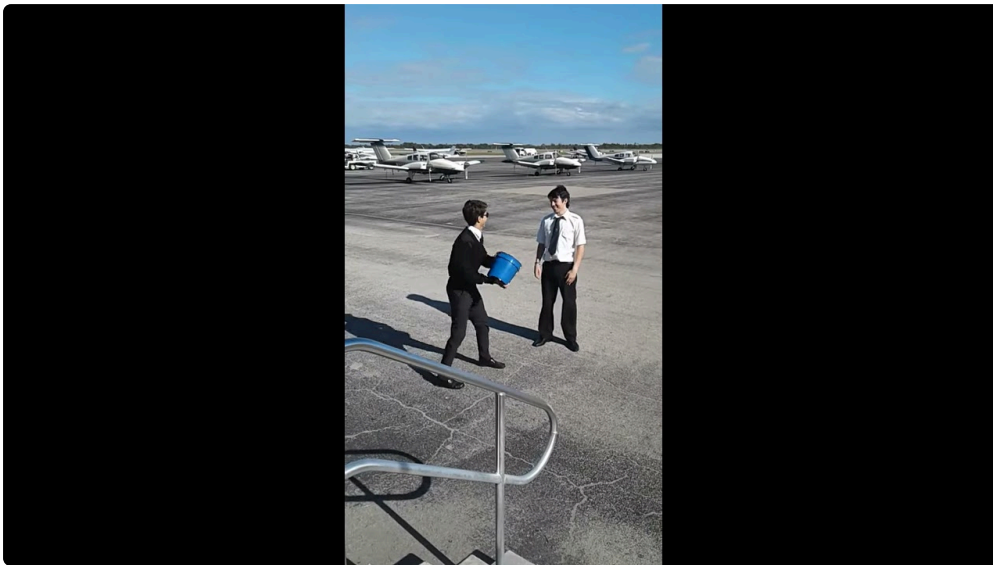
Language decides a lot. In the German-speaking part of the country, even modest German opens doors: service roles, reception work, most customer-facing positions. Without it, your options narrow to kitchen and back-of-house roles, cleaning, warehouse work, babysitting for English-speaking families, and English tutoring, which pays well at roughly CHF 25 to 40 an hour privately but provides irregular hours. If your German is still weak, treat the first six months of study as your language runway, because the wage gap between "no German" and "B1 German" is real and measurable.



Tutoring deserves a special mention. If you speak a language others want to learn, whether that's English, Spanish, Arabic, or Mandarin, private tutoring pays roughly double the retail rate and fits around your schedule rather than the other way around. The trade-off is finding students, which takes a term of slow networking through language exchange groups and university notice boards before it becomes steady.

the six-month wait, used well

Non-EU students often see the waiting period as dead time. It's the opposite, if you use it right. A student I advised some years ago spent her first six months in intensive German classes and ended up with a bakery job within two weeks of becoming eligible, simply because she could take an order in German on day one. Meanwhile classmates with better English but no German spent months longer searching.



Beyond language, use the wait to prepare the paperwork most students scramble for at the last minute: a Swiss bank account, because some employers only deposit into Swiss accounts; your CV in local format; references translated if possible; and a clear sense of your class timetable for the whole term, so when an employer asks "which days can you work," you answer in ten seconds instead of ten days. Volunteering at events through the academy or local organizations also builds the kind of local references that Swiss employers quietly weigh heavily.

internships are a different animal

If your program at AELO Swiss Academy includes an internship or industry placement, understand that it sits in a different legal category from a side job. Mandatory internships that form part of your curriculum are generally permitted full-time, because they are part of the study program itself rather than ancillary employment. Paid internships in business and hospitality settings in Switzerland often pay in the same CHF 20-plus range as regular student work, sometimes better.

The practical advice: talk to the academic office early about how your internship hours interact with the 15-hour rule, get the placement confirmed in writing as part of your program, and make sure your permit paperwork reflects it before you start. Employers hiring interns from the academy deal with this regularly, but the responsibility for your permit staying clean is yours, not theirs.

paperwork you cannot skip

A few practical items separate a smooth first job from a stressful one. You need a written contract stating your wage, role, and weekly hours, and you should read it before signing rather than after. Your employer registers you for social security, and your AHV/AVS number will arrive with your first job; keep every payslip from every employer, because permit renewals and tax situations have a way of surfacing two years later and asking for documents you thought you'd never need again. Health insurance must be arranged within three months of arrival, entirely separate from any job. And if withholding tax applies to you, keep records so you can file a correction or regular return when the time comes, since many students at these income levels recover some or all of it.

Before you accept any offer, a short check saves trouble:

- a written contract with wage, role, and hours, in hand before the first shift
- confirmation, for non-EU students, that the employer has filed for cantonal authorization
- the work schedule checked against your actual class timetable, including commute time
- an hourly wage inside the realistic local band, not a vague "to be discussed" figure
- clarity on how and when you'll be paid, including the payslip setup

protecting the two things that actually matter

Fifteen hours sounds manageable until midterms arrive. The students who struggle are rarely lazy; they're overcommitted, having said yes to extra shifts in a week that also held two deadlines. Employers will happily offer you more hours. Some will quietly let you go over 15. Decline. Payroll records are the first thing examined when your permit comes up for renewal, and exceeding the cap is one of the few mistakes that can genuinely jeopardize everything you've built here. I've seen a renewal get difficult over a handful of extra shifts that earned a student less than CHF 500 in total. That is a spectacularly bad trade.

The same logic applies to attendance. Your permit exists for one purpose, studying, and your enrollment and progress are what keep it valid. A part-time job in Switzerland does three things well: it eases your finances, it builds your German and your local network, and it gives Swiss references that matter enormously when you graduate and compete for real positions. It does one thing badly: it substitutes for your degree if you let it.

Find the balance early, respect the rules even when nobody seems to be watching, and treat the job as one part of a bigger project rather than the project itself. Do that, and working while you study becomes the experience most alumni describe as one of the most valuable parts of their time in Switzerland.