What Switzerland Taught Me About Learning

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This reflective text explores my exchange experience at Team Academy, from the reasons I chose Switzerland to the differences I observed in its learning approach. I reflect particularly on structure, competency development, feedback culture, and the lessons that influenced my personal and professional direction.

I will start with some context about why I chose Switzerland and how it all began.

I first visited Switzerland in 2023 during a hitchhiking competition. I was travelling through the country and experienced some interesting things. At one point, I ended up walking in city shoes on a glacier and ferrata because there was a checkpoint up the 3600m mountain. So suddenly we were doing a relatively demanding hike. In any case, I realized that I absolutely loved the mountains and wanted to return. That was where the idea first began.

Later, I discovered that there was also a Team Academy in Switzerland. At first, I thought it was not an option because the programme was taught in French. Then I learned that it cooperated with our school, and suddenly it seemed possible. My love for the mountains was one side of my decision. At the same time, Switzerland has a fascinating healthcare system. I was interested in its high level of regional autonomy, the infrastructure covering even remote areas, healthcare innovation, and specialized mountain services. These interests gradually came together, and already during my first year at Proakatemia, I knew that I wanted to go there.

Eventually, I went. I received the official acceptance letter at the very last moment - on the final day of the autumn semester. Of course, I had already terminated my apartment contract before knowing for certain that I had been accepted, but that is beside the point. This is the basic context of how my exchange began.

My exchange started with an approximately three-week learning journey that I organized independently. I planned it while I was in Nepal, which was quite challenging, but somehow it came together. My goal was to explore decision-making in mountain and extreme environments. I visited Rega, the Swiss air-rescue organization, as well as Swiss Olympic Medical Center, a Geneva neurocentre, and Healtch.tech summit. The visits were not always as deep as I had hoped. Nevertheless, they gave me an opportunity to interact with this professional environment, meet people working in it, and experience Swiss culture.

Looking back, I would have liked to explore these topics on a deeper level. However, it was genuinely difficult to reach the right people as an exchange student without an existing network.

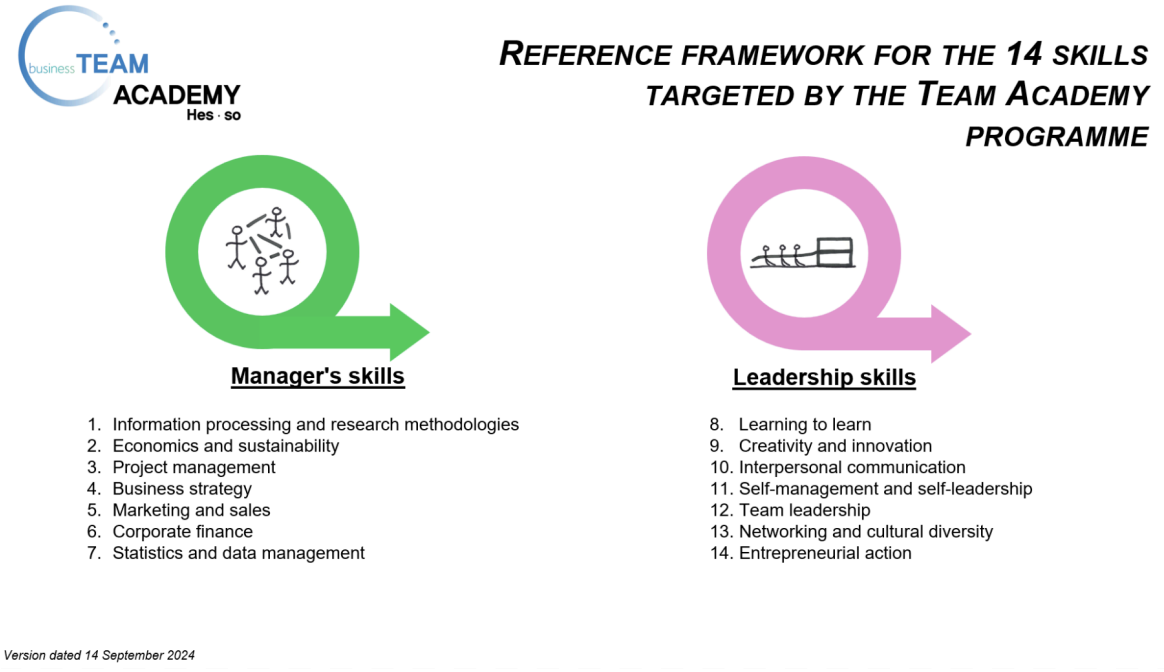
One of the most valuable aspects of the learning journey was that I did not have to align an entire team around one shared objective. I could build the journey around my personal learning goals. This allowed me to create a highly specialized, sector-focused experience. At first glance, it might appear less business-oriented, but that always depends on the type of business a person wants to pursue.

For me, this approach was much more meaningful than simply visiting a series of companies and completing standard activities. Because the journey lasted several weeks, I had time to experience the environment properly and go through many different situations. This is also how the learning journeys were organized at the Swiss Team Academy. The second-year students were divided into three groups of approximately five people. Each group travelled to a different destination and organized its own journey. I think this is a very effective model that allows lower organisational costs and higher learning.

When I later started attending the school itself, I immediately noticed that it was significantly more structured than Proakatemia. Personally, this suited me quite well. By the time I left Proakatemia for my exchange, I felt slightly lost in all the freedom. I did not feel that I was using my full potential. Having clearer guidelines helped me look at my learning from a different perspective. We had a clear schedule, and most events for the entire year had already been added to our calendars. It was fantastic. It allows me to trust the process and focus on my own development and projects. I wish we could make this work at Proakatemia as well. Research suggests that autonomy and structure do not have to be opposites. In a study of 133 classrooms, both autonomy support and clear structure predicted students' behavioural engagement (Jang et al., 2010, pp. 588, 594–596). This helped me understand why the Swiss model suited me: I did not need less autonomy, but clearer structures within which to use it.

The Swiss culture, and the school itself, was much more results-oriented. There was a stronger focus on objectives, KPIs, and moving forward. This suited me because it is also how I naturally work. At times, I missed having deeper dialogues and more space to question whether we were doing the right things and whether we were doing them in the way we actually wanted. Overall, however, the approach suited me. However, a strong focus on measurable results may also have limitations. Research on complex tasks found that learning goals produced better performance than specific outcome goals because they directed attention towards discovering effective strategies rather than immediately achieving a target (Seijts et al., 2004, pp. 227, 233–235). This challenges my natural preference for KPIs: when the path is still unclear, measuring progress may be less valuable than first creating space for exploration.

The programme was strongly based on competencies. They used seven leadership competencies and seven management competencies.



Picture 1. Team Academy Competencies Framework

(From Emilie Dellecker, personal communication 17.2.2026).

When I first saw the framework, I had mixed feelings. It seemed like another attempt to put everything into boxes. Over time, however, I realized how useful it was. I believe that if a student genuinely develops across all these competencies, they will graduate as a highly capable professional. The framework also provides clear steps showing where and how a person can grow. Experiential learning works only while a person receives enough new stimuli and has at least some idea of where they could go next. Sometimes, we simply do not know what is possible and exploring everything from zero is very inefficient.

For example, someone may know that they can write a project plan in a Google document and create a basic table. However, they may not know that other project-management methods and tools exist. Even if these approaches are well established in theory, a person cannot apply them if they never encounters them or does not know they exist. They may discover them much later than they would within a framework that requires them to research a particular method, apply it, and evaluate whether it works for them. This is why I ultimately found the competency framework so valuable.

At the same time, mastering separately defined competencies does not necessarily guarantee integrated professional capability. A systematic review of competency-based medical education found evidence for improvements in specific competencies, but no evidence that graduates' overall competence or final professional outcomes improved (Weller et al., 2020, p. 748). Although this research comes from medical education, it raises a relevant question: does validating fourteen separate competencies demonstrate that someone can combine them effectively in a complex real-life situation?

Some parts felt slightly forced. I could see its influence on the team: certain activities, both within projects and throughout the broader learning journey, sometimes seemed to be

completed mainly so that students could later mention them in their portfolios. Many things were done mainly so that students could later discuss them in their portfolios and validate a particular competency. That is not necessarily the ideal source of motivation, but every system has its advantages and disadvantages. Motivation research offers one possible explanation for this tension. A meta-analysis of 128 studies found that expected external rewards linked to task completion or performance could reduce intrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 1999, p. 627). Although competency validation is not the same as a tangible reward, the risk may be similar: students can begin optimizing for proof of learning rather than for learning itself.

Some of the competencies go into impressive depth, such as information processing and problem resolution. I had never worked with these areas in such detail before. At the same time, I am the type of person who sees the world as interconnected. I grew up believing that everything relates to everything else. I may decide to write about one topic and suddenly find myself developing several different competencies through it. I can usually explain and defend those connections, so having to place everything into separate boxes was sometimes frustrating. For example, I found it quite funny that the interpersonal communication competency focused almost exclusively on presenting and pitching in public - as if that were all interpersonal communication involved. Nevertheless, everything is a process of development. Working with the competencies helped me, and overall, it was a valuable experience.

I also appreciated that the entire second-year company I joined was much more operational structured. They had an internal Notion system that genuinely supported clarity and transparency. From what I understood, some of these structures had already been prepared by Team Academy, or the students had at least received support in developing them. They probably did not build everything entirely from scratch. I do not necessarily see that as a negative if it improves the quality of their work and allows the team to focus more of its energy on what truly matters. It may sound unexciting, but learning to use Notion properly and connect different systems was a genuinely valuable experience for me.

Another concept I liked was individual lectures. During the semester, each student had to read approximately five books. The books were supposed to be new to the team, meaning that nobody else had read them before. In some cases, students could choose a book that another team member had already read if they could properly justify their choice. After reading the book, the student prepared a presentation and brought the new knowledge into a dialogue session. This created a standardized process through which new knowledge continuously entered the company, which I found valuable. The students also had to write two reflective articles during the semester. This structure may also address a common weakness in team learning. Research shows that groups tend to discuss information already shared by most members while overlooking knowledge held by only one person (Stasser & Titus, 1985, pp. 1471–1476). Requiring students to bring different books into dialogue sessions therefore creates a deliberate mechanism for introducing unique knowledge rather than repeatedly discussing what the team already knows.

What was interesting about these assignments was how closely managed the process was. First, you selected a book, which had to come from a shared database. Then you wrote a proposal explaining what you wanted to explore, why you had chosen it, and what your

objectives were. The proposal had to be validated by a teammate and then by a coach before you could begin writing. After completing the assignment, the outcome again had to be validated and get feedback by a teammate and then by a coach. The process was therefore very decision-heavy. They had an excellent system for managing it, so it was relatively simple and structured, but it still sometimes felt unnecessarily complicated. On the other hand, the positive side was that you received genuine feedback - not only once, but around four times for a single assignment. Someone repeatedly took the time to consider how your work could be improved. Ultimately, I think that was the most valuable part of the process.

If there is one major thing I am taking away from Switzerland, it is the excellent feedback culture. People were constantly asking how something could be improved, done more effectively, or approached differently. From one perspective, this culture could almost become toxic. I saw that several of my teammates felt discouraged because it seemed as if everything they did was considered wrong. That is obviously not ideal. Research confirms that more feedback is not automatically better. A meta-analysis of 607 effect sizes found that feedback improved performance on average, yet more than one third of the interventions actually reduced it (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996, p. 254). The difference often depends on whether feedback directs attention towards improving the task and process or makes the recipient feel personally judged (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996, pp. 260–263). This may explain why I experienced the culture as developmental while some of my teammates experienced it as constant failure. Personally, however, I value feedback greatly and always try to improve. I was genuinely excited by the amount and quality of feedback I received there. Even though the system may sound overmanaged, I am grateful for it. The feedback culture was one of the main reasons why the environment suited me so well.

Another interesting element was the expert sessions. During the semester, the students had eight full-day sessions, each dedicated to exploring one specific competency in depth with an external expert. This brought a greater level of depth and new knowledge into the programme.

Honestly, the timing of this exchange was perfect for me. By the time I left Proakatemia, I felt as though I was no longer learning enough. I was missing depth, feedback, and clearer direction. In Switzerland, I suddenly found all of those things, which probably also helped me approach the whole experience positively. However, being abroad does not automatically lead to deep intercultural learning. A study of nearly 1,300 students across 61 study-abroad programmes found substantial differences in development, with stronger outcomes in programmes that deliberately supported reflection and intercultural learning (Vande Berg et al., 2009, pp. 1–2, 28–31). This makes me question whether the influence of my exchange came simply from living in Switzerland or from actively comparing, questioning and reflecting on the two educational systems.

Of course, some things did not suit me. At times, the programme felt overly theoretical. Sometimes I did not understand a single word because many activities were conducted in French, and I did not speak French. Overall, however, it was a great experience. I am extremely glad that I went there and had the opportunity to meet those people and see what different approaches to the same educational model can offer.Research suggests that the value of an international experience does not come simply from being abroad. Across five

studies, living abroad was associated with greater creativity, whereas travelling abroad was not; the extent to which people adapted to the foreign culture was particularly important (Maddux & Galinsky, 2009, p. 1047). From this perspective, the value of my exchange came not only from Switzerland itself, but from having to operate inside a different educational culture.

Overall, I am grateful for the experience. I also understand that many of the lessons will become visible only over time. There are probably many ways in which the exchange has influenced me that I do not yet recognize

That was my Swiss exchange.

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