

ETH Study on Senior Leaders at Swiss Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

Welcome to the National Networking Event

Zurich, 22 November 2024



Networking Event, Part I

When	What	Who
13:30-13:45	Welcome (<i>hybrid</i>)	Prof. Dr. Robert Perich , Academic Director Swiss School of Public Governance, D-MTEC, ETH Zurich
13:45-14:30	Presentation of key study results (<i>hybrid</i>)	Prof. Dr. Robert Perich, Dr. Ladina Rageth , Swiss School of Public Governance, D-MTEC, ETH Zurich
14:30-15:15	Panel discussion on interpretations and implications of study results (<i>hybrid</i>)	Representatives from the Swiss higher education sector: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prof. Dr. Luciana Vaccaro, Rector University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Western Switzerland (HES-SO) and President swissuniversities (<i>by video message</i>) • Prof. Dr. Günther Dissertori, Rector ETH Zurich • Prof. Dr. Frédéric Herman, Rector University of Lausanne • Prof. Dr. Christian Rüegg, Director Paul Scherrer Institute • Prof. Dr. Barbara Bader, Rector Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts • Prof. Dr. Esther Kamm, Rector University of Teacher Education Zug Moderation: Rainer Borer , Head of Corporate Communications, ETH Zurich
15:15-15:30	Short break	

Networking Event, Part II

When	What	Who
15:30-16:30	Focus groups for further discussion of selected areas of action (<i>on-site</i>)	Focus group moderators and on-site participants
	A. How can we enhance the diversity and inclusiveness of governing bodies at Swiss HEIs (especially at the level of management boards)?	Prof. Dr. Sonja Hildebrand , Pro-Rector for Sustainable Transformation and Equal Opportunities, Università della Svizzera italiana
	B. Amid growing competency demands for HEI leaders, what are the opportunities and challenges of academic self-governance and the future role of deans (focus on universities)?	Prof. Dr. Markus Menz , Dean Geneva School of Management and Economics, University of Geneva
	C. In view of the upcoming generational change, how can we improve senior leadership development at Swiss HEIs?	Prof. Dr. Frédéric Herman , Rector University of Lausanne
	D. What is the potential for a cross-institutional, national programme for senior leaders in academia in Switzerland (similar to established programmes, e.g., in the Netherlands, Sweden and Israel)?	Prof. Dr. Barbara Bader , Rector Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts
	E. As strategic challenges become increasingly prevalent, how can Swiss HEIs effectively manage change and foster institutional agility?	Prof. Dr. Christian Rüegg , Director Paul Scherrer Institute
16:30-16:45	Brief wrap-up and conclusion (<i>on-site</i>)	Focus group moderators, Prof. Dr. Robert Perich
From 16:45	Networking apéro (<i>on-site</i>)	

Empirical Insights into Leadership Profiles and General Management Competencies of Senior Leaders at Swiss HEIs

A National Study on Senior HEI Leaders in Switzerland

Robert Perich & Ladina Rageth

Swiss School of Public Governance SSPG, D-MTEC, ETH Zurich

Presentation of Key Study Results

1. Research Questions, Method and Study Setup

2. Empirical Results

- Composition and Characteristics of Sample
- Diversity in Executive Boards
- Strategic Institutional Challenges
- Relevance of General Management Competencies
- Competency Gaps
- Leadership Development

3. Conclusions

- Fields for Discussion and Further Action

Background and Research Questions

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



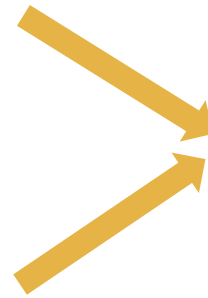
Existing biographies

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



Institutional challenges

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



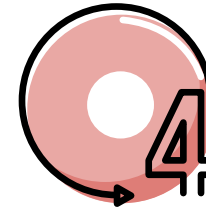
The required blend of management competencies



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

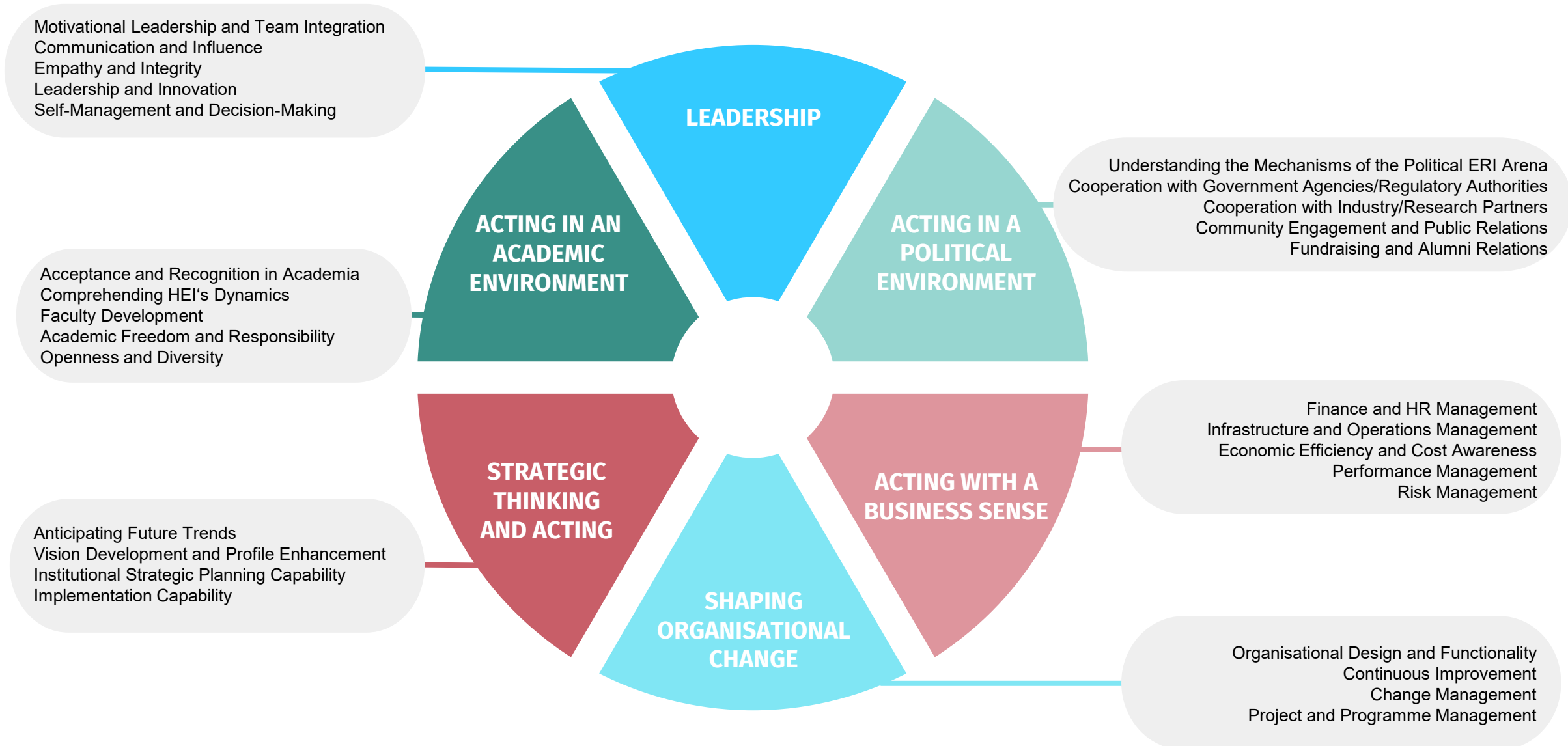


Skills & competence gap/ leadership development



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

A Comprehensive Competency Model with Six Competency Fields



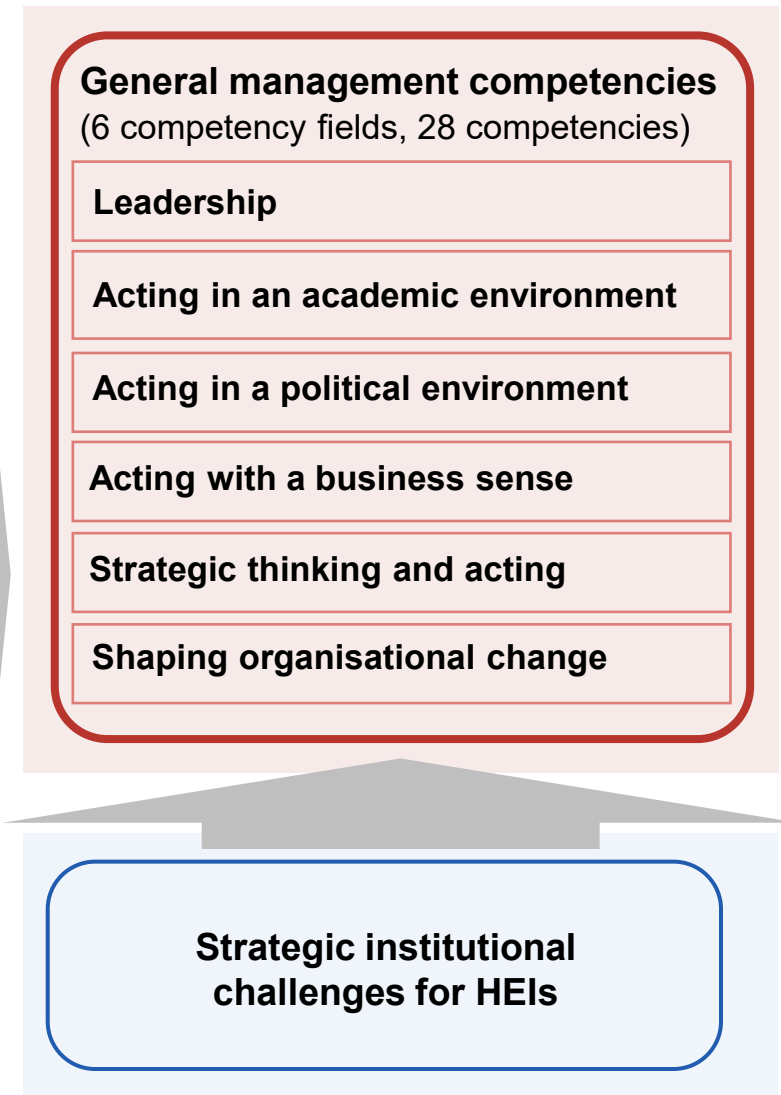
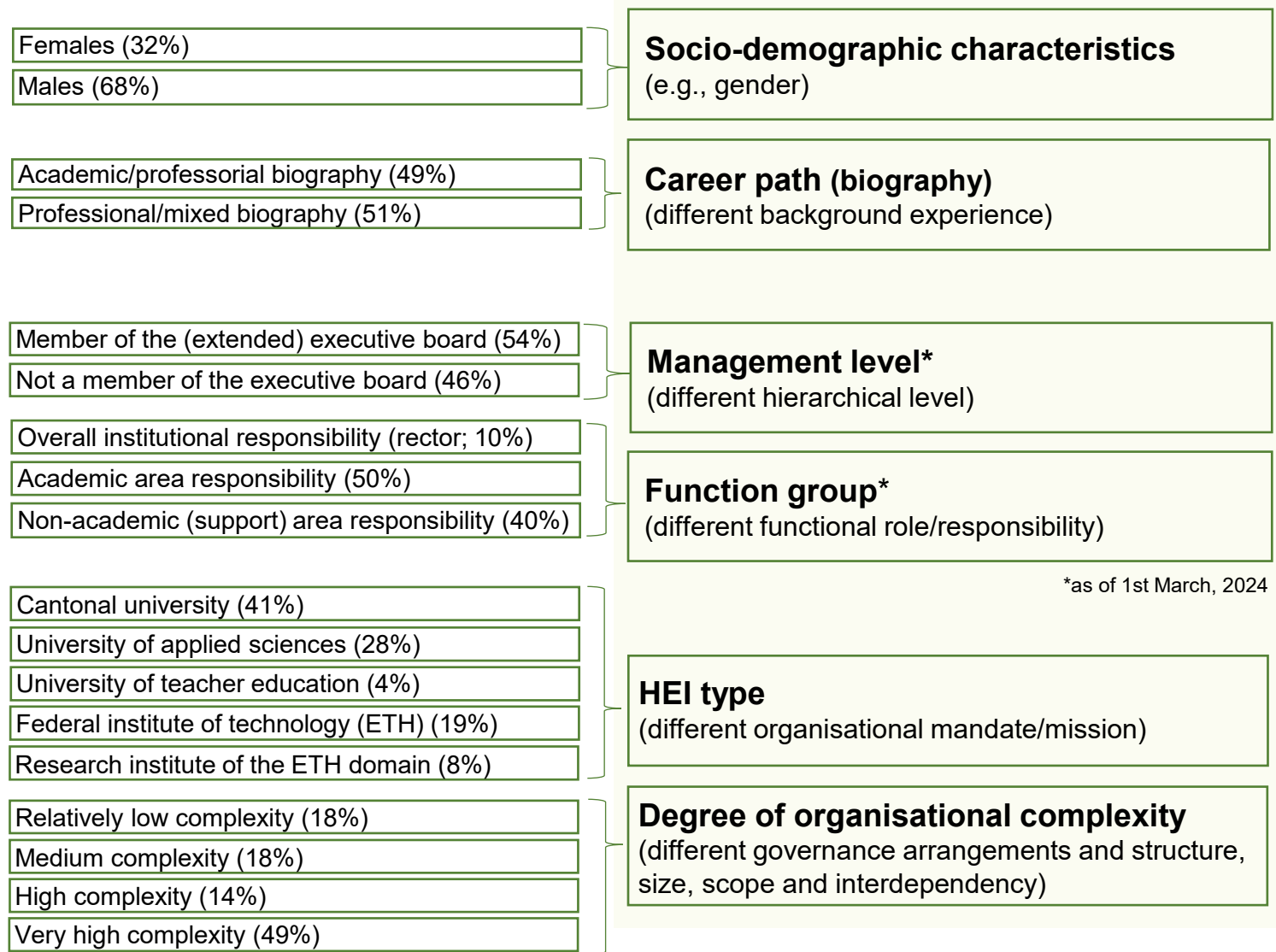
Methodology: A Nationwide Study with Own Data Collection

- **Analysis of publicly accessible data:** research on senior leaders at Swiss HEIs (selection of total population), incl. their current positions and biographies, and on their HEIs’ governance and organisation
- **Empirical data collection:**
 - **Standardised online survey** sent to 488 senior leaders at Swiss HEIs (March – April 2024)
 - **312 senior HEI leaders** completed the survey (respondents) → **response rate of 63.9%**

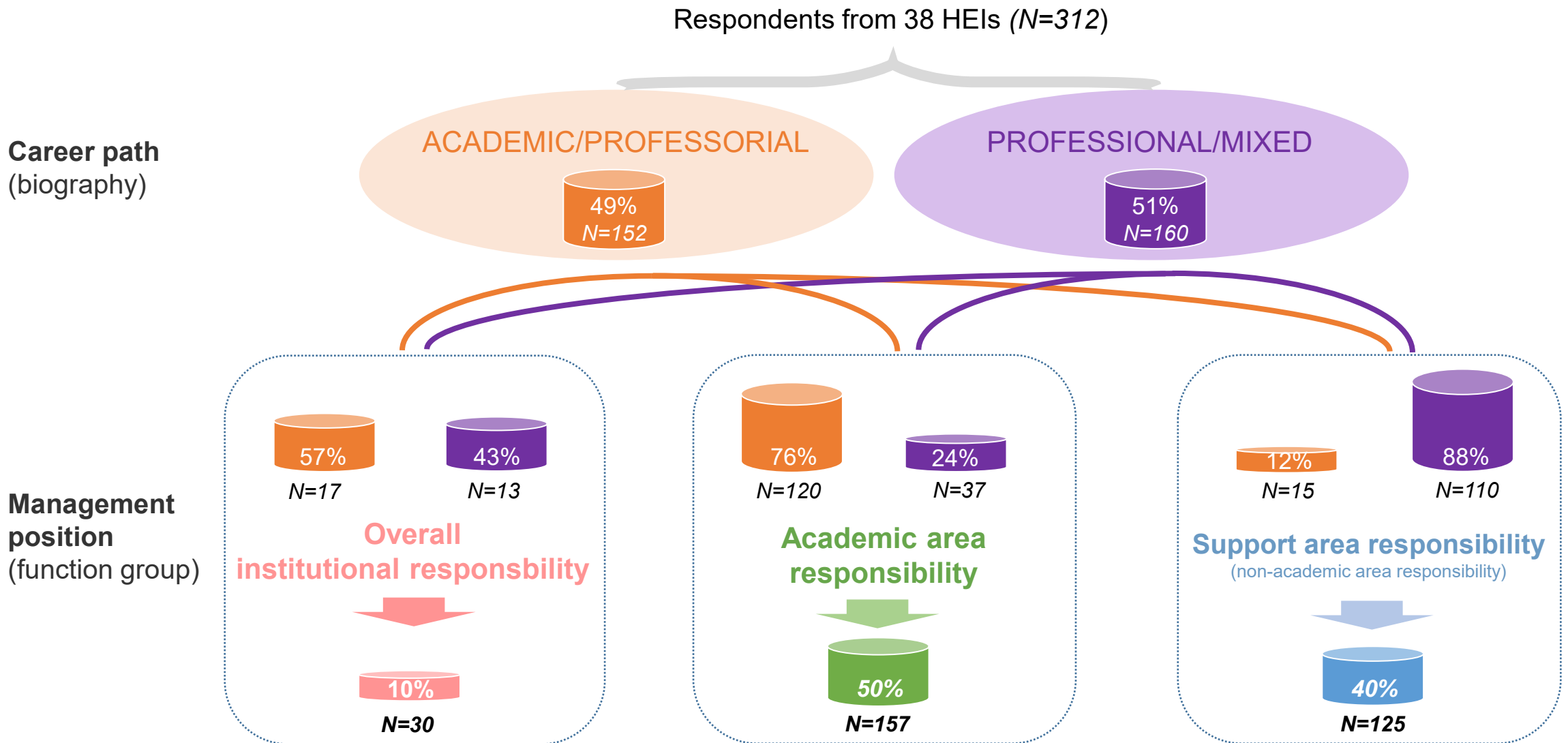
Higher education institution (HEI) (type)	Number (total)	Members of the (extended) executive board	Overall institutional responsibility (rectors)	Academic area responsibility	Non-academic (support) area responsibility
Universities of applied sciences (10)	86 28%	68 79%	9 10%	49 57%	28 33%
Universities of teacher education (12)	12 4%	12 100%	12 100%	0 0%	0 0%
Cantonal universities (10)	129 41%	57 44%	5 4%	61 47%	63 49%
Federal institutes of technology (2)	60 19%	13 22%	1 2%	33 55%	26 43%
Research institutes of the ETH domain (4)	25 8%	17 68%	3 12%	14 56%	8 32%
All HEIs (38)	312 100%	167 54%	30 10%	157 50%	125 40%

- **Structured interviews with 24 senior leaders** (June – October 2024) for a deeper understanding of their leadership situation (each 1-1.5 hours)
 - 11 rectors, 7 deans/institute directors, 4 academic members of a rectorate, 2 non-academic members of a rectorate

Study Set-up and Investigated Variables

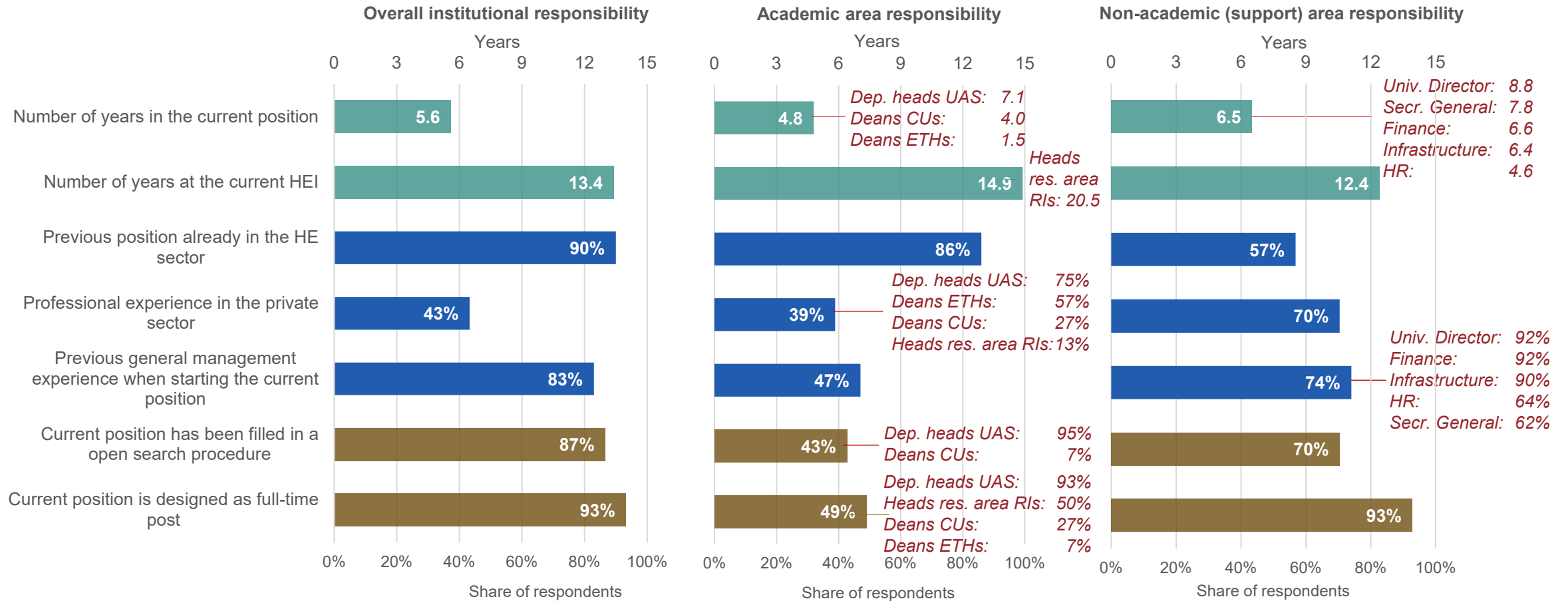


Composition of the Study Participants



Characteristics of the Three Function Groups

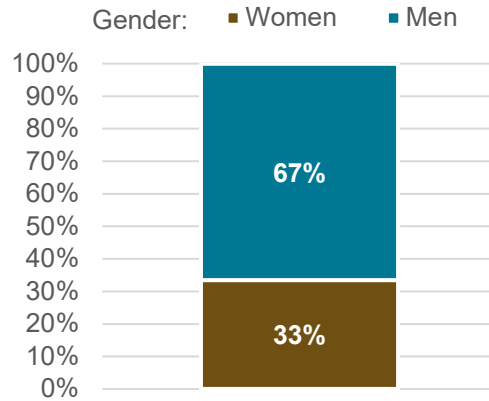
Senior HEI leaders often bring a **HE background** to their roles but **limited external professional or management experience**. The three function groups differ in terms of tenure, previous experience and the design of their position.



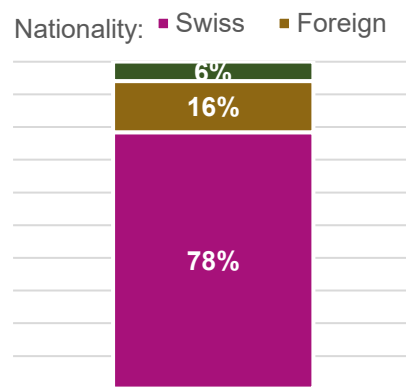
Note: ETH=Swiss Federal Institutes of Technology, CU=Cantonal University, UAS=University of Applied Sciences, RI=Research Institute of the ETH Domain; survey data; N=312.

Diversity in the Executive Boards of Swiss HEIs*

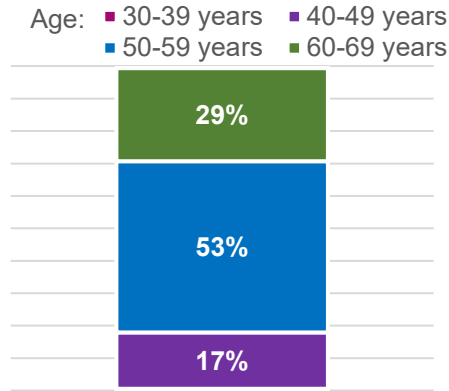
Proportion of women at 33%**



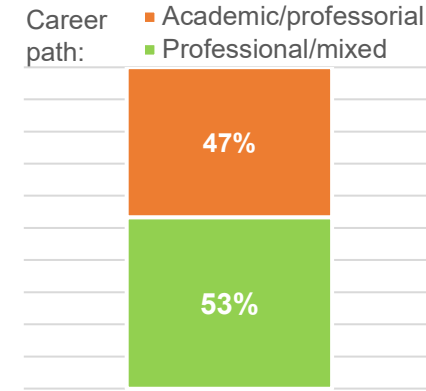
Swiss are in the majority



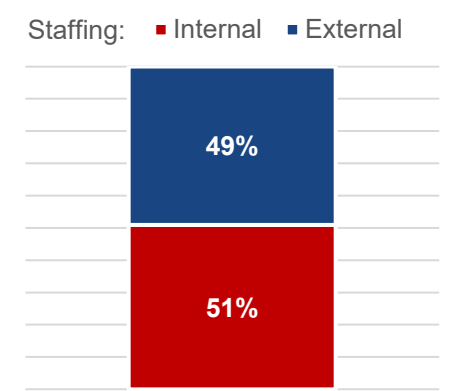
Average age is 56 years



Two types of career paths



Half came from the outside



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

«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.”»

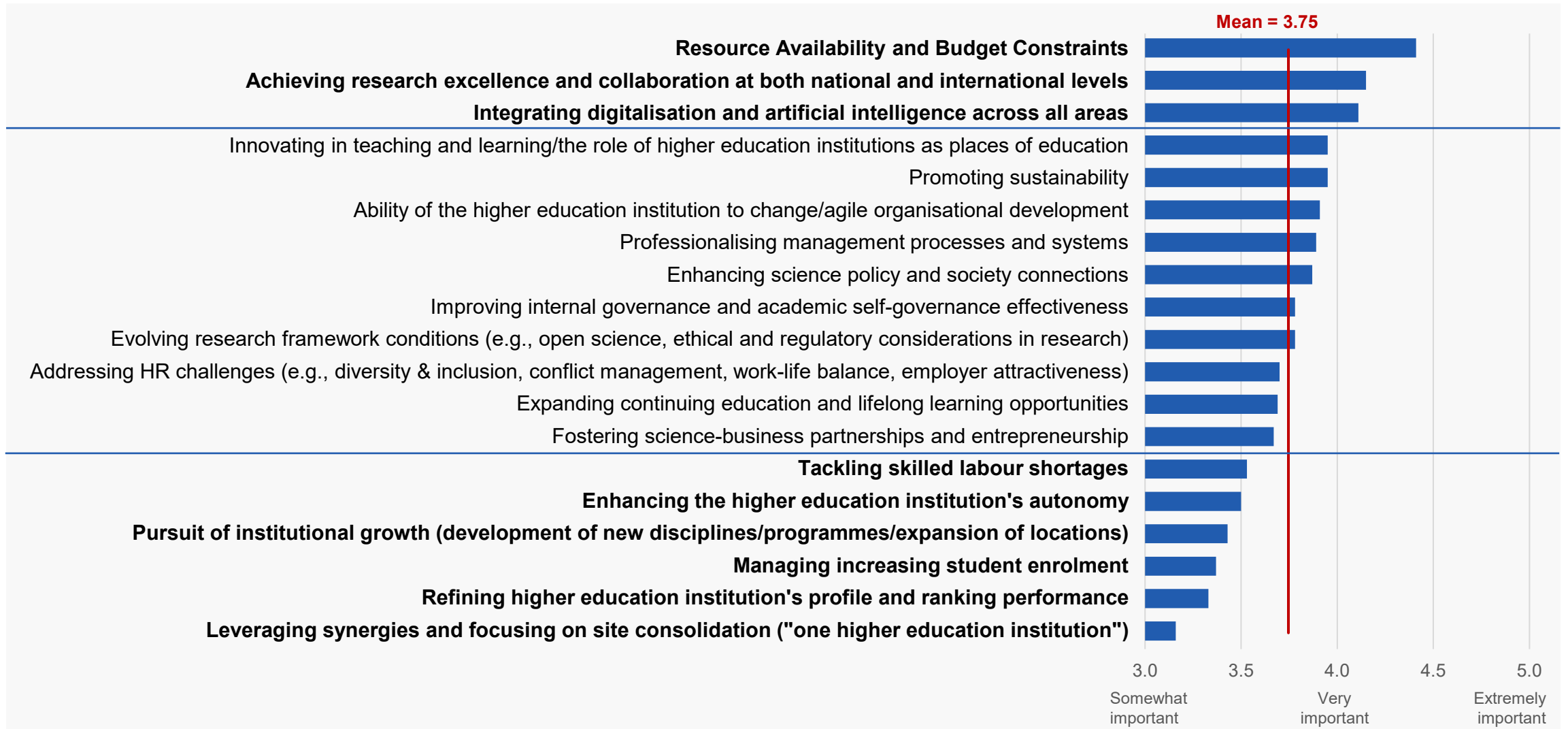
Note: Quotes from interviews

* 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/>)

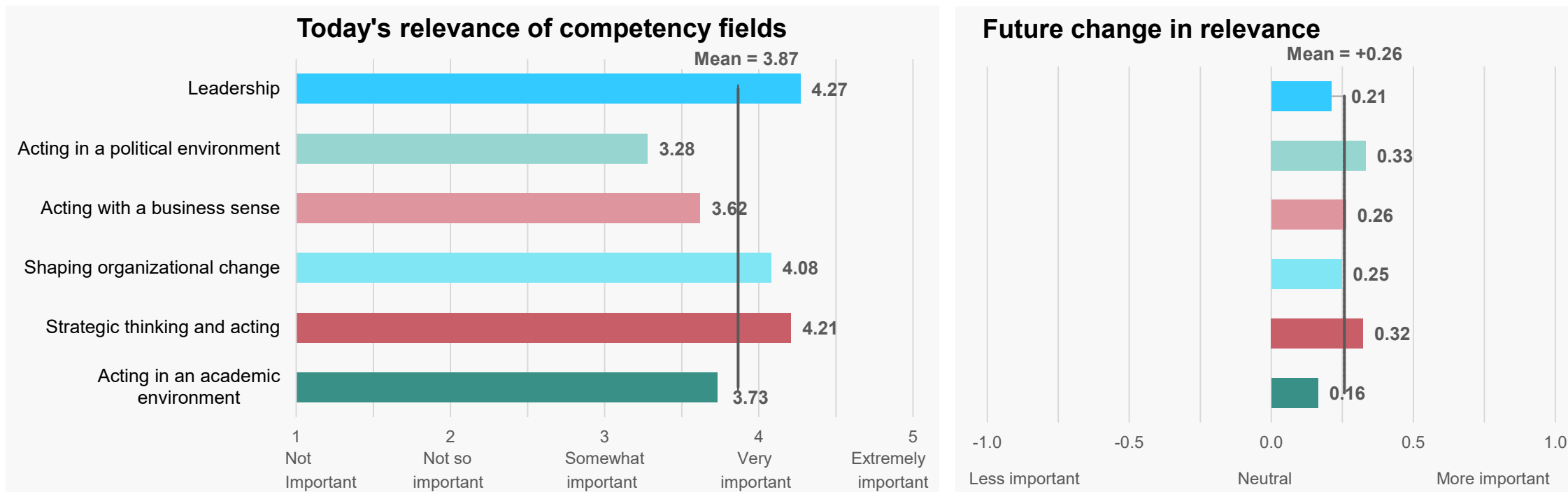
Strategic Institutional Challenges for HEI



Note: Answers were given on a 5-point-scale from 1 (Not important) to 5 (Extremely important); Survey data; N~312

Competency Requirement Profiles (today – in future)

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.

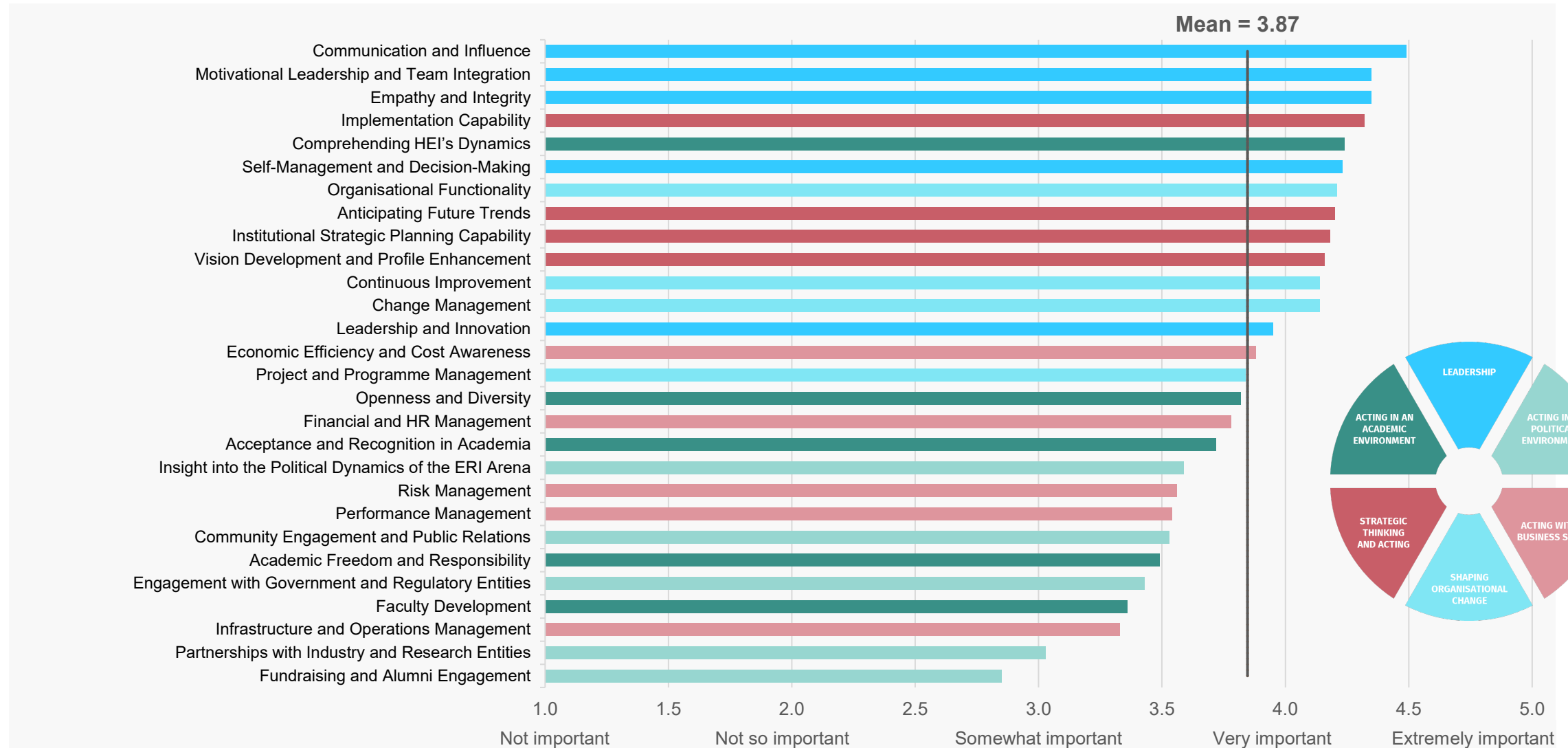


«And then we are actually looking for a jack-of-all-trades [German: “eierlegende Wollmilchsau”] who is extremely good in their field, who is up to date in terms of leadership. And who has an overall view of the university.»

Note: Figures are based on survey data and show the mean for each competency field (aggregated competencies); N=312.

Note: Quote from interviews

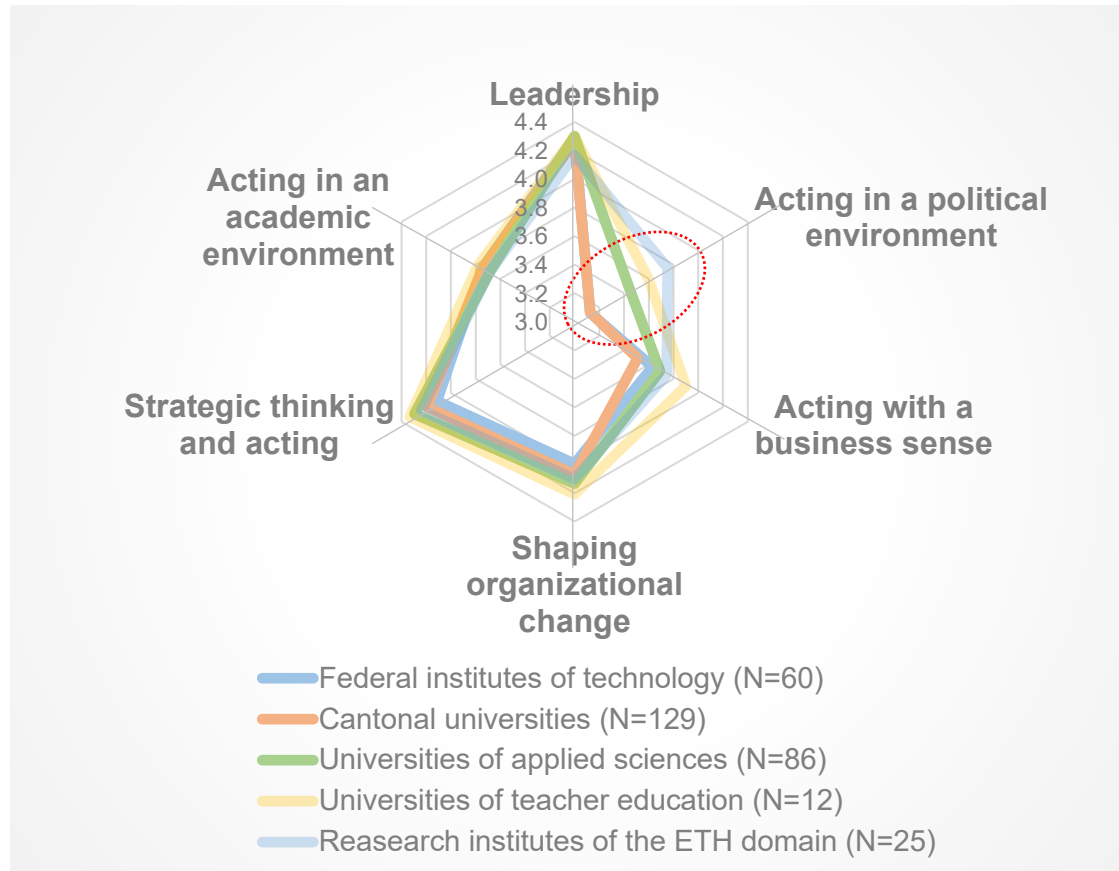
Individual Competencies



Note: Survey data; N~312.

Competency Requirement Profiles by HEI Type

The competency requirement profiles are **remarkably homogeneous across all types of HEIs**, except for acting in a political environment, which has a significantly higher importance for the RIs of the ETH Domain and the UTEs.



«Even though the kind of education we deliver is different: It's the same kind of animal. It's the same kind of institution.»

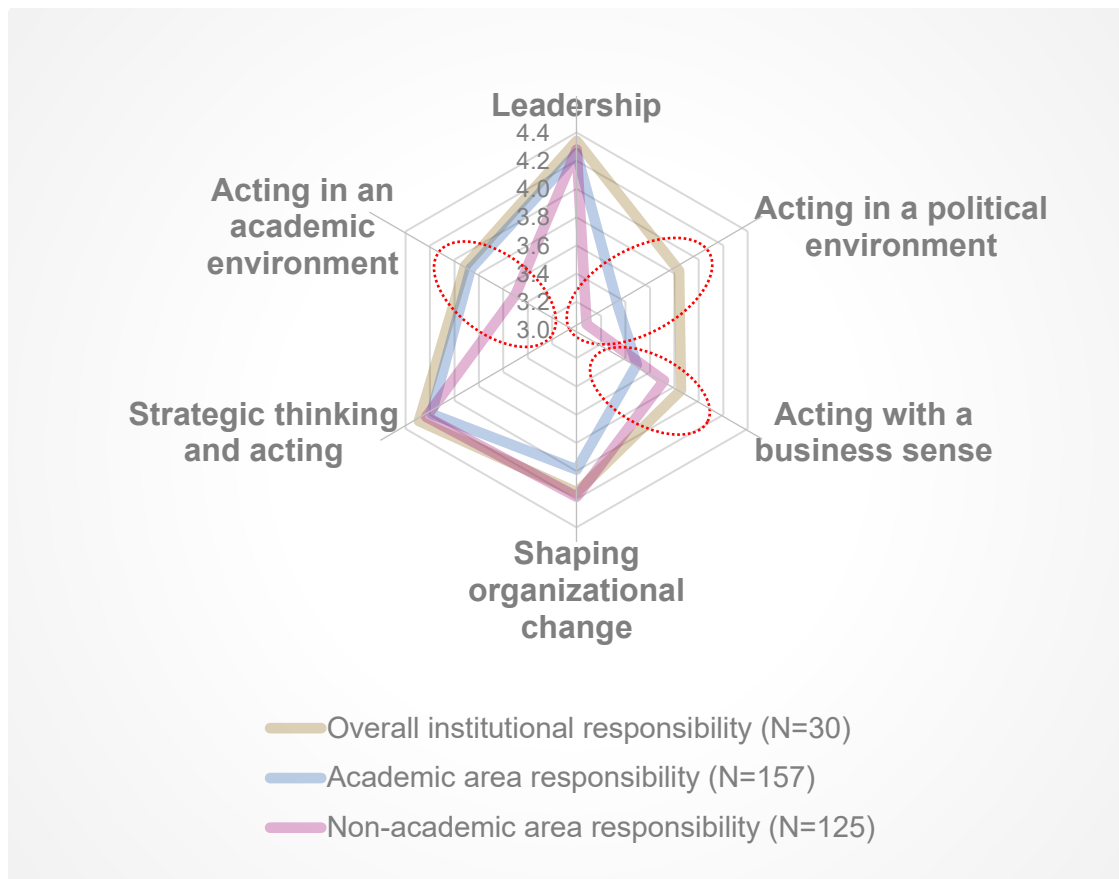
«Regardless of the type of HEI they are all expert organisations. Publicly funded, with a certain proximity to politics, and also financed along political cycles. This is absolutely independent of the type of HEI.»

Note: Quotes from interviews

Note: Figure is based on survey data and shows 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.

Competency Requirement Profiles by Function Group

The competency requirement profiles differ regarding the type of management position (i.e., function groups), with **rectors** having the **most demanding and complete requirement profile**.



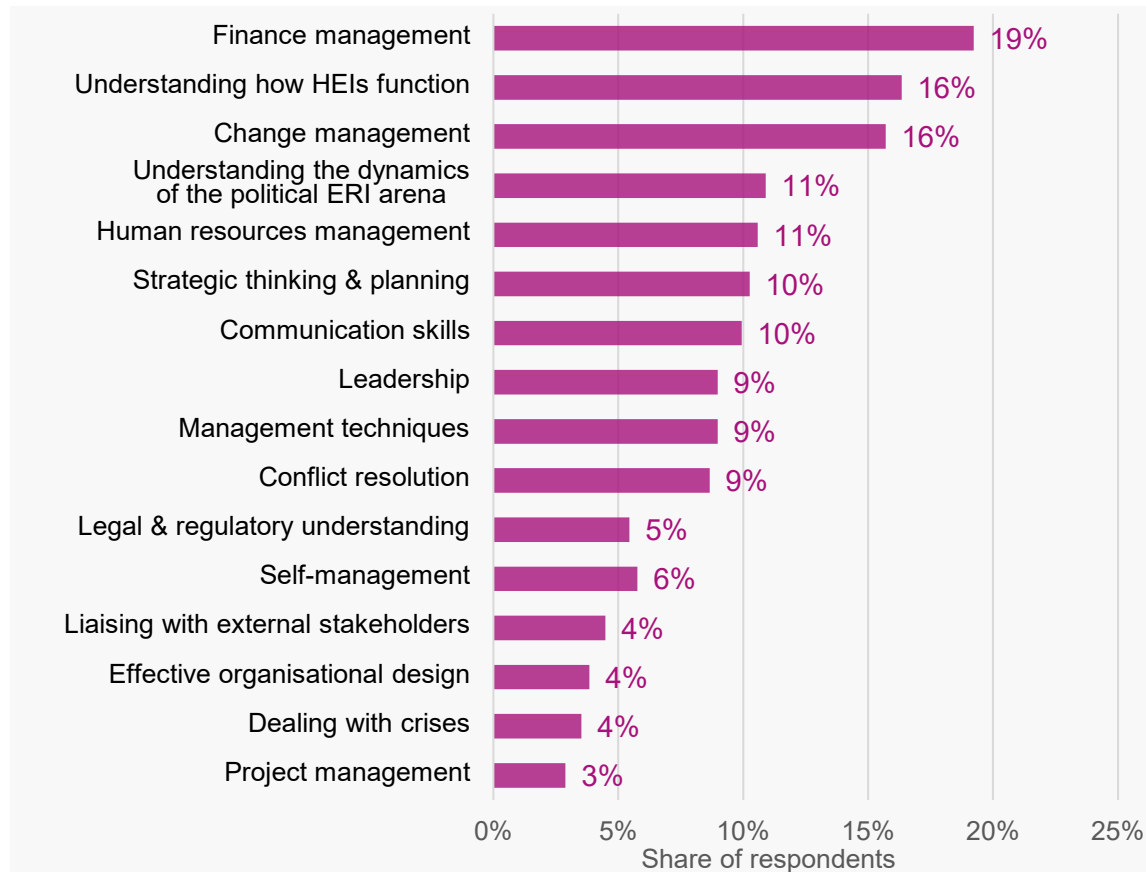
«But there is a difference between having the overall institutional responsibility or being responsible for an academic area or for a non-academic support area. Even if the competency model can be interpreted in a comparable or similar way, the focus is certainly different. Also in view of the question of: who bears what responsibility?»

Note: Quote from interviews

Note: Figure is based on survey data and shows 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.

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**.



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

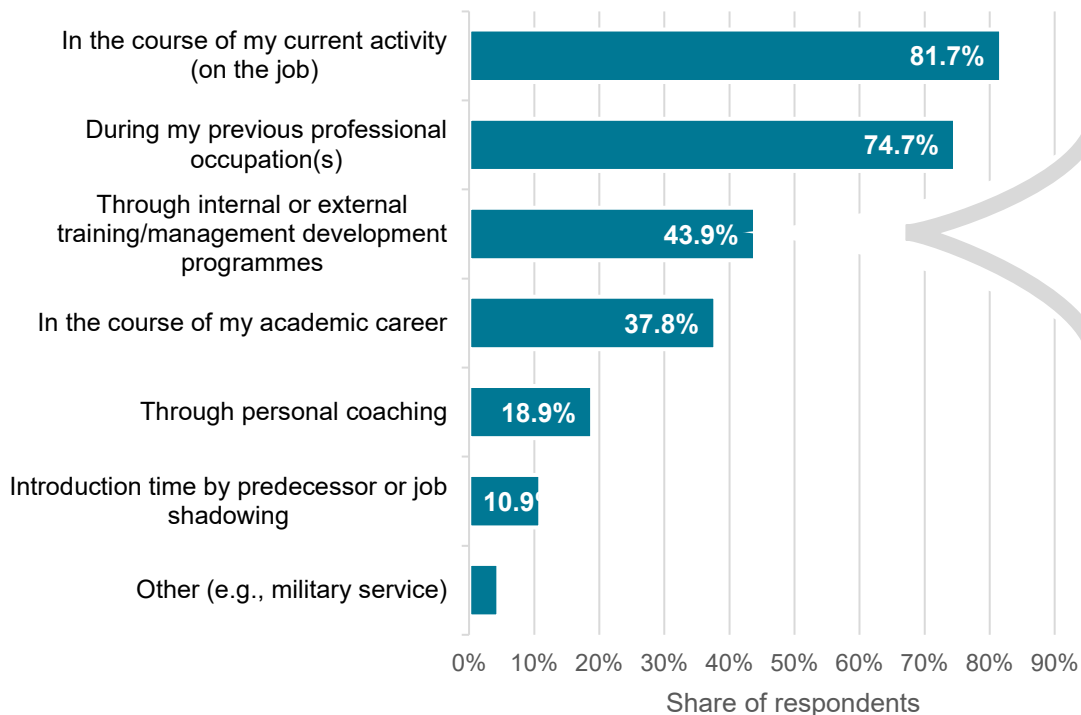
- ▶ Respondents with an academic area responsibility more often cite a need for management skills, i.e., financial management (24%);
- ▶ Respondents in support areas indicate primarily a lack of understanding of how universities function (26%);
- ▶ Respondents with an overall institutional responsibility 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.

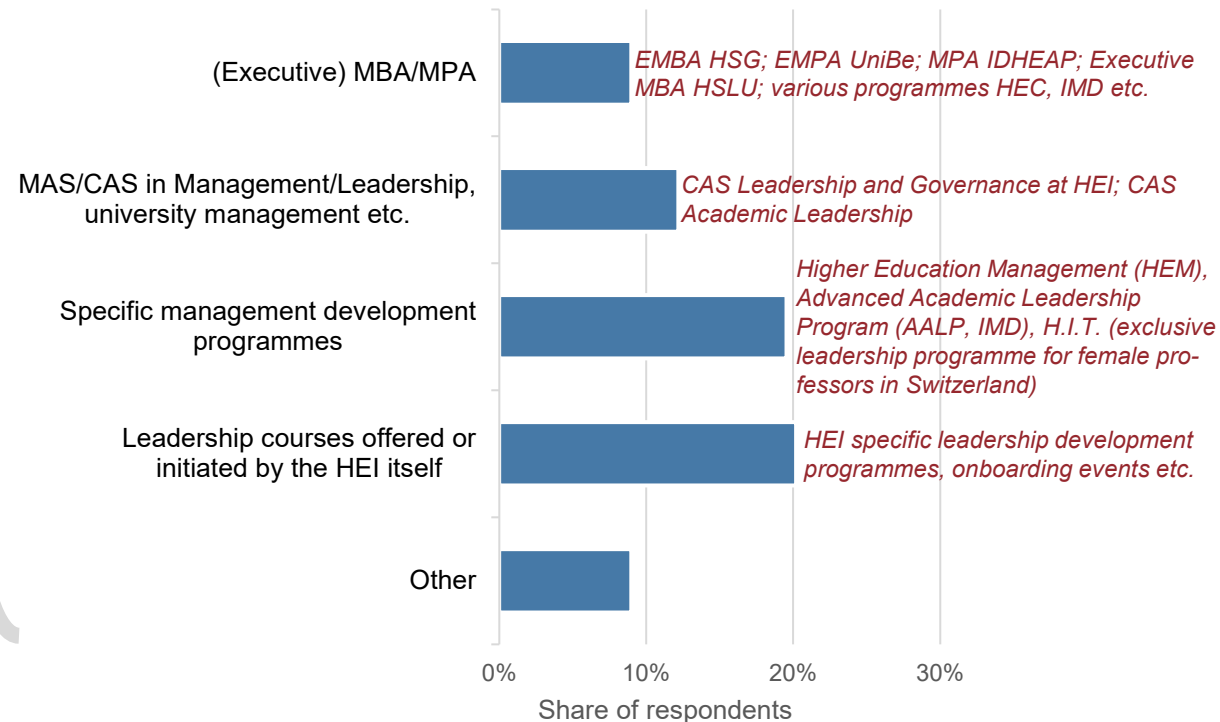
Preparation for Current Position

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?



What further education/management development programmes have you completed?



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.

Leadership Development Programmes

Continuing education and training is central for strengthening the skills and competencies of senior HEI leaders. Currently, senior HEI leaders predominantly choose their own way of preparing for the job («fit for purpose»).

Our study suggests **potential for a joint senior leadership development approach** across different Swiss HEI types (similar to successful national executive education programmes for HEI leaders, e.g., in The Netherlands, Sweden, Israel).

«Leadership is now increasingly being recognized as a profession in its own right. [...] It is something you can learn and that you may have to deal with. And it's different. Not better or worse, but simply different from your normal work as an academic researcher and teacher. And that's why there are more and more courses or training programmes where you can now get training in this area.»

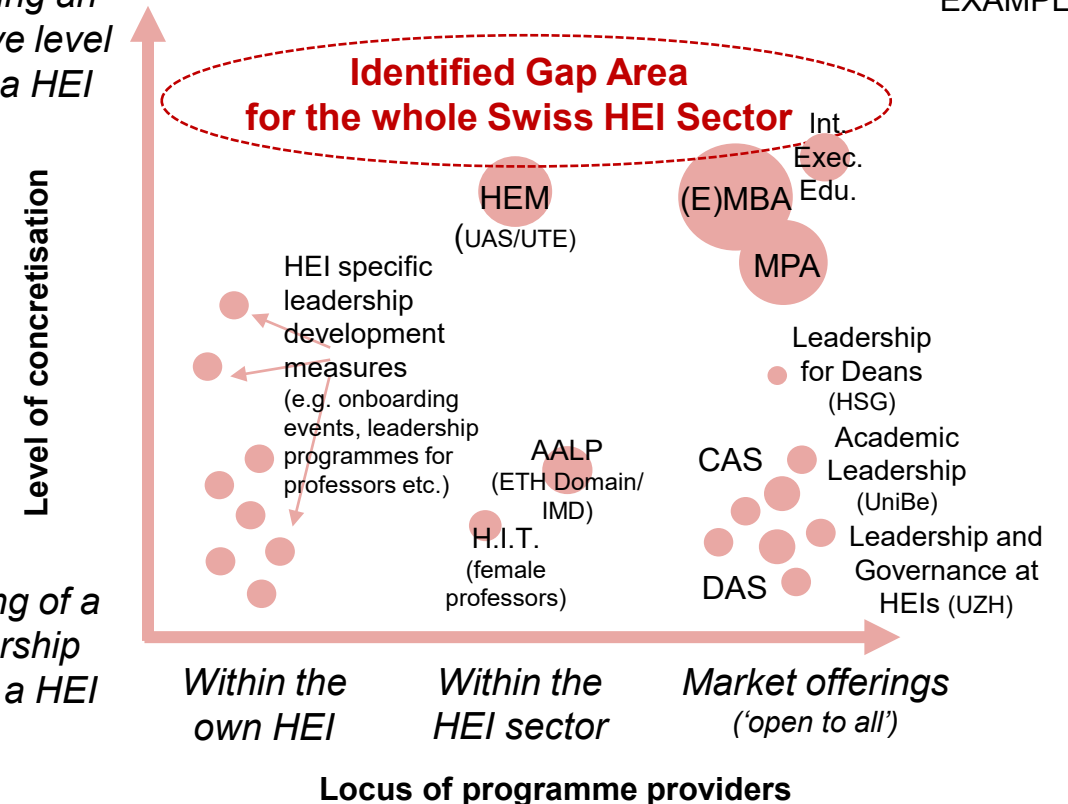
«What is special about our system only becomes apparent to me when I talk to someone from a different system, not the same one.»

Note: Quotes from interviews

Assuming an executive level role at a HEI

Thinking of a leadership role at a HEI

EXAMPLES



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 and functions**.



Based on the **empirical findings**, we particularly identify the following action fields for strengthening **the effectiveness of senior HEI leaders** and thus the general management capacity of the Swiss HE sector:

- ▶ **Diversity and inclusion:** leveraging the complementarity of career paths and competence profiles in decision-making bodies (e.g., management boards), incl. fostering the balance between academic and administrative management tasks;
- ▶ Maintaining the **HEI's agility and development capacity** in the context of “academic self-governance” vs. “managed university”;
- ▶ The challenge of **managing generational change** in senior leadership positions (succession planning, rejuvenation, mobility), incl. the question of attracting, motivating and promoting a talent pool of suitable candidates for the office of dean;
- ▶ ‘Good governance’ practices in **appointment procedures** for senior management positions (including rectors);
- ▶ A more **targeted preparation for higher management functions** ([early] career planning, timing, leadership development);
- ▶ Assessing the potential of **national cross-HEI peer group programmes** for current and newly appointed senior leaders.

Panel Discussion

(14.30-15.15h)

- **Prof. Dr. Luciana Vaccaro**, President swissuniversities Rector University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Western Switzerland (HES-SO) (*by video message*)
- **Prof. Dr. Günther Dissertori**, Rector ETH Zurich
- **Prof. Dr. Frédéric Herman**, Rector University of Lausanne
- **Prof. Dr. Christian Rüegg**, Director Paul Scherrer Institute
- **Prof. Dr. Barbara Bader**, Rector Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts
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Moderation: Rainer Borer, Head of Corporate Communications, ETH Zurich