

what new students wish they'd known: honest campus life advice from aelo swiss academy students

Every September the same little comedy plays out on campus. A new student steps off the train with two suitcases, a folder of printed documents, and the quiet confidence that the hard part is over. The admission letter is saved on their phone. The room is booked. Three weeks later, that same student is standing in a shop doorway googling why the plug they brought from home doesn't fit the wall.

Swiss sockets, by the way, are type J. Three round pins, slightly offset, almost identical to the ones back home and absolutely not compatible. Every student I spoke to had a version of this story. None of them could think of a single reason why knowing it earlier would have cost them anything.

That's how this piece came together. I sat down with a handful of second and third years at AELO Swiss Academy and asked one question: what do you wish someone had told you before you arrived? Almost nobody talked about lectures. Almost nobody talked about exams. They talked about plugs, laundry slots, fog, flatmates, and the strange loneliness of week three. So here it is, the stuff that never makes the brochure, from people who learned it the slow way.

The first fortnight is louder than you expect

Orientation week is a blur of names, buildings, apps, and QR codes. You will nod along to information you have zero intention of remembering, and then need three of those things in the same afternoon. Lena, a second year, told me she arrived with four sweaters, one hairdryer that tripped the fuse on her first evening, and no adapter at all. She spent her first weekend borrowing plugs from a girl on her corridor whose name she didn't learn until October.

The practical fix here is boring and it works. Arrive two or three days before orientation if you can. Walk the route from your room to campus once, before it matters, when you're not panicking about being late. Find the fuse box in your flat on day one, not during a blackout. And learn two or three faces properly instead of thirty vaguely. The people you eat your first lunch with tend to become the people you're still eating lunch with in spring.

One more thing about week one. Everyone looks like they've got it figured out. They don't. They're all just walking faster to hide it.

Your budget dies quietly, not dramatically

Nobody gets ruined by one big expense in Switzerland. It's the small ones that eat you. Students quoted me rent figures somewhere between 600 and 1,000 francs a month for a room in a shared flat, depending heavily on the town, and that's a room, not a whole flat. After rent, the leaks start: a coffee here, a menu there, a train ticket you didn't need to buy twice.

The students who survive comfortably all cook. They shop at the cheaper chains when it makes sense, do a proper shop once a week, and know that most Migros and Coop branches [reddit.com](https://www.reddit.com) close on Sundays, so Saturday evening is when the week gets planned. A hot meal out will usually set you back somewhere in the twenties or low thirties in francs. A coffee out runs four or five. Two or three of those a day and you've quietly spent a grocery budget on caffeine.

A few habits came up again and again in my conversations. Buy your furniture second hand from departing students, because every June and September somebody is selling a perfectly good desk for almost nothing. Ask early about student transport discounts rather than paying full fare out of habit, and get a serious bike lock, because bikes do disappear. And in many towns the garbage bags themselves are taxed, so you'll learn very quickly which bin is which.



The flatmate gamble

Living with strangers is a coin toss, and the coin doesn't care how nice you are. What actually decides whether a shared flat works is not chemistry. It's whether people talk about boring things early.

Swiss buildings often enforce quiet hours, usually overnight and sometimes on Sundays too, and your neighbours will not hesitate to let you know. The laundry situation is its own institution: in many buildings the machines live in the basement and you book a slot on a rota, sometimes weekly. Amara told me she booked her first slot for the wrong week, realised at seven in the morning, and stood in the basement queue in her coat watching a retired man fold everything with surgical precision. She now sets a phone reminder. So does everyone else in her flat.

The advice that came up most was almost embarrassingly simple. Talk about dishes in week one. Talk about guests, noise, and the cleaning rota before any of these become a grudge. The flatmate who "forgets" the trash is not doing it maliciously, usually, but resentment builds fast when nobody says anything. A five minute conversation in September prevents the January cold war.

Classes move faster, and the grading will shock you

Here's something that catches almost every international student: the Swiss grading scale runs from 1 to 6, where 6 is the top and 4 is the pass mark. That means a 5.5 is genuinely excellent and a 4.5 is a solid, respectable result. Students told me they spent their first semester panicking over grades that were perfectly fine, simply because the numbers looked small next to the systems they grew up with.

The rhythm of the work is different too. There tend to be fewer graded checkpoints than many newcomers expect, which sounds relaxing until you realise the ones that exist carry real weight. Jonas learned this the hard way when he treated his first assessed assignment casually and then discovered how much of his grade lived in exactly that kind of task. His words: "I thought it was practice. It was not practice."

The flip side is that the teaching staff are more approachable than most new students assume. The trick is coming with something specific. "I don't understand anything" is hard to help with. "I lose marks every time I structure an argument this way, is that fixable" gets a real answer. Study groups form fast in the first weeks, and the students who joined one even while feeling slightly behind all said the same thing afterwards: join it anyway. Especially then.

English gets you through campus, but not through life

Switzerland has four national languages, and which one surrounds you depends on where you land. On campus, English will carry you further than you'd expect, and people switch to it kindly and instantly. That kindness has a strange side effect, though. Several students described feeling like permanent tourists because locals kept rescuing them from the need to learn anything.

Priya's approach was to learn the supermarket first. The words for bag, receipt, thank you, and how to decline a plastic one. Twenty phrases, maybe. She said checkout conversations became tiny victories, and that the town slowly stopped feeling like a place she was visiting. Tandem partners and informal language meetups came up a lot as the low pressure way to get there. Nobody expects fluency. Everybody notices the attempt, and the attempt is what turns a polite transaction into an actual conversation with a human being.

The weather will humble you

New students from warmer places tend to arrive prepared for cold and completely unprepared for grey. The cold is manageable. The grey is psychological. November brings fog that sits in the valleys for days, and by December the sun clocks out before five in the afternoon. A couple of students mentioned daylight lamps and vitamin supplements without a hint of irony, and one described her first Swiss winter as "three months of being gently sad in a very organised country."

The gear advice was consistent. Good shoes matter more than a giant coat, because you walk everywhere and wet socks ruin more days than low temperatures do. Layers beat one heavy jacket. And the first proper snowfall is genuinely magical, so let it be magical, take the photos, then buy the waterproof ones.

Friends don't happen automatically, they happen repeatedly

This one came up in nearly every conversation. Swiss social culture is warm once you're in and reserved while you're outside, and the way through the door is repetition, not charisma. The same faces at the same club, week after week, until one day someone invites you for fondue and that's it, you have friends.

Marco joined the climbing wall in his second month mostly out of guilt about doing nothing, and described it as the single best decision of his first year. Not because he's passionate about climbing. Because he saw the same eight people every Thursday.

The pattern in the advice was clear. Pick one or two things and go deep rather than signing up for six and attending none. Say yes to the first few invitations even when they sound boring, because early in the year everyone is auditioning friendships and the boring ones turn out fine. And don't sit in your room waiting to be invited. Invite people. Somebody has to go first, and it might as well be the person reading this.

Ask for help earlier than feels comfortable

Homesickness showed up on cue in almost every story, and the timing was eerily consistent. Week three. The adrenaline of arrival wears off, the coursework turns real, and suddenly home is very far away and everyone else looks fine. Several students said the same thing about this stretch: it's normal, it's temporary, and it gets shorter every year you're here.

What made the difference was asking early. The academy has student services, tutoring options, and people whose actual job is listening to exactly these problems, and the students who used them described it as obvious in hindsight. The ones who waited until things got heavy said they'd have gone sooner. One third year put it in a way I've thought about since: "The problem is never as big as the week you spend pretending it isn't there."

The same logic applies to professors, administrators, and your own flatmates. One timely email saves weeks of quiet struggling. Nobody hands out medals for suffering alone.

Five messages they'd send back to September

When I asked each student to compress everything into one message to their past self, the answers overlapped so much they practically wrote this list for me:

- Buy the type J adapter before you fly. It costs almost nothing and saves your first weekend.
- Book the laundry slot when you move in, not when your sheets are already dirty.
- Say yes to the first boring sounding event, because that's where your people are hiding.
- Work out the grading scale before your first assessed piece, not after.
- Learn twenty words of the local language before you learn the campus shortcuts.

The part nobody says out loud

The last thing students wanted new arrivals to know had nothing to do with sockets or laundry. It was about the comparison trap. Everyone posts the hiking photos, the fondue nights, the exam results they're proud of. Nobody posts the week three loneliness or the afternoon they spent lost in a foreign supermarket trying to find something that resembles the cheese from home. You are comparing your ordinary days to other people's highlights, and you will always lose that comparison, because it isn't real.



Give it a year. Learn the plug type, book the laundry slot, go to the boring event, ask the question early. Then you'll be the second or third year someone corners with a notebook, and you'll find yourself describing the fuse box incident of your first weekend, and a nervous newcomer will laugh and write it down.

That's how campus knowledge actually works at AELO Swiss Academy. One slightly embarrassing story at a time.