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Swiss Government sinks youth visa agreement with Australia

The government's decision to scotch a young people's cultural exchange system with Australia has ruffled official feathers down under.

The Swiss embassy in Canberra has accused politicians in Bern of showing a "lack of political will" after they buried plans for a working-holiday visa.

The idea of the Working Holiday Visa (WHV) is to spend a year in Australia, travel around, discover another culture, perfect your English - and at the same time be able to study and work. In 2008 more than 154,000 people aged 18-30 from 25 countries benefited. However, Swiss youngsters are going to have to continue waiting. The justice ministry has decided it wants nothing to do with the scheme - more than four years after a request from Australia.

The four reasons the ministry cites when justifying its decision focus on the young Australians who would come to Switzerland, as the WHV obviously works both ways.

The first reason is legal. "Switzerland does not recognise 'working tourist' as a status," says Roland Flükiger, head of the emigration service of the Federal Migration Office. "The legal basis is not sufficient. A vote in parliament would be needed to change it, but that would take two to three years. In our opinion there's no point in changing the entire law over one article in it."

Another issue is that the free movement of people agreement between Switzerland and the European Union means Switzerland has to be "more strict with third countries", according to Flükiger. Only candidates with special qualifications will be accepted.

A third significant factor is the opposition of the cantons, responsible for issuing work permits in the first place. Last year two-thirds said they were against

the new status and the rest wanted first of all to see the details of an agreement.

Finally, there's the economic crisis. "With a rising unemployment rate, people don't want to add another group of workers to the market," Flükiger said. "We're not afraid of an Australian invasion, but if we start introducing a new sort of work permit, you can be sure that other countries will make the same requests."

While politicians in Switzerland are killing off the project, Swiss representatives on the other side of the world have been fighting for more than four years to bring it to fruition.

Everyone contacted by swissinfo.ch, at the consulate as well as the embassy, supported the programme and clearly regrets Bern's rejection, based on assumptions and fears.

Claude-André Barbey, number two in the Swiss embassy in the Australian capital Canberra and who spoke to swissinfo.ch in the ambassador's absence, was amazed above all by the excessive caution on the part of the cantons.

"Our cantonal authorities don't get out of Switzerland enough," he said. "Some of them seem to be terrified about being invaded by Australians. They have a completely warped view of the world, thinking that everyone wants to cling to the Swiss boat!"

Barbey criticised above all the "lack of political will" on the part of the justice ministry, ultimately in charge of this dossier within Switzerland. It's too easy, he said, to use the cantons, and now the economic crisis, as a pretext.

"We've been going round in circles for years - enough's enough!" he said. "We've scored an own goal by depriving young Swiss people of an opportunity to travel the world and learn English. Our politicians don't want to cross swords with the cantons."

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