

what's in your welcome pack? first impressions for incoming aelo swiss academy students

Somewhere between the airport gate and the last train stop, almost every new student goes quiet. The questions that felt manageable at home start stacking up. Will someone actually be waiting? What happens if my luggage takes a different route than I do? What am I supposed to do in the first hour, at what my body will insist is midnight?

We know that silence well. Every August and January, a small group of us at AELO Swiss Academy sits around a long table with stacks of plain boxes and paper bags, packing welcome packs by hand for the students about to arrive. Between sixty and eighty packs go out at each intake. After years of doing this, we have strong opinions about what goes in, what stays out, and why the whole thing is designed to weigh just under a kilogram.

This is a walk through that pack, item by item, along with the thinking behind each choice. If you are an incoming student, treat it as a preview of a box you will soon be holding. If you are a parent, treat it as reassurance. Nothing in it is there by accident, and nothing in it was chosen by someone who has forgotten what arrival day feels like.

Why the first two days matter more than any brochure

Brochures promise mountains, friendships and academic excellence. None of that helps you at nine in the evening when you are standing in a corridor, holding a suitcase, wondering which door is yours. Arrival day runs on much smaller questions. Where do I eat? Whom do I call if something goes wrong? Is the water safe to drink? Where is the laundry, and when am I allowed to use it?

Decision fatigue is real, and it hits hardest when you are jet lagged and everything around you sounds different. So the welcome pack is built around a simple principle: answer the first dozen questions before anyone has to ask them. A student who can find the dining hall on the first evening, without having to perform a search party in front of strangers, carries themselves differently by the third day. Confidence in a new place is rarely dramatic. It is usually built out of tiny, unremarkable competencies, and we try to hand you a few of them on day one.

There is also an emotional logic at work. A box that has clearly been prepared by human hands tells you something no website can: you were expected. Someone thought about you before you existed to them as anything more than a name on a list. Students notice this, even the ones who would never say so out loud.

The letter on top

Open the pack and the first thing you meet is a single page, signed by hand by our head of student life. It names your house, your house parent and your buddy, a returning student who has volunteered to look out for you in your first weeks. The letter is rewritten before every intake, partly because the names change and partly because the students who just left teach us what the next group will need to hear.



It usually includes a version of this:

> "You are not expected to know anything yet. Nobody is standing around waiting to see whether you find your classroom on the first morning. That is what the next few weeks are for, and you will not spend them alone."

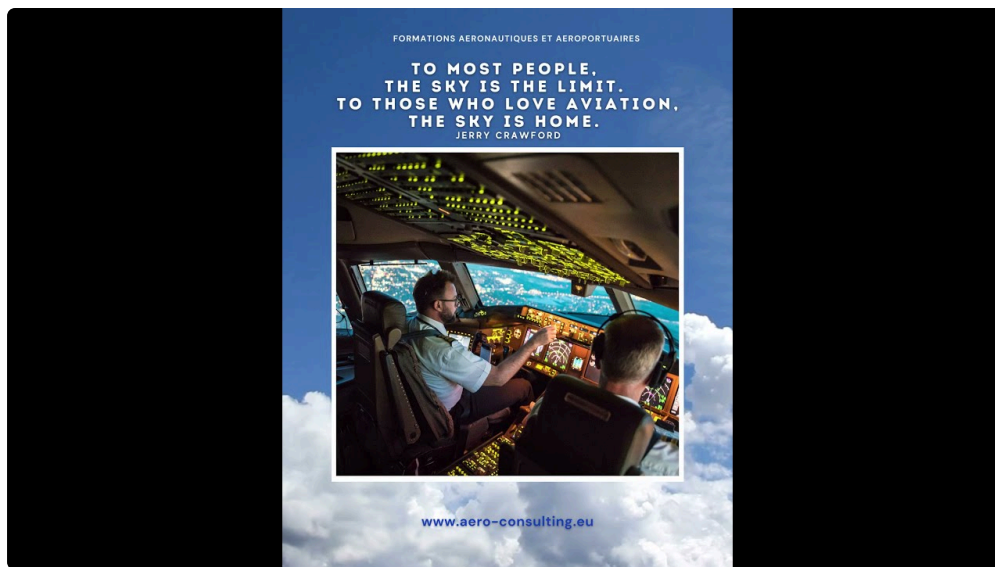
A printed signature would undo the point of the letter. Handwriting takes longer, and that is exactly why we keep doing it. The letter is deliberately one page. Anything longer becomes homework, and nobody needs homework in their first hour.

The papers that prevent a panic

Three documents sit in the pack, and each exists because of a specific panic we have watched happen.

The first is a campus map, folded down to pocket size and marked by hand. The dining hall, the laundry room, the nurse's office and the shortcut through the arch that saves you four minutes in the rain. We annotate by hand because a clean, professional map gets glanced at once and forgotten. A map with a scribbled arrow and the words "laundry, ask for Marta" gets used.

The second is the house handbook, around twenty pages. Laundry days by floor, quiet hours, kitchen access, sign-out rules for weekends, how meals work, and, importantly, what to do at two in the morning if you feel unwell. The answer to that last one is always the same: knock on your house parent's door, any hour, no apology needed. We put it in writing because at 2am, anxious minds do not trust verbal assurances given at orientation.



The third is a short checklist of documents to have on you rather than in checked luggage: passport or ID, insurance card, visa confirmation where relevant, and any medication accompanied by a doctor's note. Originals stay with you. We may copy them, but only with your knowledge. Students arriving with incomplete paperwork are not in trouble; the checklist exists precisely so that the conversation happens calmly at a desk instead of anxiously at a border.

Small things that weigh more than they should

The physical items in the pack are modest, and that is deliberate. But modest does not mean meaningless.

There is a small bar of chocolate from a producer in our canton, with a handwritten note. One student from Seoul kept hers unopened for two weeks because it was the first gift anyone had given her in Switzerland, and she could not bring herself to eat it. We now write "this one is meant to be eaten" on the note. Some still save it anyway. That is allowed too.

There is a plain notebook and a pen. The first page carries three prompts: three things you noticed [reddit.com](https://www.reddit.com) today, one thing that confused you, one thing that made you laugh. Years ago, a boy from Milan used his notebook to write down every new German word he heard, margins crammed with phonetic guesses, and by winter he was correcting my pronunciation. The notebook was meant to be a journal. It became whatever he needed. That is fine. Objects get to choose their own jobs.

There is a simple water bottle, because Swiss tap water is drinkable and excellent, and public fountains in most towns are safe to drink from as well. A refillable bottle saves you money within a week and saves the planet a modest amount of plastic over a school year.

There is a small travel adapter. Swiss sockets are type J, running 230 volts, subtly different from the plugs used by our neighbours on every side. A dead phone on the first night is an avoidable misery, so if you forgot your adapter, one is already waiting.

And there is a lanyard or scarf in your house colour. It looks like a trinket. It functions as a belonging cue. Older students greet you by house before they know your name, which is a small thing that turns out not to be small at all.

Finding your way: the timetable and the phrasebook

Two more items deserve their own explanation.

The timetable card shows the local bus or train stops that matter in your first week, with the departure times circled that match the school day. The national rail app covers the entire country and is excellent, but an app requires battery, signal and the confidence to navigate it in a language you may not yet have. A laminated card requires nothing at all.

The phrasebook holds roughly fifty phrases, and here is the part we are quietly proud of: returning students choose them, not a language textbook. So it contains things like "where is", "how much is", "the usual, please", "sorry, I'm still learning" and "thank you, that was kind". A girl in one of our first cohorts took her phrasebook to the village bakery, ordered bread with visible effort, and came back half a head taller in terms of confidence. Most Swiss people will

meet you halfway, and often further than that. A baker in a village of two thousand people has sold bread to teenagers with mangled pronunciation for thirty years, and it has never once stopped being endearing to her rather than tiresome. You will be fine. The phrasebook is less a dictionary than a permission slip, something that lets you try out loud instead of only in your head.

What we leave out, and why

A welcome pack teaches you as much by its absences as by its contents, so here is our reasoning on a few things people often expect to find.

We do not include a SIM card, though we tried, twice. Swiss mobile registration rules and eSIM compatibility shift often enough that a card packed in spring can be awkward by autumn, and a prepaid card that refuses to activate is worse than no card at all. Instead, your house parent sits with you in the first two days and helps you set up a local number on your own phone, with a provider of your choosing. It takes about twenty minutes, and you learn to top it up yourself, which matters more in month three than convenience matters in hour one.

We do not include heavy guidebooks either. Switzerland is small, well signposted and full of returning students who will happily tell you which mountain deserves your first Saturday. A guidebook in your suitcase is weight. A buddy with an opinion is a plan.

And we do not include anything costly or sentimental enough to grieve. Packs are handed to you in person on arrival, never posted, so they cannot go missing in transit. Even so, we keep the contents replaceable, because arrival weeks are chaotic and things get left on trains. The chocolate can be bought again. The letter cannot, which is why the handbook gently suggests keeping that page somewhere safer than a back pocket.

The first seventy-two hours after the box

The pack is the opening move, not the whole game. Within your first evening, your house parent walks your floor with you: your room, the washrooms, the kitchen, the fire exits, and the corner where the wifi is mysteriously strongest. Within your first full day, you sit down with your buddy over a coffee or a walk, and the two of you work out which questions you actually have. They are rarely the ones we predicted.

If homesickness lands on day two, as it does for a good share of students, the handbook has a page for that too, and nobody will treat it as a problem to be fixed so much as a feeling to be walked through. The buddy system exists partly for exactly this. A seventeen year old who arrived two years ago can say "I cried the first Sunday too" in a way no adult ever quite can.

By the third day, most students have been into the nearest town once, ideally with a small group, to buy the things nobody thought to pack: a particular shampoo, warmer socks, a phone case. That first errand turns out to

be one of the most important of the term, because it is the moment the country stops being an idea and becomes a place where you have successfully bought socks.

Four small things worth doing before you fly

If you are reading this with a suitcase still open on your bedroom floor, a little preparation makes everything in the pack work even better:

- Photocopy or photograph your passport, visa and insurance papers, and email the copies to yourself.
- Pack any daily medication in your hand luggage, with a doctor's note if it needs a prescription.
- Write two phone numbers on paper: your house parent, once we send the details, and a relative who answers at odd hours.
- If you can, learn to say hello and thank you in German or French. Two words each is enough. It changes how the first week feels.

A word for the parents reading over a shoulder

Plenty of parents will read this more carefully than their children will, and that is as it should be. Here is what we would want you to know. The pack is designed so that your child can stand on their own feet from the first hour, and the surest way to undermine that is to manage arrival remotely. Resist the urge to phone three times on day one. Ask instead about the chocolate, the notebook prompts, the buddy's name. Those questions signal interest without signalling worry, and teenagers can tell the difference even when they pretend otherwise.

One mother once told us she taped the house parent's number inside her daughter's journal cover before departure, and we mention it because the instinct is exactly right: one number, on paper, in a place the child will actually look. Everything else can wait for Sunday's video call.

The box is the beginning

Almost every intake, a student in their second or third week asks whether they can help pack the next round of welcome packs for the incoming AELO Swiss Academy class. We nearly always say yes. There is something in the act, folding a letter like the one once handed to you, writing "laundry, ask for Marta" on a fresh map, that closes a loop. The nervousness you felt at the airport becomes competence you can pass on, sealed into a box that weighs just under a kilogram and carries considerably more than that.

So when you arrive, and someone on the steps hands you a plain box with your name on it, written by hand rather than printed, take a breath before you open it. Everything inside was packed by people who remember exactly where you are standing. The mountains will come. The academics will come. First, the small things.