Senior Leaders at Swiss Higher Education Institutions: An Empirical Analysis of General Management Competencies

Konferenz des Netzwerks Hochschulforschung Österreich, 08.05.2025

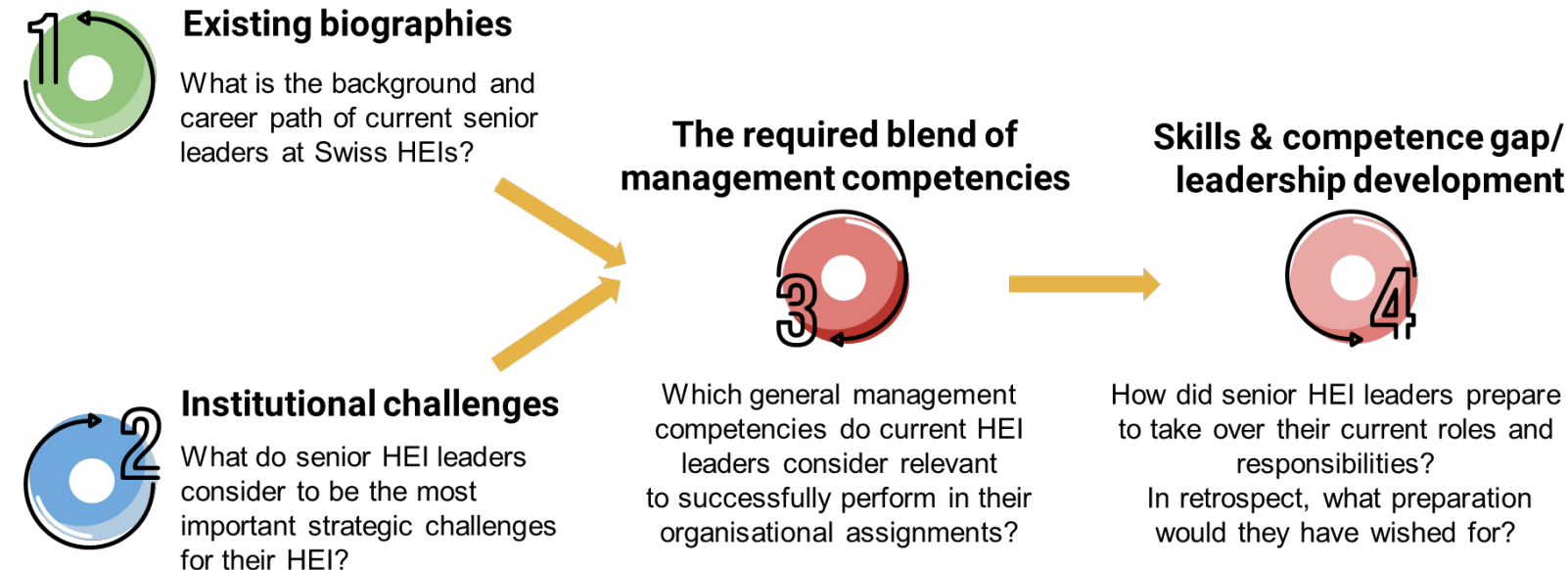Dr. Maryna Lakhno, SSPG Swiss School of Public Governance, ETH Zürich

Presentation Content

o **Research questions, method and study setup**

o **Empirical Results**

   1. Biographies of senior leaders

   2. Strategic institutional challenges

   3. Relevance of General Management Competencies

   4. Competency gaps and preparation for current position

o **Conclusions**

   – Fields for discussion and further action

Research Questions and Sample

The **national study** draws an evidence-based picture of the current and future **leadership situation at Swiss Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)**.
→ **five types**: ETHs, cantonal universities, universities of applied sciences & arts, universities of teacher education, research institutes of the ETH domain

① Existing biographies

What is the background and career path of current senior leaders at Swiss HEIs?

② Institutional challenges

What do senior HEI leaders consider to be the most important strategic challenges for their HEI?

③ The required blend of management competencies

Which general management competencies do current HEI leaders consider relevant to successfully perform in their organisational assignments?

④ Skills & competence gap/ leadership development

How did senior HEI leaders prepare to take over their current roles and responsibilities?
In retrospect, what preparation would they have wished for?

− **Analysis of publicly accessible data:** research on senior leaders at Swiss HEIs (selection of total population)
→ N=488 (44 HEIs)

− **Empirical data collection:**

• **Standardised online survey** (March – April 2024)
→ **312 respondents** (38 HEIs)
→ **response rate of 63.9%**

• **Structured interviews with 24 senior leaders** (June – October 2024)
→ 11 rectors/directors, 7 deans/institute directors, 4 academic members of a rectorate, 2 non-academic members of a rectorate

Focus on Senior Leadership Positions at Swiss Higher Education Institutions
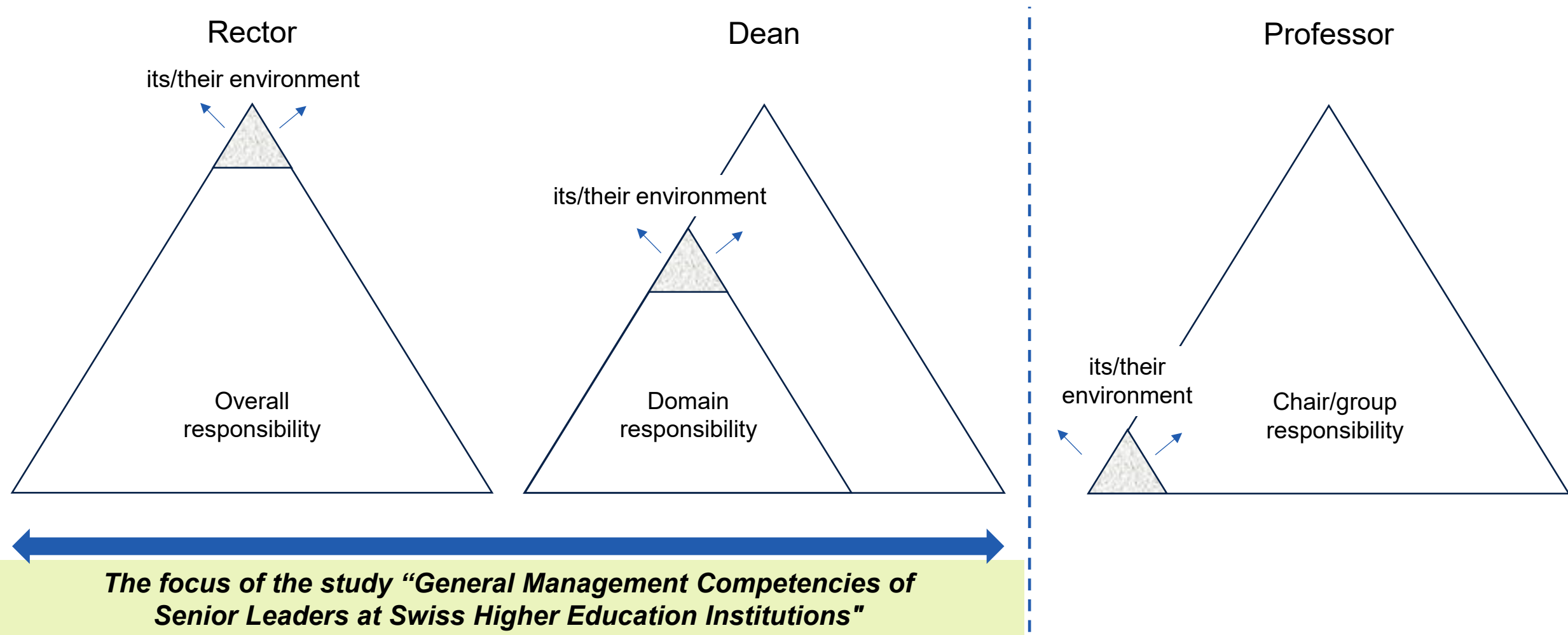
Structural classification of managers between their unit and various internal and external environments

Composition of the Study Participants

Respondents from 38 HEIs *(N=312)*

Career path
(biography)

ACADEMIC/PROFESSORIAL
49%
N=152

PROFESSIONAL/MIXED
51%
N=160

Management position
(function group)

57%
N=17

43%
N=13

Overall institutional responsbility

10%
N=30

76%
N=120

24%
N=37

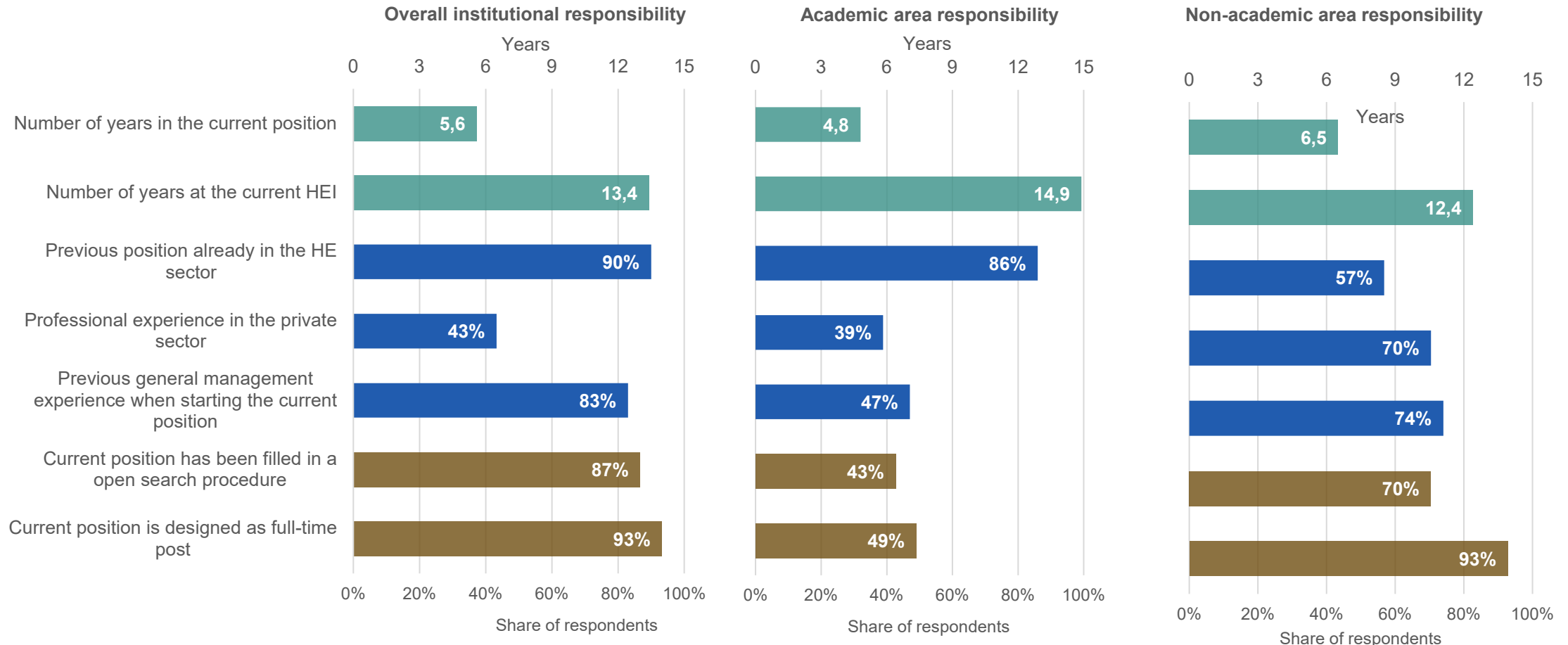**Academic area responsibility**

50%
N=157

12%
N=15

88%
N=110

Support area responsibility
(non-academic area responsibility)

40%
N=125

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1. Biographies of Senior HEI Leaders

Senior HEI leaders often bring a **HE background** to their roles but **limited external professional or management experience**. The three function groups differ in terms of tenure, previous experience and the design of their position.

	Overall institutional responsibility	Academic area responsibility	Non-academic area responsibility
Number of years in the current position	5,6	4,8	6,5
Number of years at the current HEI	13,4	14,9	12,4
Previous position already in the HE sector	90%	86%	57%
Professional experience in the private sector	43%	39%	70%
Previous general management experience when starting the current position	83%	47%	74%
Current position has been filled in a open search procedure	87%	43%	70%
Current position is designed as full-time post	93%	49%	93%

Note: ETH=Swiss Federal Institutes of Technology, UNI=Cantonal Research University, UAS=University of Applied Sciences and Arts, RI=Research Institute of the ETH Domain; survey data; N=312.

1. Diversity in the Executive Boards of Swiss HEIs*

Proportion of women at 33%**

Gender: ■ Women ■ Men

- Men: 67%
- Women: 33%
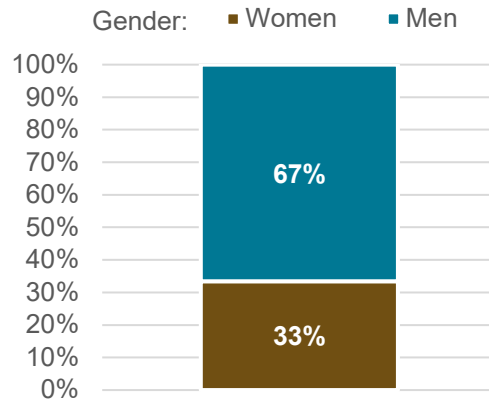
Swiss are in the majority

Nationality: ■ Swiss ■ Foreign

- 6%
- 16%
- 78%

Average age is 56 years

Age: ■ 30-39 years ■ 40-49 years ■ 50-59 years ■ 60-69 years
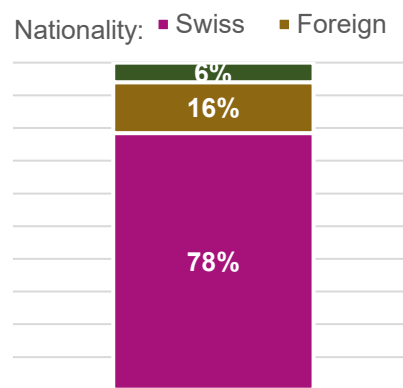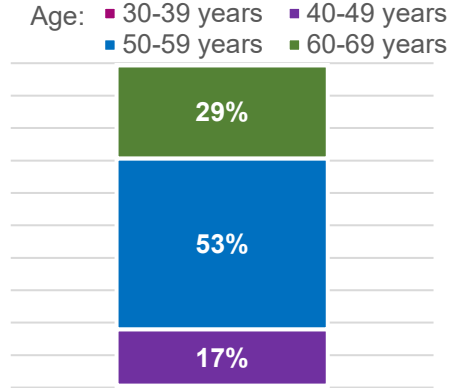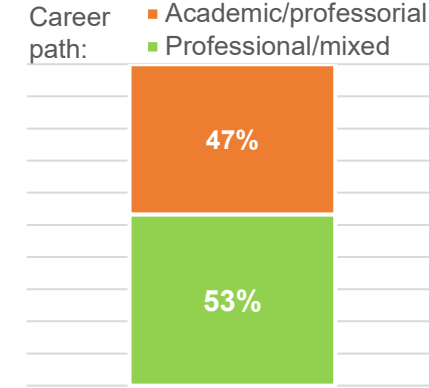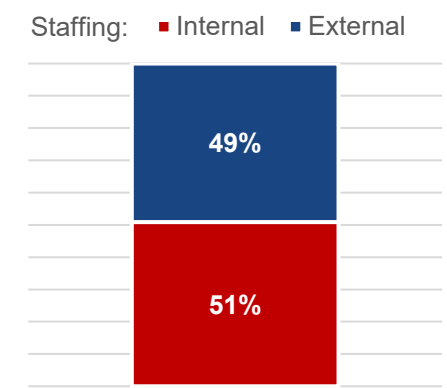
- 60-69 years: 29%
- 50-59 years: 53%
- 40-49 years: 17%

Two types of career paths

Career path: ■ Academic/professorial ■ Professional/mixed

- Academic/professorial: 47%
- Professional/mixed: 53%

Half came from the outside

Staffing: ■ Internal ■ External

- External: 49%
- Internal: 51%

Results of the schillingreport for comparison*:

Data on the composition of **management** employees in the **private sector** and **public administration** in **Switzerland**:

- 20% of women on the management boards of the 100 largest companies
- 25% of women in top management positions in the public administration
- 46% of foreigners on management boards in the private sector
- 53 years is the average age on the management boards of the 100 largest companies

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«I think it's important that the university management really does have a diverse and complementary skills profile overall.»

«Well, I see it in our Executive Board now, that management skills and effectiveness and also a certain strategic thinking do not necessarily come from the academic field, but actually rather from the outside world.»

«For me, it is really a major political concern that people in leadership positions also feel an ethical obligation to allow other voices to be heard [...]. And I notice that with young people, too. They think much more inclusively about what they demand of us, for which we also have to take responsibility.".»
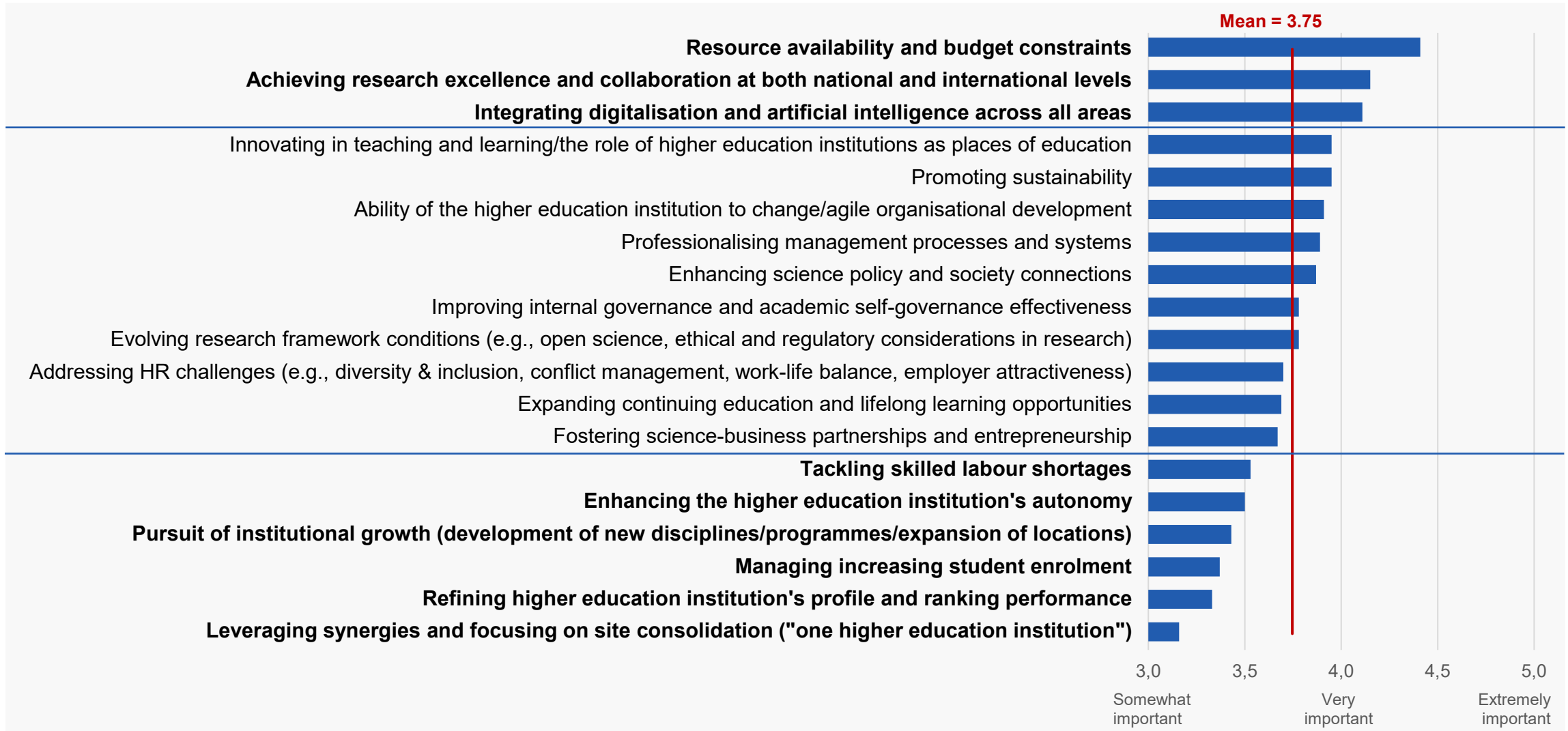
Note: Quotes from interviews

* Executive boards include core members (with voting rights) and members of the extended executive board (in an advisory capacity)
** Based on the total population (not on the respondents)
*** schillingreport 2024. The Management Boards of Switzerland's Private and Public Sectors (https://www.schillingpartners.ch/en/schilling-report/)

2. Strategic Institutional Challenges for HEI

Mean = 3.75

- Resource availability and budget constraints
- Achieving research excellence and collaboration at both national and international levels
- Integrating digitalisation and artificial intelligence across all areas
- Innovating in teaching and learning/the role of higher education institutions as places of education
- Promoting sustainability
- Ability of the higher education institution to change/agile organisational development
- Professionalising management processes and systems
- Enhancing science policy and society connections
- Improving internal governance and academic self-governance effectiveness
- Evolving research framework conditions (e.g., open science, ethical and regulatory considerations in research)
- Addressing HR challenges (e.g., diversity & inclusion, conflict management, work-life balance, employer attractiveness)
- Expanding continuing education and lifelong learning opportunities
- Fostering science-business partnerships and entrepreneurship
- Tackling skilled labour shortages
- Enhancing the higher education institution's autonomy
- Pursuit of institutional growth (development of new disciplines/programmes/expansion of locations)
- Managing increasing student enrolment
- Refining higher education institution's profile and ranking performance
- Leveraging synergies and focusing on site consolidation ("one higher education institution")

3,0 (Somewhat important) — 3,5 — 4,0 (Very important) — 4,5 — 5,0 (Extremely important)
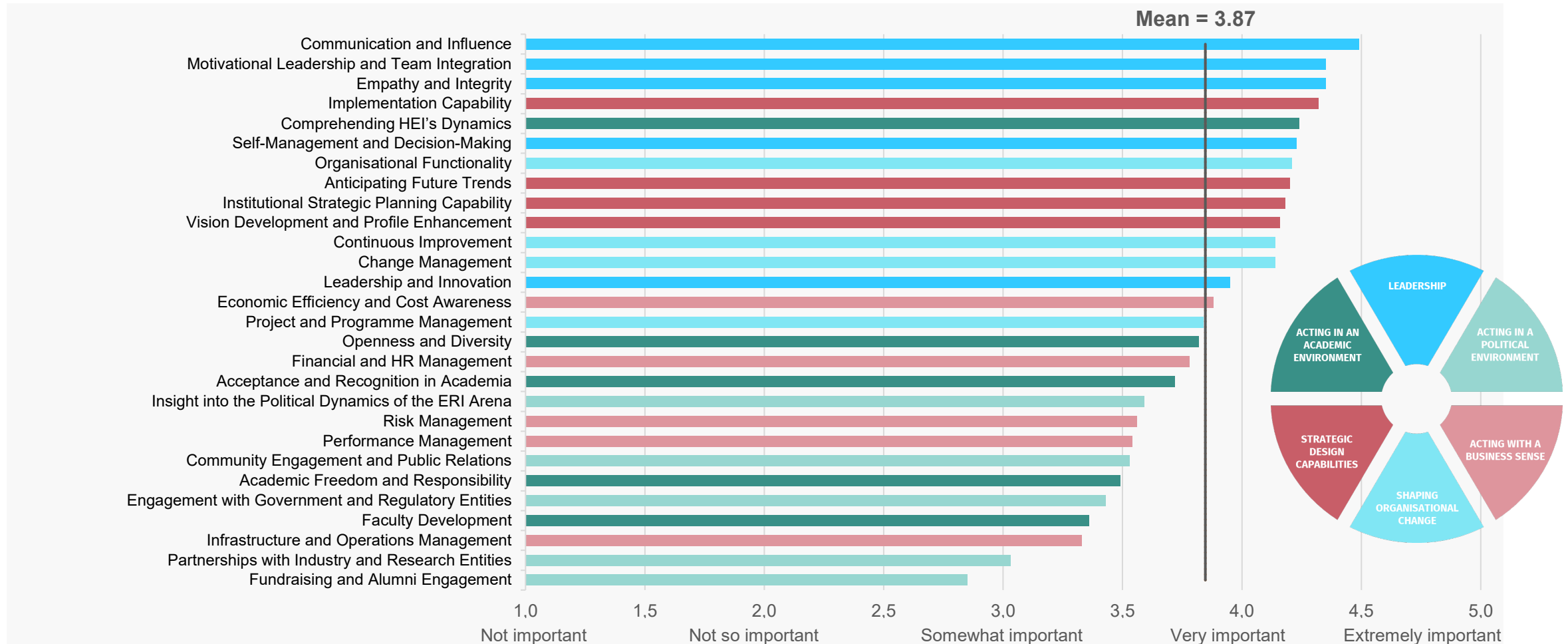
Note: Answers were given on a 5-point-scale from 1 (Not important) to 5 (Extremely important); Survey data; N~312

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A Comprehensive Competency Model with Six Competency Fields

Motivation and team integration
Communication and influence
Empathy and integrity
Leadership aspiration and commitment
Self-management and decision-making

Understanding the Mechanisms of the Political ERI Arena
Cooperation with government agencies and supervisory bodies
Collaboration with industry/research partners
Community engagement and public relations
Fundraising and alumni relations

Acceptance and recognition in academia
Comprehending the mode of operation of HEI's
Faculty development
Academic freedom and responsibility
Openness and diversity

Financial and HR management
Infrastructure and operations management
Economic efficiency and cost awareness
Performance management
Risk management

Anticipating future trends
Vision development and profile building
Institutional strategic planning capability
Implementation capability

Organisational design and functionality
Continuous improvement
Change management
Project and programme management

LEADERSHIP

ACTING IN A POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

ACTING IN AN ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT

ACTING WITH A BUSINESS SENSE

STRATEGIC DESIGN CAPABILITIES

SHAPING ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

3. Relevance of Competencies

Mean = 3.87

Competency	Value (approx.)
Communication and Influence	
Motivational Leadership and Team Integration	
Empathy and Integrity	
Implementation Capability	
Comprehending HEI's Dynamics	
Self-Management and Decision-Making	
Organisational Functionality	
Anticipating Future Trends	
Institutional Strategic Planning Capability	
Vision Development and Profile Enhancement	
Continuous Improvement	
Change Management	
Leadership and Innovation	
Economic Efficiency and Cost Awareness	
Project and Programme Management	
Openness and Diversity	
Financial and HR Management	
Acceptance and Recognition in Academia	
Insight into the Political Dynamics of the ERI Arena	
Risk Management	
Performance Management	
Community Engagement and Public Relations	
Academic Freedom and Responsibility	
Engagement with Government and Regulatory Entities	
Faculty Development	
Infrastructure and Operations Management	
Partnerships with Industry and Research Entities	
Fundraising and Alumni Engagement	

Scale: 1.0 Not important — 1.5 — 2.0 Not so important — 2.5 — 3.0 Somewhat important — 3.5 — 4.0 Very important — 4.5 — 5.0 Extremely important

Wheel segments: LEADERSHIP, ACTING IN A POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT, ACTING WITH A BUSINESS SENSE, SHAPING ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE, STRATEGIC DESIGN CAPABILITIES, ACTING IN AN ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT
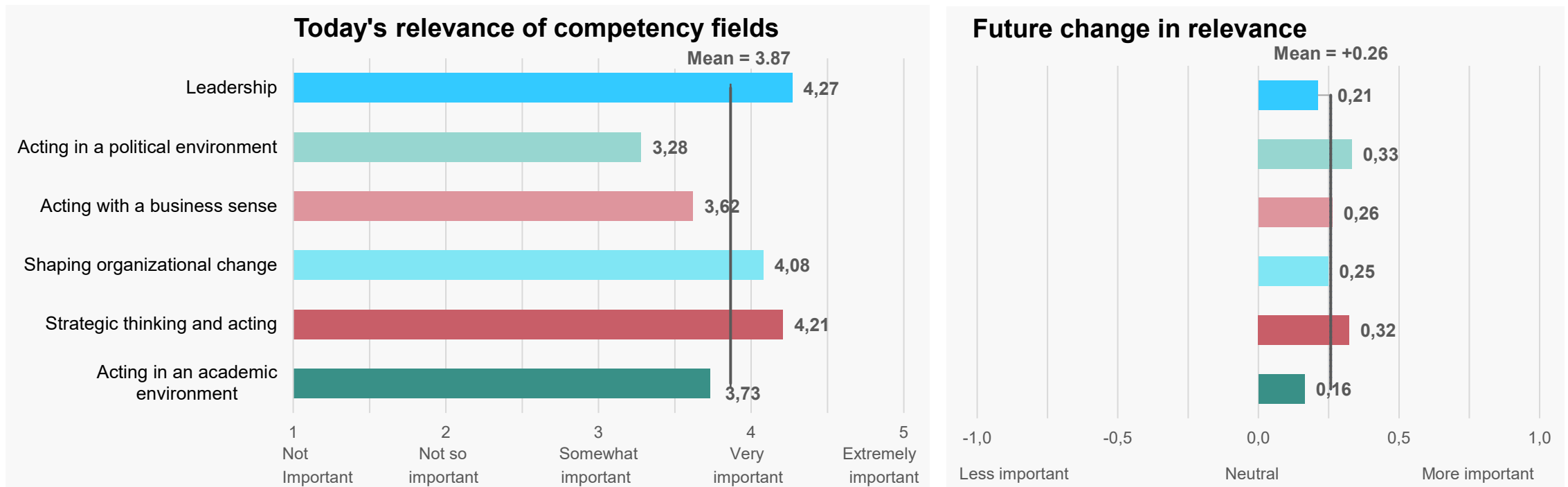
Note: Survey data; N~312.

«And then we are actually looking for a jack-of-all-trades [German: "eierlegende Wollmilchsau"] who is extremely good in their field of activity, who is up to date in terms of leadership. And who has an overall view of the university.»

3. Relevance of Competency Fields

The competency profiles required by senior HEI leaders are **wide-ranging and challenging** – today and in the future. **Leadership**, **strategic thinking and acting**, and **shaping organisational change** are seen as the most relevant competency fields.
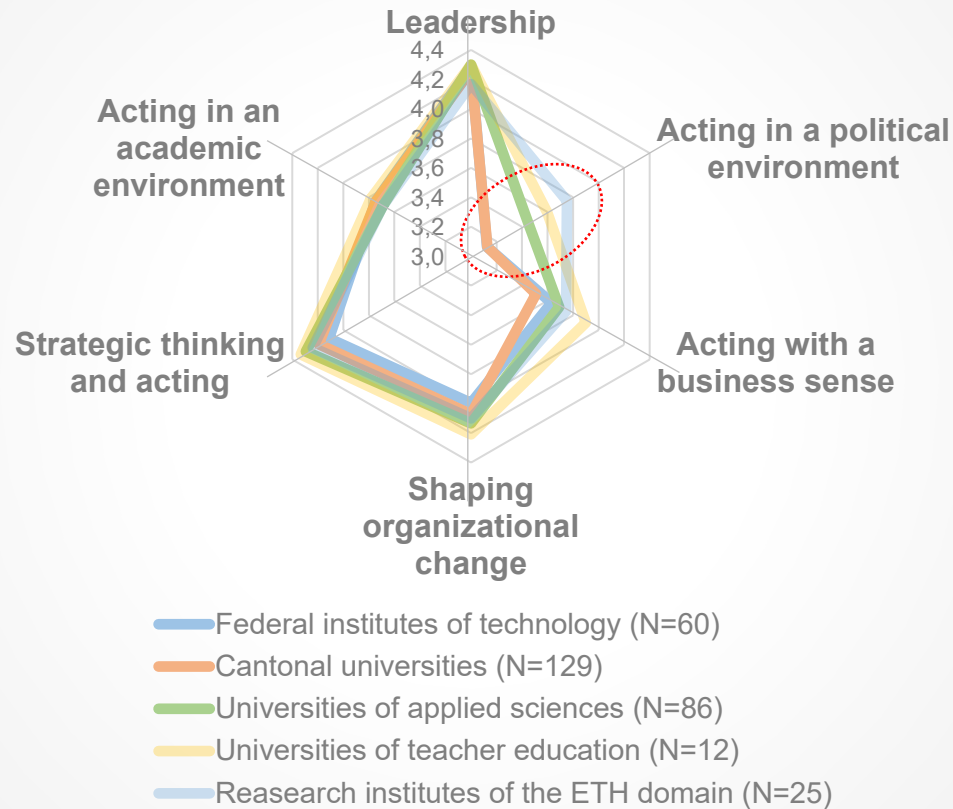
Today's relevance of competency fields

Mean = 3.87

Competency field	Value
Leadership	4,27
Acting in a political environment	3,28
Acting with a business sense	3,62
Shaping organizational change	4,08
Strategic thinking and acting	4,21
Acting in an academic environment	3,73

1 Not Important
2 Not so important
3 Somewhat important
4 Very important
5 Extremely important

Future change in relevance

Mean = +0.26

Competency field	Value
Leadership	0,21
Acting in a political environment	0,33
Acting with a business sense	0,26
Shaping organizational change	0,25
Strategic thinking and acting	0,32
Acting in an academic environment	0,16

-1,0   -0,5   0,0   0,5   1,0
Less important   Neutral   More important

«And then we are actually looking for a jack-of-all-trades [German: "eierlegende Wollmilchsau"] who is extremely good in their field, who is up to date in terms of leadership. And who has an overall view of the university.»

Note: Quote from interviews
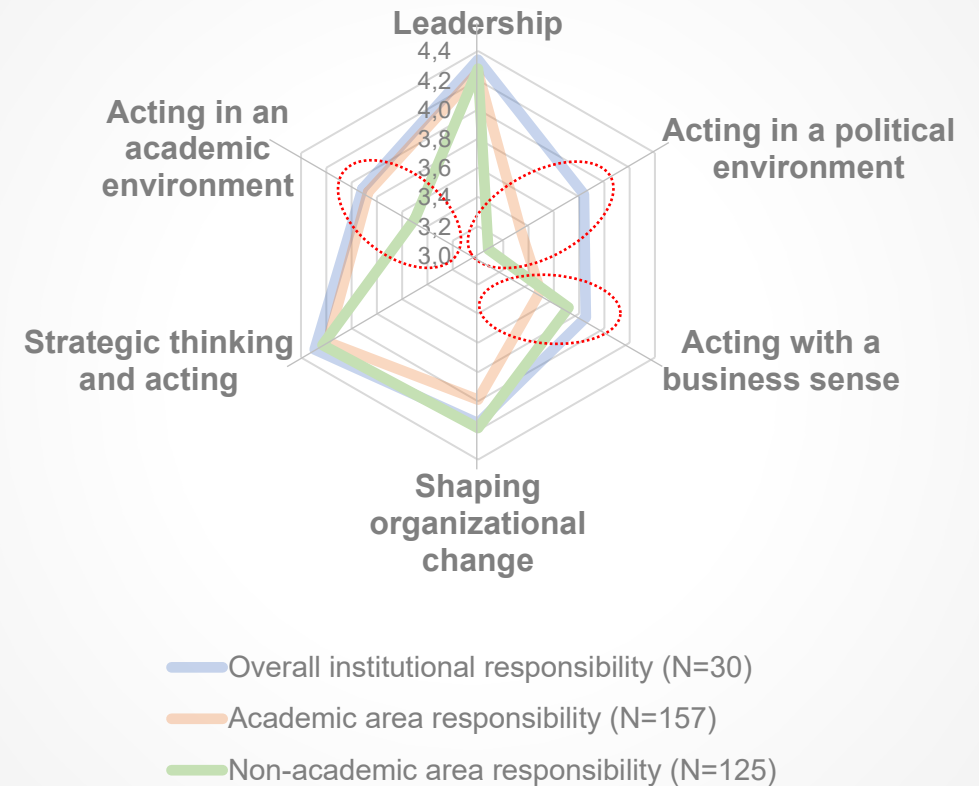
3. Heterogeneity in Competency Requirement Profiles

The survey reveals **remarkably homogeneous competency requirement profiles** across **all types of HEIs,** with one exception (acting in a political environment).

Differences mainly arise with regard to the **type of management position or function group**, the most comprehensive profile being that of the rectors.
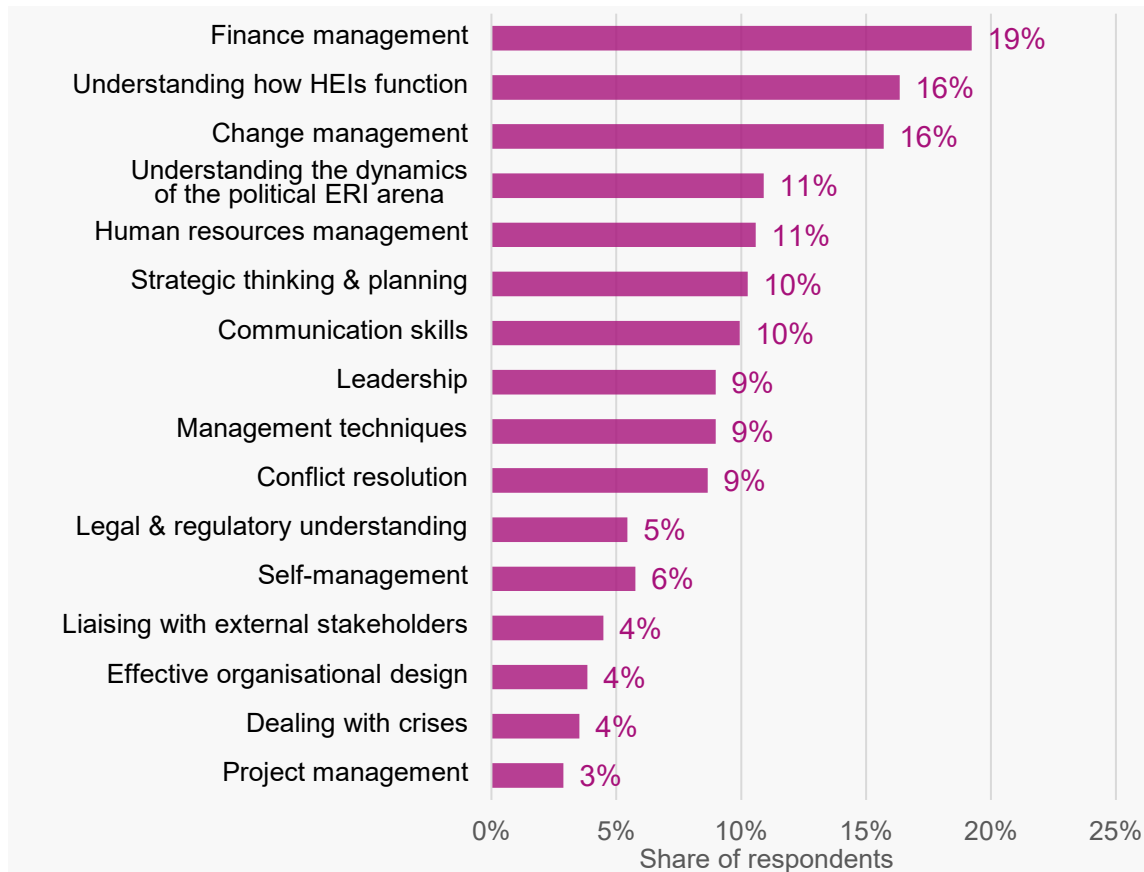
By HEI type

- Federal institutes of technology (N=60)
- Cantonal universities (N=129)
- Universities of applied sciences (N=86)
- Universities of teacher education (N=12)
- Reasearch institutes of the ETH domain (N=25)

By function group

- Overall institutional responsibility (N=30)
- Academic area responsibility (N=157)
- Non-academic area responsibility (N=125)

Note: Figures are based on survey data and show the mean for each competency field (aggregated across competencies); Answers were given on a 5-point-scale from 1 (Not important) to 5 (Extremely important); N=312.

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4. Competency Gaps at the Start of the Current Position

The most frequently mentioned competencies, for which the senior leaders wish they had had more targeted preparation when assuming their current positions, are **fundamental knowledge and experience in management** as well as a better contextual **understanding of how universities and the political ERI arena work**.

Competency	Share of respondents
Finance management	19%
Understanding how HEIs function	16%
Change management	16%
Understanding the dynamics of the political ERI arena	11%
Human resources management	11%
Strategic thinking & planning	10%
Communication skills	10%
Leadership	9%
Management techniques	9%
Conflict resolution	9%
Legal & regulatory understanding	5%
Self-management	6%
Liaising with external stakeholders	4%
Effective organisational design	4%
Dealing with crises	4%
Project management	3%

Differences depending on the **type of management position** (function group):

► Respondents with an <u>academic area responsibility</u> more often cite a need for management skills, i.e., financial management (24%);

► Respondents in <u>support areas</u> indicate primarily a lack of understanding of how universities function (26%);

► Respondents with an <u>overall institutional responsibility</u> would have desired more preparation in relationship management with external stakeholders (23%), and in management techniques and change management (20% each).
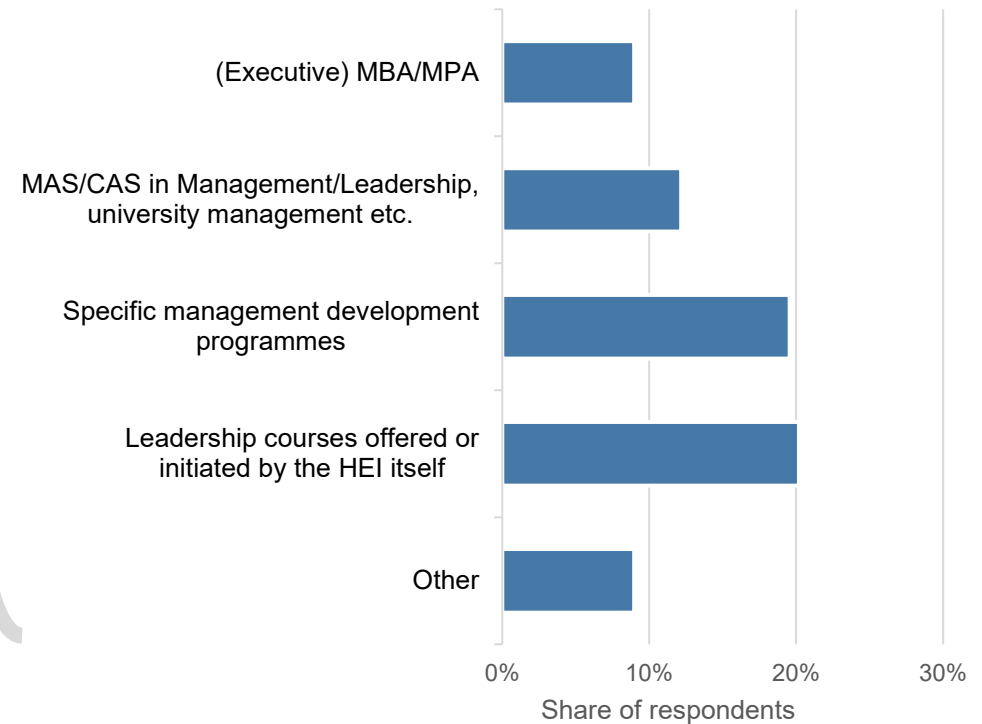
Note: Figure based on 454 quotes from survey respondents (80% of the respondents mentioned specific competency gaps; multiple answers were possible); N=312.

4. Preparation for Current Position

Senior HEI leaders have acquired their general management competencies **mainly «on the job»** during their current or previous positions. Only 44% have completed a **further education or management development programme**.

Where did you mainly acquire the competencies needed for your current management position?

Category	Share
In the course of my current activity (on the job)	81,7%
During my previous professional occupation(s)	74,7%
Through internal or external training/management development programmes	43,9%
In the course of my academic career	37,8%
Through personal coaching	18,9%
Introduction time by predecessor or job shadowing	10,9%
Other (e.g., military service)	

Share of respondents

What further education/management development programmes have you completed?

- (Executive) MBA/MPA
- MAS/CAS in Management/Leadership, university management etc.
- Specific management development programmes
- Leadership courses offered or initiated by the HEI itself
- Other

Share of respondents

Note: Survey data; N=312 (multiple answers possible).

Note: The figure shows the percentage of respondents who attended an external or internal continuing education or a management development programme (multiple answers possible); N=312.

Conclusion

– **High resonance**: the high level of participation in this national study underlines the topic's current importance.

– Senior leaders at Swiss HEIs face **a wide range of challenges that require demanding and broadly diversified competency profiles**. The **similarities visibly dominate across different HEI types, while there are more differences between function groups**.

Based on the empirical findings, we outline key action areas that reflect current transformations in academic leadership and the evolving governance logics of higher education:

► The study exposes a **misalignment between the formal expansion of managerial responsibilities** in higher education and the **institutional mechanisms available to cultivate corresponding competencies**.

► Variations in perceived competency gaps are shaped more by **functional roles than institutional types**, suggesting that governance challenges are structurally embedded within the **division of academic and administrative labour**, rather than sectoral diversity.

► Competency deficits in financial governance, political navigation, and strategic change management are not individual failings, but indicators of **institutional inertia in preparing leaders for hybridised roles** within increasingly complex governance environments.

► These findings call for a **reconceptualisation of leadership development** as a shared responsibility across institutional and policy levels—one that aligns with broader shifts towards professionalised, accountable, yet collegially legitimate governance in higher education systems.

Thank you very much for your attention!

The detailed report by Perich, Rageth, He und Lakhno (2024) „General Management Competencies of Senior Leaders at Swiss Higher Education Institutions" can be found here:

https://www.research-collection.ethz.ch/handle/20.500.11850/712834

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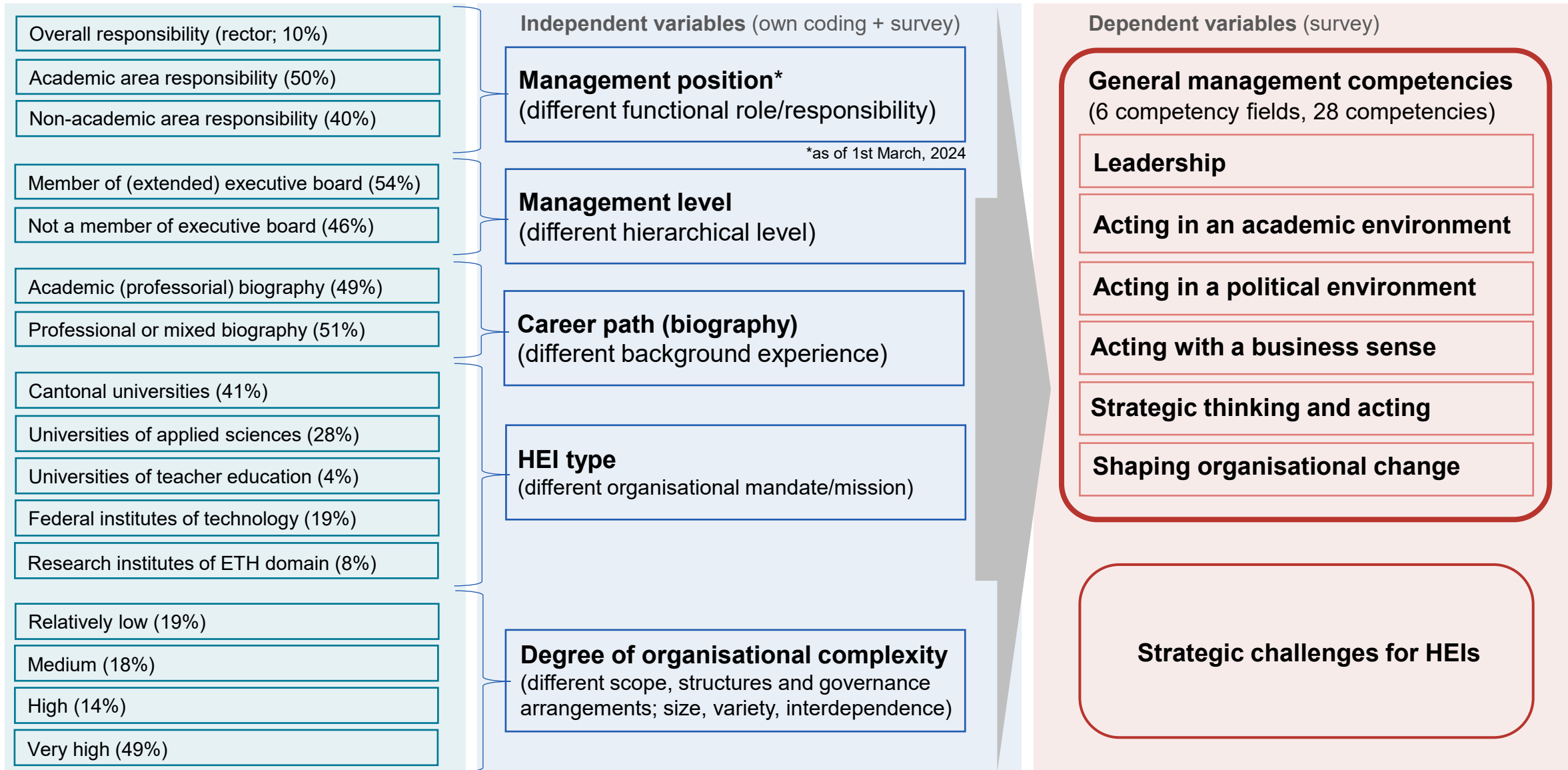www.sspg.ethz.ch, Follow us on LinkedIn

ANNEX

HEIs Included in this Study

	Swiss Federal Institutes of Technology (ETH)	Cantonal universities (UH)	Universities of Applied Sciences (FH)	Universities of Teacher Education (PH)	Research Institutes of the ETH Domain (RI)
Institutions (N=44)	(2): • ETH Zurich • EPF Lausanne	(10): • University of Basel • University of Bern • University of Fribourg • University of Geneva • University of Lausanne • University of Neuchâtel • University of St. Gallen • University of Zurich • Università della Svizzera Italiana • University of Lucerne	(10): • Haute école spécialisée de Suisse occidentale (HES-SO) • Bern University of Applied Sciences BFH • University of Applied Sciences Northwestern Switzerland FHNW • Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts HSLU • Scuola universitaria professionale della Svizzera italiana SUPSI • Zurich University of Applied Sciences ZHAW • Zurich University of the Arts ZHdK • OST - University of Applied Sciences of Eastern Switzerland • University of Applied Sciences of the Grisons FHGR • Kalaidos University of Applied Sciences	(18): • Swiss Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training SFIVET • PH Bern • PH Valais • PH Grisons • PH Freiburg • PH Thurgau • HEP Vaud • PH Lucerne • PH Zug • PH Schwyz • HEP Berne/Jura/Neuchâtel • PH Schaffhausen • PH St. Gallen • PH Zurich • PH FHNW • PH SUPSI • Intercantonal University for Special Needs Education Zurich • University College of Teacher Education NMS Bern	(4): • Paul Scherrer Institute (PSI) • Swiss Federal Laboratories for Materials Testing and Research (Empa) • Swiss Federal Institute for Forest, Snow and Landscape Research (WSL) • Swiss Federal Institute of Aquatic Science and Technology (Eawag)

Note: Senior Leaders from 38 out of the 44 contacted institutions participated to the online survey (N=312)

Study Set-up and Investigated Variables

Independent variables (own coding + survey)	Dependent variables (survey)

Overall responsibility (rector; 10%)

Academic area responsibility (50%)

Non-academic area responsibility (40%)

Management position*
(different functional role/responsibility)

*as of 1st March, 2024

Member of (extended) executive board (54%)

Not a member of executive board (46%)

Management level
(different hierarchical level)

Academic (professorial) biography (49%)

Professional or mixed biography (51%)

Career path (biography)
(different background experience)

Cantonal universities (41%)

Universities of applied sciences (28%)

Universities of teacher education (4%)

Federal institutes of technology (19%)

Research institutes of ETH domain (8%)

HEI type
(different organisational mandate/mission)

Relatively low (19%)

Medium (18%)

High (14%)

Very high (49%)

Degree of organisational complexity
(different scope, structures and governance arrangements; size, variety, interdependence)

General management competencies
(6 competency fields, 28 competencies)

Leadership

Acting in an academic environment

Acting in a political environment

Acting with a business sense

Strategic thinking and acting

Shaping organisational change

Strategic challenges for HEIs

Higher Education Landscape in Switzerland

Key data by higher education institutions (2022)

Domain	Indicator	N = 2 ETHs	10 (12*) Universities	9** Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS)	14 Universities of Teacher Education (UTE)	35 (37) Total CH
Costs	Costs (MCHF)	2'935 *22%*	6'438 *48%*	3'124 *24%*	754 *6%*	13'250 *100%*
	Share of total costs:					
	Basic Education	22%	24%	63%	64%	35%
	Research	60%	57%	27%	15%	48%
Funding bodies	Confederation***	86%	27%	29%	2%	36%
	Cantons	0%	51%	51%	83%	46%
	Private Sector, other	14%	22%	20%	15%	18%
Students	Students (number)	37'147 *14%*	130'601 *47%*	83'756 *31%*	23'412 *8%*	274'916 *100%*
	of which foreign	50%	29%	21%	10%	28%
	Degrees (all levels)	8'596	29'429	21'488	6'269	65'782
Staff	Staff (FTE)	16'647 *24%*	31'323 *46%*	15'998 *24%*	3'944 *6%*	67'912 *100%*

*   incl. Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (IHEID), Geneva and FernUni Schweiz, Brig
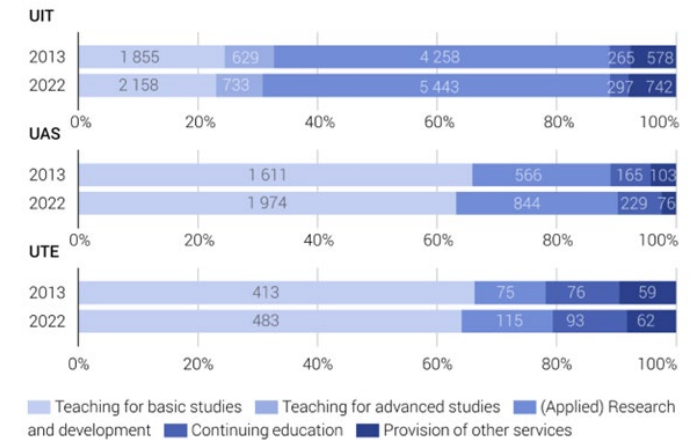**   excl. Kalaidos (private UAS)
*** incl. contributions via SNSF, Innosuisse, EU-RFP and federal government research (Ressortforschung)

Source: Swiss Federal Statistical Office (SFSO)

Type of activities by type of institutions 2013 and 2022
In CHF million

Teaching for basic studies — Teaching for advanced studies — (Applied) Research and development — Continuing education — Provision of other services

Funding of Universities by Source, 2022

Source: Confederation — Cantons — Private