



More Economics for the Public Debate



Monika Büttler, a professor of economics, is active on multiple fronts. She has introduced generations of assessment students to the beauty of economics. She is an influential voice in the public debate. She thinks that policy solutions would benefit a lot from sound economics. How can Switzerland stay ahead of other economies? Why are economists successful in consulting and management? How should students prepare for their own research?

What is right and wrong with Switzerland? What must Switzerland do to stay ahead of other nations? Where do you see the biggest challenges in economic policy?

A good, but difficult question with no easy answer. I would see two key factors for Switzerland's success: the first is a well-functioning labor market that manages – together with a good education system on all levels – to integrate a wide range of skills. The second is a highly competitive export industry. For both it will be important to keep the flexibility, and align social insurance systems with work incentives. Two concrete challenges: reforming old age insurance and rethinking primary and secondary school curricula and organization (including early childhood) in the age of digitization.

You are an influential voice in the Swiss policy debate. It takes time and effort to write columns, participate in panels. What is your motivation, and why is it important?

One reason to switch from Science to Economics was to be closer to policy. It may sound naive, but I want to contribute a little bit to improve policy decisions, to make the world a better place. It is my deep conviction that informing the public (more pompously "Aufklärung"/Enlightenment) is the route to take. Yes, participating in the policy debate takes time and energy, but employers (even most universities) hire individuals and not publication lists.

What are your current research projects? Why are the results important for policy making? How can economics students prepare to do policy relevant research in their Master thesis?

I am generally interested in individual decision-making and (work) incentives in social insurance schemes. Currently we analyze whether regulation on cash withdrawals from



the occupational pension system affects home purchase decisions (yes), and why (we are not yet sure). Concerning policy relevant research: My experience is that a rich background in economic theory and empirical methods provides an enormous backing for policy advice even in situations in which the required economic advice is simply basic economics (or in other words: common sense).

You are active in company boards, including the Swiss National Bank. Are economists better strategists and managers? It is clear that public policy requires sound economics. But what are the competitive advantages of our students in the private sector?

Economists are neither better nor worse at strategy and management than graduates from other fields, but they often ask questions from a different angle. Thinking in terms of causality and impact, but also incentives and behavioral anomalies is highly appreciated. While working on boards of international companies, I realized how important economic questions are in the board room: from remuneration of top management to trade restrictions and many more.

You have done research on the economic situation of families in Switzerland. What is your own experience in reconciling work and family? Is there any time left for private hobbies?

Would you ask the same question to my male colleagues? Probably not. I therefore participate in various initiatives to make economics more attractive to women (including the recent move by the American Economic Association). Too many women leave the field – not only for family reasons. This is bad for economic research: many crucial questions in economic policy are not adequately addressed. But yes, I do take time off to do other things: I plead guilty to pollute the world with my travel activities. More environmentally friendly (with the possible exception of my family): I started to play the violin 4 years ago.

For more information, please visit <http://sew.unisg.ch> for research and www.batz.ch for (Swiss) policy or write to monika.buetler@unisg.ch.