

paying from abroad: currency, transfers, and tuition tips for international aelo swiss academy families

There is a particular kind of quiet that settles over a kitchen table when a tuition invoice from Switzerland lands in your inbox for the first time. You open the attachment. The amount sits there, bold and exact, followed by a string of letters and numbers that looks nothing like any account format you grew up with. CHF, it says. Swiss francs. And somewhere in your head, in the currency you think in, you start doing the math at midnight, calculator in one hand, coffee going cold in the other.

If you are reading this as a new AELO Swiss Academy family, welcome. You have already done the hardest part, the part that actually matters: the research, the applications, the long dinner-table conversations, the decision to let your child learn and grow in another country. What remains is the unglamorous machinery of paying for it all from abroad, and that machinery has edges that catch families every single year. This is a guide to those edges, written with genuine sympathy for anyone who has ever squinted at an IBAN and wondered whether they are about to send a year's worth of savings into the void.

the invoice is a document, not a suggestion

The first piece of advice sounds almost insultingly simple, and yet it prevents more problems than any other: read the entire invoice before you do anything with it. Swiss institutions bill in Swiss francs, and Swiss invoices are precise documents. Many now use the QR-bill format, a clean layout with a square code and a long reference line. That reference is not decoration. It is how the finance office connects an incoming payment to your child's name out of the hundreds of payments that arrive each term. If you omit it, or let your bank truncate it, your money arrives anonymously and someone has to play detective.

Look for the due date and treat it as a deadline for the money to be in the school's account, not a deadline for you to walk into your local bank. The difference matters, and I will come back to it. Check what the invoice actually covers, because at many Swiss schools the tuition line is only part of the picture. Boarding, insurance, excursion fees, technology charges, and deposits may appear as separate items or arrive as separate invoices later in the year.

One request worth making early: ask the finance office for the full year's billing schedule in advance. Most institutions are happy to provide it, and international families who ask this question tend to have far calmer Septembers than those who discover a second invoice they had not budgeted for. While you are asking, find out whether installment plans exist. Paying term by term costs slightly more in transfer fees over a year, but for many families the cash-flow relief is worth every franc of it.

the quiet cost of the exchange rate

Here is where international families lose the most money, and it rarely announces itself as a fee. The exchange rate you see when you search online is the mid-market rate, essentially the honest midpoint between what buyers and sellers are trading at. No bank gives you that rate on an international transfer. Traditional banks typically add a margin on top, often somewhere between 1 and 4 percent depending on the bank, the currencies, and whether anyone ever told you to ask. The margin is invisible. Nobody hands you a receipt that says "hidden markup."

Run the numbers and it stops being abstract. On a tuition bill of 30,000 francs, a 2 percent margin is 600 francs before you have paid a single stated fee. Over four or five years of education, that quiet spread can add up to more than a term's worth of incidental costs. Then the explicit fees stack on top: your own bank's sending fee, which can be modest or eye-watering depending on where you bank, correspondent bank fees along the way, often 10 to 30 francs at each intermediary, and occasionally a receiving charge.

The predictable result is the "short arrival." Your school's account receives 29,940 francs against an invoice for 30,000, and a polite but firm email follows. Schools are not being petty. A finance office reconciling hundreds of international payments needs amounts to match, and chasing shortfalls is genuinely difficult. When you send a tuition payment, send the full invoice amount and make sure the fee arrangement guarantees it arrives whole. On a SWIFT transfer you will usually be offered a choice of fee instructions, and the three standard options are worth understanding before you choose:

- OUR: you pay all the fees, and the recipient receives the full invoice amount. This is almost always the right choice for tuition.
- SHA: fees are shared, meaning each bank in the chain takes its cut, and the school may receive slightly less than invoiced.
- BEN: fees are deducted from the amount sent, so the school receives less than the invoice. Rarely appropriate for school fees.

If your bank's form does not make the choice clear, ask. It is a thirty-second question that prevents a week of reconciliation headaches.

choosing how the money travels

You have three broad routes, and each comes with trade-offs that depend on your situation.

The traditional bank wire is the one your parents would recognize. It works from everywhere, every school accepts it, and the paper trail is well understood. It is also usually the slowest and the most expensive combination of margin and fees, especially from countries whose banking relationships with Switzerland are less direct.

Specialist transfer services, the kind that advertise the real exchange rate with transparent fees, have changed the economics of this entirely. On a large tuition payment, the savings compared with a classic wire can easily run into the equivalent of several hundred francs. The caveats are practical rather than financial. Confirm that the service's transfer will carry the invoice reference cleanly, and be aware that some services send from pooled or intermediary accounts, which can occasionally make a receiving bank ask questions. This is solvable, but it can add days.

The third route is the multi-currency account. You open an account that can hold Swiss francs, convert your home currency into francs when the rate suits you, and then send the payment as a domestic Swiss transfer. Families who take this path often find it becomes their favorite, because it separates the two decisions that cause the most stress: when to convert, and when to pay. You can convert in calm moments and pay on schedule regardless of what the market did that week.

Whatever route you choose, one rule matters more than any fee comparison. Send the money from an account held in the name of the parent or guardian exactly as it appears in the enrolment paperwork. I once watched a payment sit in limbo for two weeks because a father sent tuition from his company account, and the name on the transfer did not match the name on the contract. The school's bank, doing exactly what banks are supposed to do, flagged the mismatch. The money was never at risk,

https://www.reddit.com/r/flyingeurope/comments/1nnhrnv/anyone_from_aelo_swiss_any_advice/ but the stress was entirely avoidable. If a grandparent or an employer is genuinely the fee-payer, tell the finance office before the transfer, not after.

And here is a trick that experienced families swear by: treat the first small payment, usually a registration fee or deposit, as a dress rehearsal. Note the date you sent it, the date it landed, the actual total cost including everything, and whether the reference arrived intact. By the time the large tuition payment comes due, you will know your route works, and you will know its true price.

timing, buffers, and the stubborn franc

The Swiss franc has a personality, and it is not a comforting one for families paying from abroad. It is a safe-haven currency, which means it tends to strengthen precisely when the world feels uncertain, which is often exactly when other currencies weaken. You cannot predict it, and honestly, neither can the professionals.

So do not build your budget on hope. Build it with a buffer, something in the range of 3 to 5 percent above the invoiced amounts converted at today's rate. If the rate moves in your favor, the surplus becomes a small gift to your travel fund. If it moves against you, the buffer absorbs the blow instead of your family's monthly finances.

There are a few ways to handle the currency question itself. Some families set rate alerts and convert when the number crosses a threshold they can live with. Others convert a fixed amount monthly, spreading the risk across the year the way investors spread purchases, accepting that they will never get the best rate but also never the worst. For larger sums, currency brokers can offer forward contracts, where you lock today's rate for a payment you will make in several months. The paperwork is slightly heavier and there is usually a minimum size, but for a family budgeting a full year of fees, the certainty can be worth giving up the possibility of a better rate later.

What I would gently advise against is the waiting game. I know a family who watched the rate for six weeks, convinced it would recover to where it had been the previous spring. It did not. It moved roughly 4 percent against them, and the delay cost them more than every transfer fee they had ever paid combined. Schedule payments by the calendar and the invoice, not by the chart.

Finally, give the money time to travel. A SWIFT transfer typically takes one to five business days, and occasionally longer if a bank in the chain pauses to ask a compliance question. Aim to send each payment about a week before the due date, and mark both dates in your calendar, the day you send and the day it is due. The gap between them is your margin for the unexpected.

when the school says it hasn't arrived

It will happen to you once, probably in your first year, and I want you to know in advance that it is fixable. A payment you sent on time appears, from the school's side, to have vanished. Take a breath. This is one of the most routine problems a Swiss finance office deals with, and there is a well-worn path to solving it.

Your tools are the documents you kept: the transfer confirmation, the SWIFT copy that your bank can produce on request, and the exact reference number you used. Email the finance office the same day with the amount, the date, the reference, and the confirmation attached. From there, their bank asks the correspondent chain where the funds are sitting, and in most cases the money is found paused at an intermediary, released within days, and applied to your account. The first time this happens it feels like a catastrophe. By the second year, it is a Tuesday.

This is also why the habit of emailing proof of payment immediately after every transfer is worth forming. It costs you two minutes and gives the finance office everything they need if anything goes quiet.

questions worth asking before your first transfer

The finance office exists to answer exactly these questions, and asking them early marks you as organized, not difficult. Five worth putting in your first email:

- Can tuition be paid in installments, and is there any reduction for paying the full year in advance?
- Must payments come from an account in the fee-payer's name, and how should payments from a grandparent or employer be handled?
- Which transfer methods do other international families use most successfully, and does the office have a preference?
- How are deposits held, and under what circumstances are they refunded if plans change mid-year?
- Who should receive the proof of payment after each transfer, and what details do they want included?

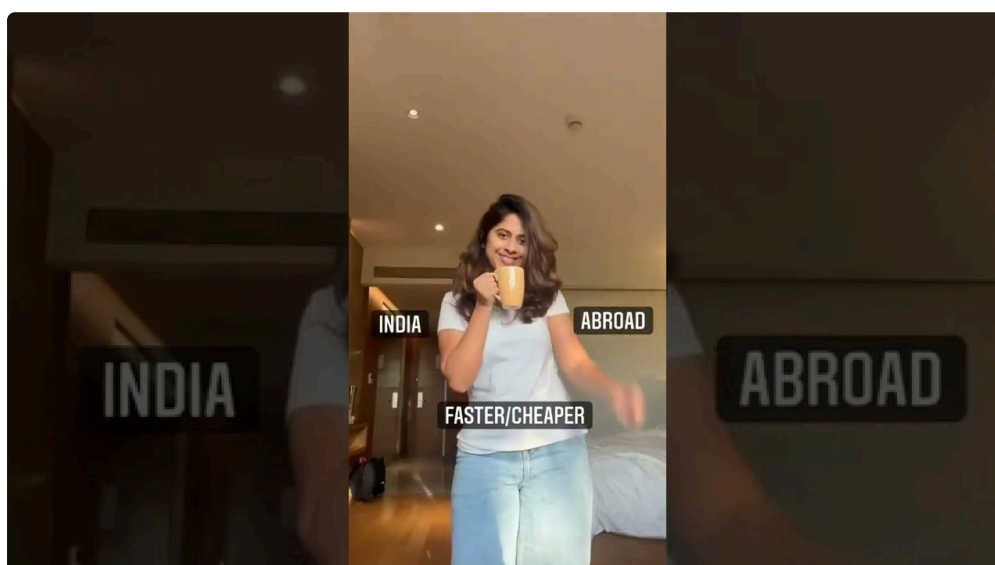
the human side of a bank transfer

It is worth saying plainly: money conversations across cultures can feel awkward. In some families, discussing fees at all is close to taboo, and admitting confusion about a payment feels like admitting failure. Please set that weight down. The people who handle fees at AELO Swiss Academy work with families from many countries every single year. They have seen every currency, every banking system, every confused first-timer, and every payment that arrived short, late, or nameless. A question you feel silly asking is, to them, a normal Tuesday morning, and answering it well is literally their job.

There is also something quieter at stake. Your child, adjusting to a new country and a new language, will absorb some of your stress about logistics whether you intend it or not. Every payment you handle calmly, every deadline met without drama, removes one more thread of worry from the fabric of the family's year. The transfers are not just accounting. They are how you parent from a distance.

a rhythm, not a crisis

The goal, after the first term or two, is that none of this requires thought. Same account, same route, same rhythm each term. A calendar reminder two weeks before each due date, a folder on your computer holding every confirmation, a short email to the finance office after each transfer. What took an evening of anxious research in year one will take twenty unhurried minutes by year two.



The transfers are the least poetic part of an international education. Nobody writes home about a well-executed SWIFT payment. But they are the mechanism by which the whole adventure happens, and once the system runs smoothly, your attention is freed for the things that actually deserve it: the phone calls, the first report written in a new language, the child who comes home for the holidays somehow taller and more of the world than they were when they left. Get the money right, then go be their parent. That is the entire point.