

## European Universities initiative. What's in it for Swiss HEIs?

*Conclusions from a high-level debate with Swiss alliance representatives (incl. 7 vice-rectors), 15.9.2023, Bern*

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### Core messages

The European Universities initiative is forging a dynamic 'network of networks' in European higher education, serving as the vital circulatory system for the seamless flow of people, resources, and ideas across the continent.

The exclusion of Swiss Higher Education Institutions from these collaborative networks would result in enduring structural consequences, significantly impacting their positioning and reputation in the global academic landscape.

European Alliances represent the crucibles where the future of European higher education is being shaped, fostering stronger cooperation, inclusive mobility, and the potential for widespread adoption of joint degrees. These alliances are pivotal in reshaping the European higher education space, Switzerland included.

Swiss HEIs face structural obstacles in participating in these initiatives; hence, support from the Confederation and flexibility in the rules governing their involvement is critical for overcoming these challenges and ensuring meaningful participation.

The European Universities initiative (hereafter, the initiative) stands as a beacon of ambition, marking the European Union's concerted effort to transcend national boundaries and shape the future of higher education in Europe. In four successive calls to date (two of them pilot calls), 50 Alliances have been selected and financially supported by the EU, with the initiative now representing a remarkable network of over 430 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in 35 countries<sup>1</sup>. Data show that most alliances are constituted around a core of highly reputed European universities, with about 90% of the European universities ranked in the top 500 of the Shanghai ranking already participating in the initiative<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, geographical participation in alliances is distributed across Europe, including also HEIs from Southern and Eastern European countries. This tapestry of collaboration reflects the initiative's commitment to fostering both excellence and cohesion across the whole of Europe.

Within this evolving landscape, Swiss HEIs face a unique challenge. Switzerland is not associated with the Erasmus+ program, and Swiss HEIs can only join alliances as associate partners, having to navigate a position with limited rights compared to their European counterparts. This disparity stems from their exclusion from European funding and, thus, certain alliance activities. To mitigate these constraints, the Confederation has provided financial support through Movetia, funding the costs of Swiss participation in the alliances.

Despite a weaker position within the alliances and a relatively small amount of funding available to them, Swiss HEIs have demonstrated remarkable engagement with the initiative: as of today, nine Swiss HEIs are participating in European Universities alliances, including the two Federal Institutes of Technology in Zurich and Lausanne, five (out of ten) Cantonal Universities (Basel, Bern, Lausanne, Geneva and Zurich) and two Universities of Applied Sciences (HES-SO and ZHAW).

In a [workshop](#) with members of the executive management of the involved institutions, we sought to understand the reasons for this interest – why the alliances appear to be so important for Swiss HEIs

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<sup>1</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_23\\_3634](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_3634)

<sup>2</sup> <https://osf.io/preprints/edarxiv/qp9rm>

and what is required to allow them to continue participating. And more in general, what is at stake in Switzerland's participation in such initiatives?

### **Participating in the arena of European Higher Education**

While from an external perspective, HEIs might appear as individual actors competing for excellence based on their resources, the reality is far more nuanced. Many statements during the workshop highlighted that European (and global) higher education is, in fact, composed of intricate networks of collaboration. These networks facilitate the movement of HEIs' resources, including talented researchers, across borders, carrying with them reputation, funding, and fresh ideas. From this vantage point, the alliances are on the way to becoming a 'network of networks'<sup>3</sup> of European higher education, acting as the veritable circulatory system through which people, resources and ideas will seamlessly flow across Europe.

Furthermore, the alliances are emerging as crucial platforms for HEIs to share expertise at the institutional level and lay the groundwork for further cooperation in education and research. In essence, they serve as catalysts for diverse initiatives, underscoring their strategic significance that extends far beyond the relatively limited funding they receive.

Several workshop attendees emphasised the paramount importance of participating in these networks to enhance the attractiveness of Swiss institutions on the European and global stage. While Swiss HEIs still enjoy a high reputation and ample funding, their exclusion from the alliances (and other European networks) will likely lead to a gradual erosion of their standing. A key takeaway from the workshop was that while Swiss replacement measures might provide temporary relief, failing to participate fully in European networks and initiatives will likely inflict significant long-term damage on the Swiss higher education system.

### **Beyond Bologna. A crucible for innovation in European Higher Education**

A second core dimension of alliances is that these are the places where the future of European higher education is being shaped. While the Bologna process emphasised the physical mobility of students over extended periods, the initiative embraces a more nuanced approach, promoting short-term exchanges, flexible course structures where students might acquire some credits in partner institutions, and, eventually, the development of European curricula jointly offered by several institutions. This evolution also reflects the profound impact of digitalisation on higher education, necessitating a more agile and adaptable approach.

The European Universities alliances serve as laboratories where these innovative approaches are tested and refined. Within these collaborative hubs, HEIs across Europe are experimenting with new curricular cooperation and integration models. This experimentation extends to shaping the rules of engagement for sensitive matters such as mutual credit recognition, micro-credentials, and quality assurance.

Swiss HEIs cannot afford to be moved to the sidelines of these critical discussions. Active participation in the initiative is essential to ensure their voices are heard and their perspectives contribute to shaping the future of European higher education and research. Further, the European Universities alliances provide an ideal platform for Swiss HEIs to learn from their European counterparts and adapt to an increasingly mobile higher education landscape, where acquiring degrees from alliances may become commonplace. Failure to engage in these transformative initiatives could jeopardise the reputation and standing of Swiss diplomas.

### **Balancing challenges with incentives: ensuring Swiss HEIs' engagement**

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<sup>3</sup> [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-56316-5\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-56316-5_2)

Participants acknowledged the unique challenges faced by Swiss HEIs as 'junior' partners within the alliances. Their reduced rights and potential exclusion from certain activities, such as those funded by EU's research framework programs or the Erasmus+ program, demand high commitment and resourcefulness from Swiss partners. This situation necessitates leveraging institutional and personal connections to maintain active involvement.

Despite these obstacles, the strategic importance of participating in the alliances is undeniable, as evidenced by the leadership and commitment demonstrated by the governing bodies of the involved institutions. While most activities will be self-funded, participants emphasised the crucial role of the Confederation support in providing seed money to initiate projects and signal political backing in this challenging context. Given the long-term nature of the alliances, clear commitments for ongoing support are essential, as Swiss participants currently bear the risk of pledging future involvement without firm assurances from the Confederation beyond the current funding period.

Furthermore, the experimental nature of the alliances, where partners will jointly shape cooperation over time, necessitates flexibility in implementation and accounting procedures. This adaptability will enable Swiss HEIs to respond effectively to the evolving dynamics of their partnerships. Ultimately, assessing the long-term gains from cooperation should serve as the primary benchmark for utilising federal funding.

In conclusion, as the European Universities initiative continues to evolve, Swiss HEIs must remain steadfast in their commitment to collaboration and innovation within the European higher education landscape. By actively engaging in these transformative initiatives and embracing the initiative's vision of a dynamic and interconnected European Higher Education Area, Swiss institutions can safeguard their position as global leaders in higher education and contribute meaningfully to shaping its future on the continent. Through fostering a supportive environment that nurtures innovation and collaboration, the Confederation can empower Swiss HEIs to thrive within the European Universities alliances, ensuring their continued success and impact on the global stage.

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