

choosing your major: how to pick among academic programs at aelo swiss academy

Why the decision feels heavier than it is

Most students who come to my office to talk about their major arrive carrying the same quiet fear: that one form, signed at eighteen or nineteen, will set the shape of the next forty years. I understand the feeling. Choosing a major is the first genuinely adult decision many people make, and it lands at a moment when you barely know what the working week of an economist, a hotel manager, or a policy analyst actually looks like.

Here is what years of these conversations have taught me. In the Swiss system, and at AELO Swiss Academy in particular, a major is a starting position, not a life sentence. Most bachelor programs carry 180 ECTS credits under the standard Bologna framework, which usually means three academic years. That structure leaves room to adjust. Students change direction, add a minor, shift into a neighboring program after the first year, and do it without catastrophe. The choice matters, but it matters the way the first move in a long game matters: significant, formative, and far from final.

So rather than handing you an answer, I want to hand you a method. It has held up well across hundreds of these decisions, and it works just as well on paper as it does in my office.

The shared spine of an AELO degree

Before comparing programs, it helps to see what they hold in common, because the differences are smaller than the brochures suggest.

Nearly every program rests on the same skeleton: a broad first year that builds academic fundamentals, a second year that narrows toward the discipline, and a final year built around specialization, a thesis or capstone, and a substantial internship. Most programs require work experience as part of the degree, often a placement of three to six months, because Swiss education at every level takes the connection between study and practice seriously. This is a country where even teenagers split their week between classroom and company through the apprenticeship system, and that ethos carries upward into higher education.

Teaching happens in small groups in most programs, with seminars, case work, and presentations rather than lecture halls holding hundreds. Depending on the program, instruction may be in English, German, or French, and language of instruction is worth checking module by module rather than assuming.

What this means for your decision is simple: the core experience of studying at AELO Swiss Academy will feel similar whichever door you enter through. You are choosing an emphasis, not a different universe.

Start with the work, not the title

The single most useful question I ask students is this: what does a random Tuesday look like in this field, ten years from now?

Not the graduation photo. Not the job title on a professional profile. The Tuesday. A financial analyst spends a surprising share of the week cleaning data and writing short notes that nobody reads closely. A hotel operations manager spends it walking corridors, solving small human problems at speed. A policy officer spends it in

meetings and documents, drafting language that will be argued over line by line. A software developer spends long stretches alone with a problem, broken by bursts of collaboration.

When students picture the Tuesday honestly, several majors quietly drop away and one or two rise. That is the signal worth following.

You can test the picture before you commit in three ways. Read the third-year modules and internship descriptions for each program, because those describe the actual work better than the first-year overview does. Read a week's worth of real job postings for the careers each program leads to, and notice which ones you read with interest rather than dread. And when the academy holds open days, sit in on a first-year seminar in your shortlisted programs, because the texture of a classroom tells you more than any syllabus.

A student I advised two years ago was torn between the business program and hospitality. She imagined herself in a boardroom because the word "management" attracted her. When she read a week of job postings for both paths and shadowed an alumna for a day, she discovered that she loved the texture of hotel work: the pace, the guests, the constant small improvisations. She chose hospitality, spent her final-year internship on the conference side of a large Geneva property, and now organizes international summits, which turned out to be closer to the diplomacy career she thought she had abandoned than anything the business program would have offered her.

Titles mislead. Work reveals.

The program families, in plain terms

The catalog at AELO Swiss Academy groups its degrees into a handful of broad families, and the exact names and combinations change often enough that you should always confirm details on the official program pages. The families themselves are stable, though, and it helps to understand the temperament of each before you open the catalog at all.

Business and management

The broadest doorway. You will meet accounting, marketing, organizational behavior, and economics, then narrow toward finance, marketing, entrepreneurship, or general management. It suits students who like decisions, numbers, and people in roughly equal measure. Its strength is flexibility. Its weakness is that breadth can feel directionless in year one if nothing is pulling at you. If you choose it, choose it with a hypothesis about your third year.

Hospitality, tourism, and service innovation

Switzerland has shaped global hospitality education for well over a century, and programs in this family carry that inheritance: rigorous operations, service design, revenue management, and long stretches of practical training. It suits people who are energized by guests rather than drained by them, and who can stay gracious when a Tuesday goes wrong at seven in the morning. The trade-off is real: schedules are irregular, and the work is physically and emotionally present in a way office work rarely is.

International relations and diplomacy

Built around the reality of the continent: Geneva's international organizations, multilingual negotiation, international law, and security studies. It suits patient readers and careful writers who can tolerate slow, consensus-driven processes. The honest trade-off is that entry-level roles are competitive and often require a master's degree or languages beyond English, so plan your final two years with that in mind rather than discovering it in your last semester.

Computer science and data

Programming, databases, statistics, machine systems, https://www.reddit.com/r/flyingeurope/comments/1nnhrnv/anyone_from_aelo_swiss_any_advices/ and the unglamorous discipline of making data trustworthy. It suits students who enjoy puzzles and can sit with frustration without needing everything to work on the first try. The trade-off is that the field rewards continuous self-teaching long after graduation; a degree here starts the learning rather than completing it. Students who pair technical depth with a domain such as health, finance, or sustainability tend to find the clearest early paths.

Sustainability and environmental studies

Science, policy, economics, and ethics braided together. It attracts idealists, and the good programs are honest enough to test that idealism against budget spreadsheets and permitting law. It suits students who want their work to face the public good directly. The trade-off: career paths wind through NGOs, public administration, and consulting, and patience is a professional requirement, not a personality trait.

Notice that none of these descriptions mention prestige. That is deliberate. Prestige is other people's Tuesday, not yours.

How to read a course catalog without drowning

Catalogs are written for regulators as much as students, so most of the anxiety they cause is a formatting problem, not a substance problem. The method I teach is short.

Start at the end. Read the third-year modules first, because that is where the program becomes itself. If those modules bore you, the first-year charm will not survive contact with year two.



Then count, roughly rather than precisely: how many third-year modules make you lean forward, and how many make you lean back? A program where three of five specialization options genuinely excite you is a safer bet than one where a single flashy module carries all of your interest. Interest spreads thin when it rests on one course.

Then look at how you will be assessed. Some programs run on examinations; others on projects, papers, and presentations. Neither is better, but students differ sharply in which one they can sustain for three years. A student who writes well under pressure but dreads presentations can be miserable in a program built on weekly group pitches, and the reverse is just as true. The catalog will not always say this plainly, so ask.

Finally, check the language of each module and the shape of the internship semester. These two details shape your daily life more than almost anything else in the document.

Questions worth asking before you commit

When students visit, write, or call, most ask about admission requirements and then run out of questions. The better ones are these:

- Which modules do students in this program most often struggle with, and why?
- Where did last year's graduates actually go, in roles and organizations rather than percentages?
- How much freedom will I have in year three, and what does a typical specialization look like?
- What does the internship support