

# General Management Competencies of Senior Leaders at Swiss Higher Education Institutions

Empirical findings of a national research study  
Summary of the study results, November 21, 2024

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What is the educational and professional background and career path of current senior leaders at Swiss HEIs? Which general management competencies do these senior leaders across all types of HEIs consider relevant to successfully perform in their organisational assignments today and in the next five to ten years? What do senior HEI leaders consider to be the most important strategic challenges for their HEI? In which skills would the current generation of senior HEI leaders (in retrospect) have wished for a more targeted preparation when taking on their demanding roles? These and other questions were examined by the [Swiss School of Public Governance \(SSPG\)](#) at [ETH Zurich](#) as part of a comprehensive study on the situation of senior leaders at Swiss HEIs, which represent the entire diversity of the Swiss HE sector (more information on the study is available [here](#)).



The national research study on senior leaders at Swiss HEIs and the general management competencies required to successfully perform in their leadership roles is based on (1) a representative online survey of senior leaders from all types of HEIs in various functions and at different management levels and (2) in-depth interviews with a selection of survey respondents.

The here presented results are based on the responses of 312 senior leaders from 38 HEIs to a representative online survey conducted in March-April 2024 and on the analysis of 24 in-depth interviews subsequently conducted with selected representatives of all HEIs from all language regions (this summary contains some statements from it as quotations). With a pleasingly high response rate of 63.9%, our sample is representative in terms of both the diversity and organizational complexity of the five types of analysed HEIs (cantonal universities, federal institutes of technology, universities of applied sciences, universities of teacher education, research institutes of the ETH Domain) and the different career paths, management positions and management levels of the senior leaders considered in the study. We distinguish between:

- two types of **career paths** (biographies): academic/professorial and professional/mixed careers (coded based on academic title, relevant professional experience and previous positions held);
- three different **function groups**: Senior leaders with an overall institutional responsibility (rectors), with an academic area responsibility (e.g. rectorate members with core academic responsibilities, faculty deans, heads of department, heads of research centres), or with a non-academic area responsibility (i.e. with significant cross sectional/support functions, e.g. university directors, general secretaries, responsible for finance, human resources, infrastructure and operations, IT, student administration, etc.);
- various **management levels**: 53.5% of the respondents are members of the (extended) executive board, either core members with full voting rights or in an advisory capacity.

«The average senior leader» at Swiss HEIs: profile

Despite some progress in recent years, current senior leaders at Swiss HEIs are still predominantly male (68.0%) and Swiss (80.1%), and only some have spent a longer period abroad (33.3% more than three years). The average senior HEI leader is in their mid-50s and has been in their current management position for 5.5 years. An educational background in the natural sciences and technology outweighs an educational background in the humanities and social sciences (43.0% to 34.6%). Only 23.4% have an educational background in business administration or economics. Internal appointments outweigh external appointments (55.4% to 44.6%). On average, senior leaders have been employed at the current HEI for 13.7 years, with their professional career path and background experience being significantly influenced by the HE sector. Only around one in two (51.9%) has acquired professional experience in the private sector. 39.1% did not have relevant (general) management experience when they took up their current management position.



Overall, around half of the senior leaders at Swiss HEIs have either an academic/professorial career or a professional/mixed career, with distinct differences between the major function groups.

Of the surveyed senior HEI leaders, 9.6% are in a position with overall institutional responsibility (rectors), 50.3% have an academic area responsibility, and 40.1% have a non-academic area responsibility (support function), see Figure 1. In addition, 48.7% have followed a purely **academic/professorial career** and 51.3% have a **professional/mixed career**. Among those with overall institutional responsibility, both backgrounds are represented, with those with an academic/professorial background in the majority (56.7%). As expected, most senior HEI leaders with an academic division responsibility have an academic/professorial background (76.4%), while those with a support responsibility mostly have a professional/mixed background (88.0%).

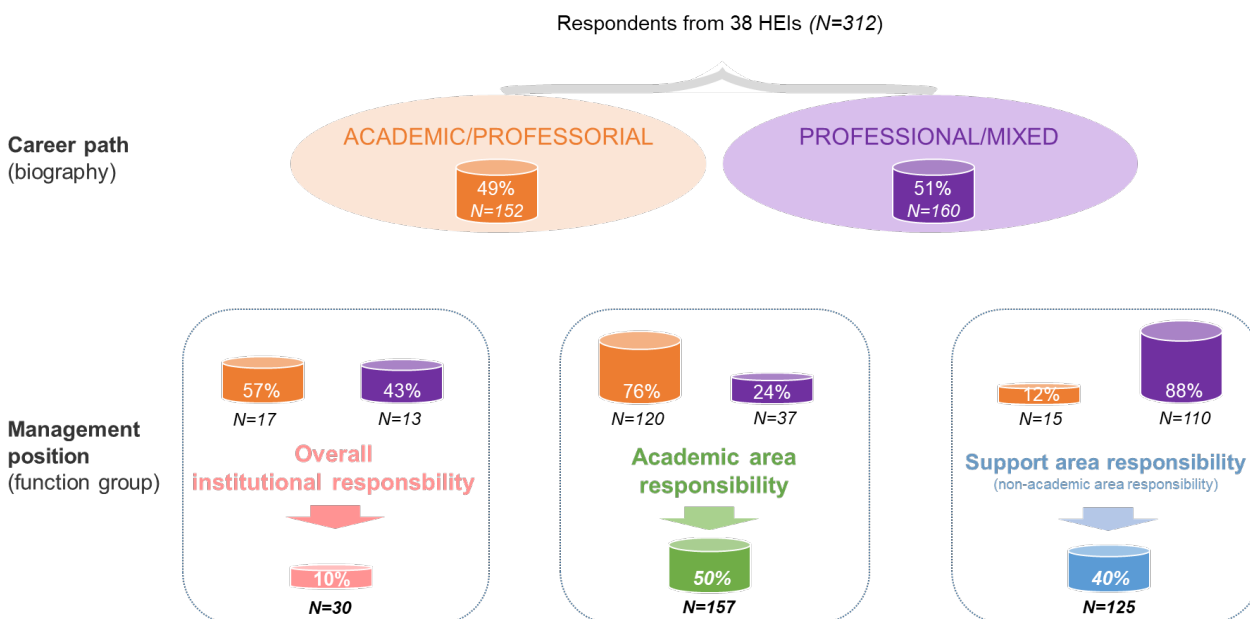
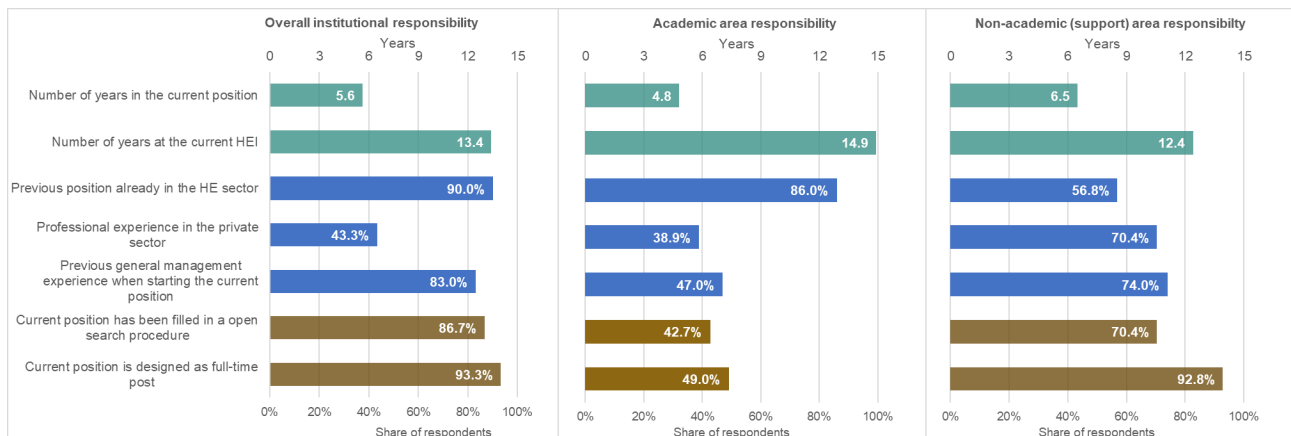


Figure 1 Relation between individual career path (biography) and type of current management position (function group) among the surveyed senior leaders (based on data from the online survey, N=312).

**Positions with an overall institutional responsibility (rectors)** at cantonal universities, ETHs and research institutions of the ETH domain are held exclusively by people with an academic/professorial career background (100.0%). However, this only applies to a limited extent to rectors at universities of applied sciences (55.6%) and universities of teacher education (33.3%), where the dual profile is in the foreground. An academic/professorial career is most likely to be found in **positions with academic area responsibility** among the deans of the cantonal universities or department heads at the ETHs (100.0%). However, most academic heads of other sub-units such as institutes or interdisciplinary centres (78.1%) and heads of research institutes of the ETH Domain (64.3%) also have an academic/professorial background. In contrast, among department heads at universities of applied sciences, relevant professional work experience, preferably in combination with an academic teaching qualification, is a defining feature of their professional biography (57.5% have a professional/mixed career).

However, in **positions with a support area responsibility**, senior leaders with a (purely) academic/professorial background are clearly in the minority (e.g. those responsible for infrastructure 6.7%, finances 8.3% and HR 21.4%). For most management positions with a non-academic area responsibility at the level of the (extended) executive board, the track record from a professional career (usually in combination with relevant experiences from the private or public sector) seems to be a prerequisite for holding the respective positions (e.g. university director, secretary general or head of communications; each 100% with a professional/mixed career).

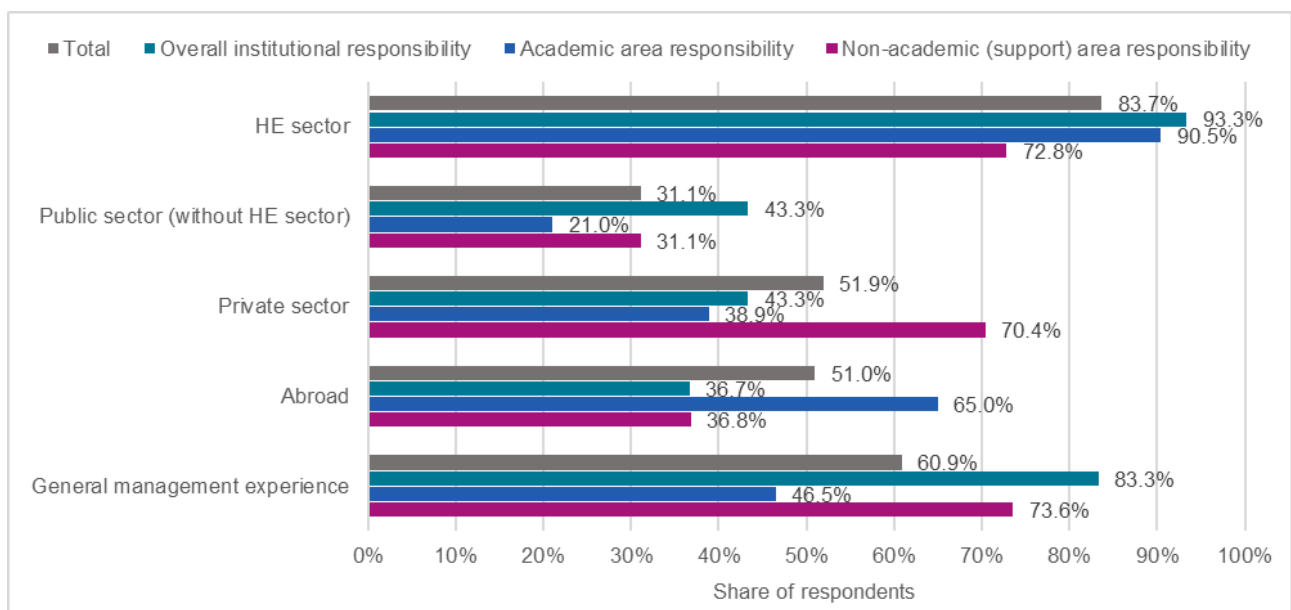


**Figure 2** Characterization of the three function groups of senior HEI leaders (based on data from the online survey, N=312).

The profiles of the surveyed senior HEI leaders in the three broad function groups differ in various respects. While the respondents with a non-academic area responsibility have been in their current position the longest, those with an academic area responsibility have already spent the most time of their career at their current HEI and are already somewhat older. Those with academic responsibilities have the highest proportion of non-Swiss nationalities and a higher proportion of international experience – while the majority of those with a non-academic area responsibility have previously worked in the private sector and have already gathered relevant general management experience before their current assignment.



**The professional experience of senior leaders at Swiss HEIs is strongly influenced by the HE sector and their own HEI. 39.1% of senior leaders with an overall institutional or area responsibility had no relevant general management experience when they took up their current position.**




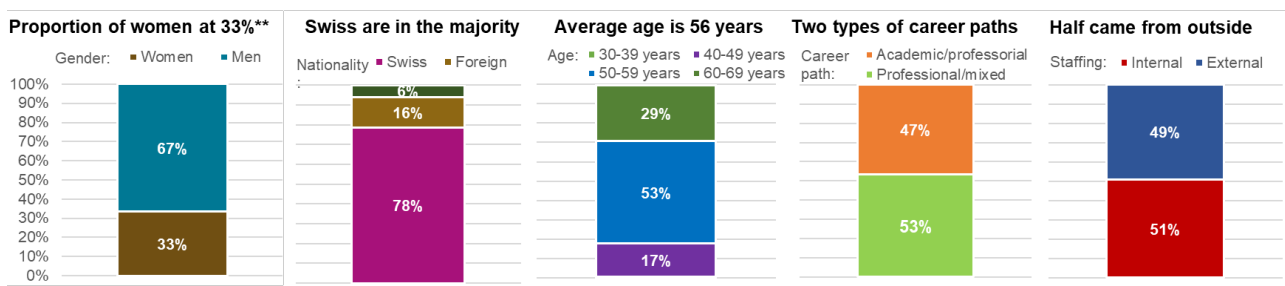
**Figure 3** Professional experience of senior HEI leaders, overall and by function groups (based on data from the online survey, N=312).

74.7% of the surveyed senior HEI leaders had already worked in the **HE environment** in their immediately preceding position (55.5% of them at the same institution and 19.2% at another scientific organisation in Switzerland or abroad). Only 25.4% came directly from another sector when assuming the current position (including 11.2% from the private sector), the majority of whom were senior HEI leaders with non-academic support responsibilities (e.g. finance, HR, infrastructure, communication). Overall, only around one in two had **professional experience from the private sector** (51.9%), and around one in three **from the public sector** outside of the HE environment (31.1%). In contrast, 83.7% of respondents already had experience in the HE environment. The relatively low overall (sector) mobility is also reflected in the fact that only a very limited number of senior leaders transferred *between* different types of HEIs or directly from foreign HEIs.

Overall, 46.2% of the respondents state that they have no long-term **experience abroad**, while 15.1% have been abroad for more than ten years; people with an academic/professorial career have typically been abroad more often during their professional career than those with a professional/mixed career path (70.4% vs. 32.5%).

The proportion of current senior HEI leaders with previous **general management experience** is highest at the universities of applied sciences (73.3%) and the research institutes of the ETH domain (72.0%), and lowest at the cantonal universities (51.9%) and the ETHs (56.7%). In terms of the three function groups, the highest proportion of people who had already taken up a position with relevant management experience is among rectors (83.3%), followed by those with non-academic support responsibilities (73.6%). However, with senior leaders with an academic area responsibility, the proportion is at 46.5%, whereby again striking differences can be seen, e.g., between the universities of applied sciences and the cantonal universities (75.0% and 26.7% respectively). 28.2% of today's senior HEI leaders moved directly **from a professorship position to their current general management position**, with this proportion being particularly high among those with an academic area responsibility, e.g., deans (49.7%).

 **Diversity of HEI executive boards: In terms of socio-demographic characteristics and professional career paths, HEI executive boards are strongly characterised by men, Swiss nationals and people at a later stage in their careers.**



**Figure 4** Diversity in executive boards of Swiss HEIs (including members with voting rights and in an advisory capacity; based on data from the online survey, N=167).

As of March 1, 2024, the proportion of women on the executive boards of Swiss HEIs is still significantly lower than that of men. However, compared to the executive boards of the Swiss private economy and public sectors, where women make up 20% and 25% respectively (see schillingreport 2024: <https://www.schillingpartners.ch/de/schilling-report/>), the **proportion of women on the HEI executive boards** is in comparison still substantially higher at 33.5% (universities of applied sciences 37%, ETHs 35%, cantonal universities 31%, research institutes of the ETH domain 21%). In the years 2024-2025, the proportion of women who will held a rectorate position will continue to rise, as the Universities of Geneva and Berne as well as the ZHAW have appointed female rectors for the first time in their history. Within the ETH domain, EPFL will for the first time be led by a female president from 2025 on. In the research universities, the proportion of women in rectorate positions would thus exceed in the future that of men for the first time at 58%.

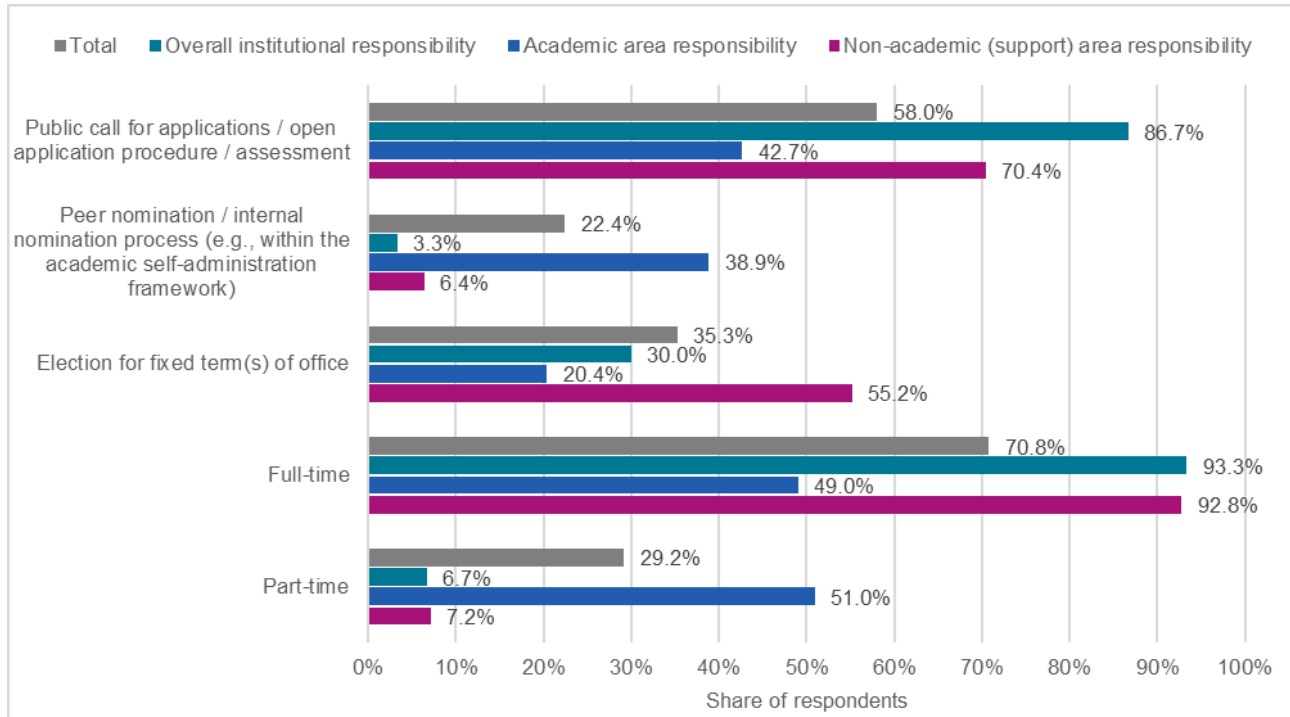
At 15.6%, the proportion of **foreign nationals** on HEI executive boards is rather low, especially in comparison to the 46% share of foreign nationals on executive boards in the private sector (cf. schillingreport 2024).

At an average **age of 56.4 years**, the majority of today's HEIs executive board members are already in a later phase of their professional careers. Only 18.0% of HEI executive board members are under the age of 50.

In terms of their **professional biographies**, academic/professorial and professional/mixed careers are roughly balanced at the executive board level (46.7% to 53.3%). Just under half of the members of the HEI executive boards were recruited **externally**; the other half were already employed at the respective HEI immediately beforehand.



**For senior HEI leaders with overall institutional responsibility and those with support responsibility, 86.7% and 70.4% of their current positions were filled through an open application process; 93.3% and 92.8% were filled in a full-time position. When filling positions with academic area responsibility (in particular deans at research universities), the rules of academic self-administration (peer nomination, internal candidates, rotation system, part-time positions) continue to dominate.**



**Figure 5** Selection procedure and structure of respective management positions, overall and per function group (based on data from the online survey, N=312).

Overall, the **selection process for filling** their current position was carried out at 58.0% of surveyed senior HEI leaders in an **open application procedure** (public advertisement, appointment of a search committee, assessment of candidates) with the general consideration of external candidates. Rectors were recruited in such a procedure in 86.7% of cases and senior leaders with a non-academic area responsibility in 70.4% of cases.

In the case of **senior leader with an academic area responsibility**, the open application procedure was only used for an average of 42.7% of cases. The wide range between department heads at universities of applied sciences (95.0%) and deans at cantonal universities (6.7%) may reflect different academic traditions and philosophies. Cantonal universities and ETHs, for example, usually have special nomination and election procedures for the (often exclusively internal) rotational appointment of dean positions within the framework of academic self-administration, while universities of applied sciences, as «managed HEIs», are more obliged to follow standard market appointment procedures.

While university deans usually perform their duties as part of a **rotation process** (with a limited term of 2 to 5-years) and then return to their academic chairs (professorship), department heads at universities of applied sciences and research unit heads of the research institutes of the ETH domain generally held their management assignments as permanent positions. The fact that the corresponding management positions are often held only in a **part-time** (51.0% of those with an academic area responsibility) reflects that the continuation of their own academic career alongside and after their current management position is of great importance, especially for academic department heads at ETHs and cantonal universities.

At the universities of applied sciences with their mostly single-tier executive board model (whereby the department heads are an integral part of the executive board), almost half of the department heads (45.0%) also assume a HEI-wide divisional responsibility for a core academic function (e.g. education, research and innovation, continuing education) as a secondary function in addition to their primary management responsibility for a disciplinary academic unit.



The surveyed senior HEI leaders perceive the pressure to save money and the availability of resources as the biggest strategic challenges for their HEI today. They expect digitalization and artificial intelligence to become even more relevant in the future.

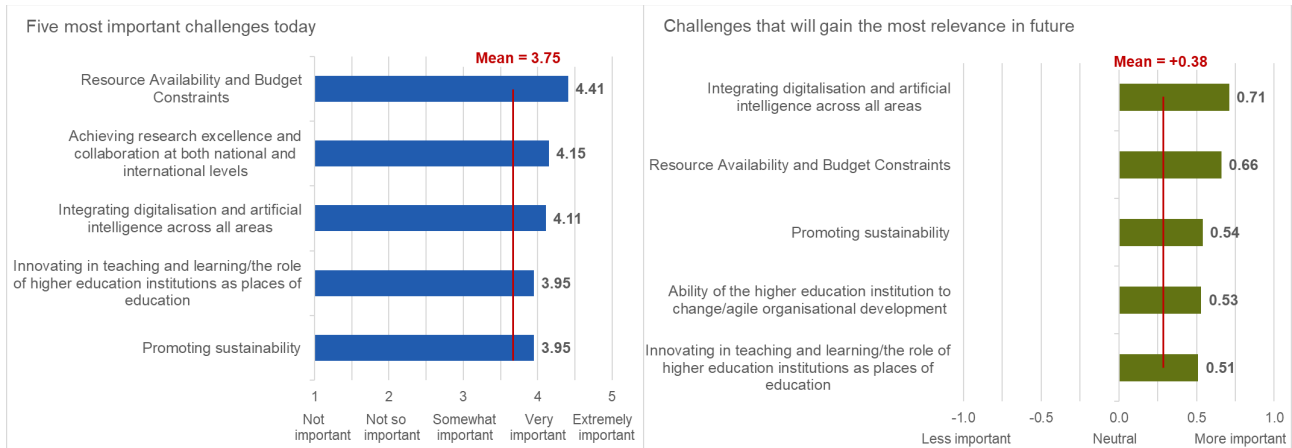


Figure 6 Most frequently mentioned strategic institutional challenges for own HEI (based on data from the online survey, N=312).

The surveyed senior HEI leaders generally consider the **institutional challenges in the Swiss HE system** to be increasingly demanding. In their perspective, from a list of 19 strategic challenges provided as part of the online survey, the tighter availability of resources and the increased cost-cutting pressure (4.41), research excellence and the ability to collaborate in a national and international context (4.15) and the digitalisation and artificial intelligence in all areas of life (4.11) are currently the most important strategic challenges for their HEIs. This list is followed by the role of HEIs in education (esp. new forms of teaching and learning; 3.95) and the commitment to contributing to a sustainable society (3.95). Topics such as the shortage of skilled labour (3.53), strengthening the autonomy of the HEI (3.50) or dealing with increasing student enrolments (3.37) are – rather surprisingly – at the lower end of the list.

According to the respondents, **these challenges will become even more relevant in the next five to ten years**, especially regarding the issues of cost-cutting pressure and digitalisation. In comparison, the respondents expect only a moderate increase in the relevance of topics such as research excellence and the ability to collaborate.



Our General Management Competency Model allows a systematic recording and assessment of the diverse competencies that a senior HEI leader needs to successfully fulfil the requirements of the respective management position.

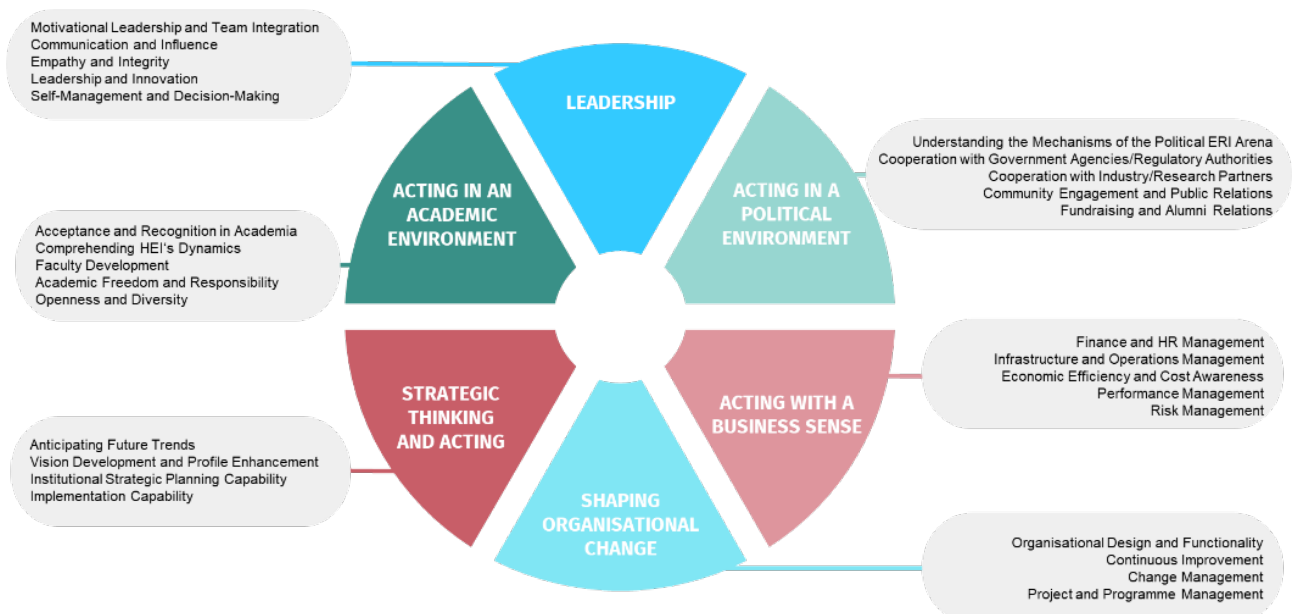
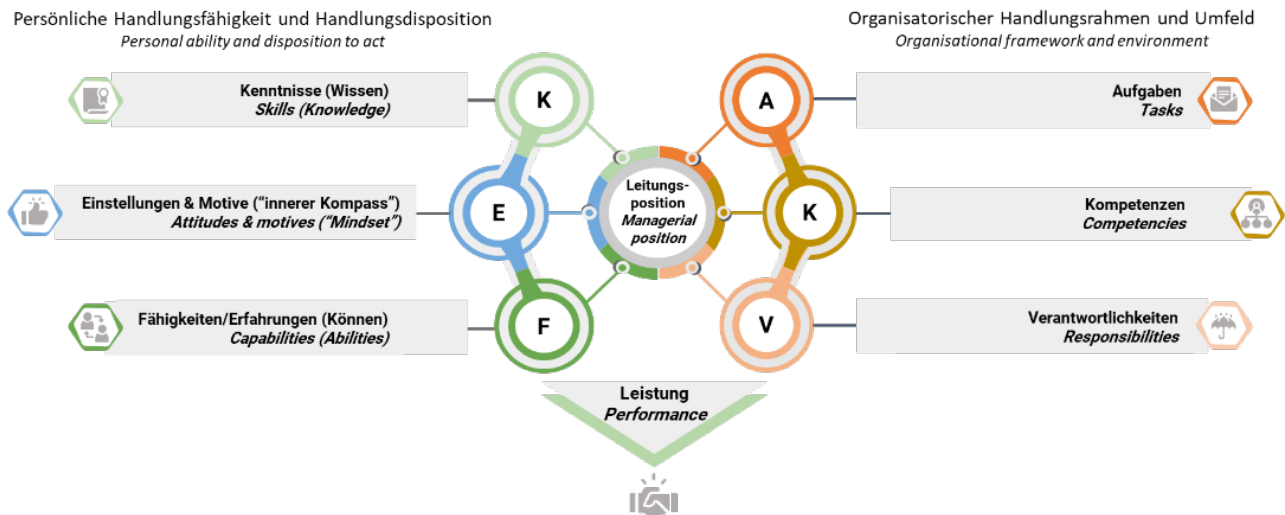



Figure 7 General management competency model on which the study is based (own illustration).

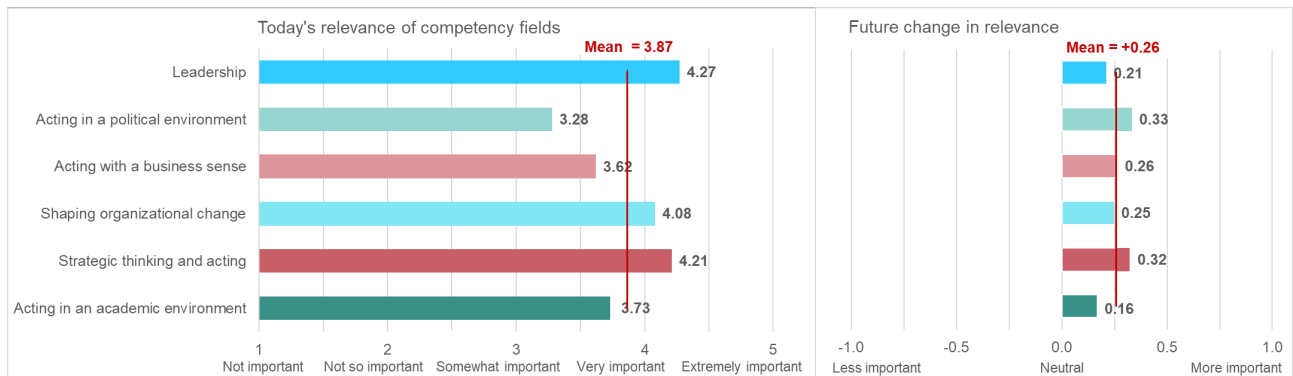
Our general management competency model comprises **six competence dimensions** («GMC dimensions») and a **total of 28 competencies** (see Figure 7). These competencies can be analysed individually, but their full impact is achieved through their interplay. The variety of relevant general management competencies at HEIs in our model considers the special features of HEIs as **expert organisations** with a more or less distinctive **academic culture of values** and **multiple rationalities** of numerous internal and external stakeholder groups.

Each of the competencies comprises the observable knowledge, attitudes, and skills (see left-hand side of Figure 8 with «C, E, F») that senior leaders need to act successfully in their management position within an organisation and its environment. A senior leader's **personal ability and disposition to act** is embedded in a specific **environment and organisational framework** (with different tasks, rights, and duties, see right-hand side of Figure 8 with 'A, K, V').



**Figure 8** Theoretical conceptualization of a management competency model (own illustration).

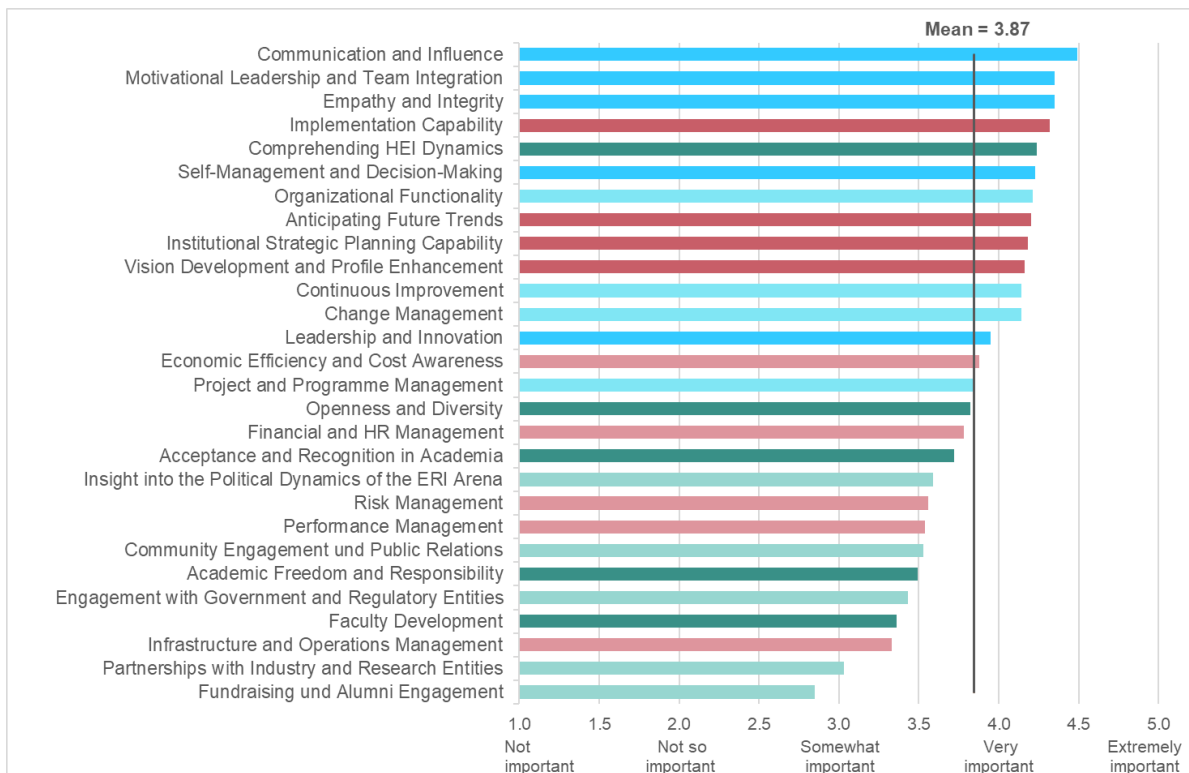
 **The competency profiles required by today's senior HEI leaders are wide-ranging and challenging. The current senior HEI leaders also assume that the requirements for their successors in the respective position will increase even further.**




**Figure 9** Relevance of the dimensions of general management competencies dimensions («GMK dimensions») today and change in this relevance in 5-10 years according to the surveyed senior HEI leaders (aggregated values, based on data from the online survey, N~312).

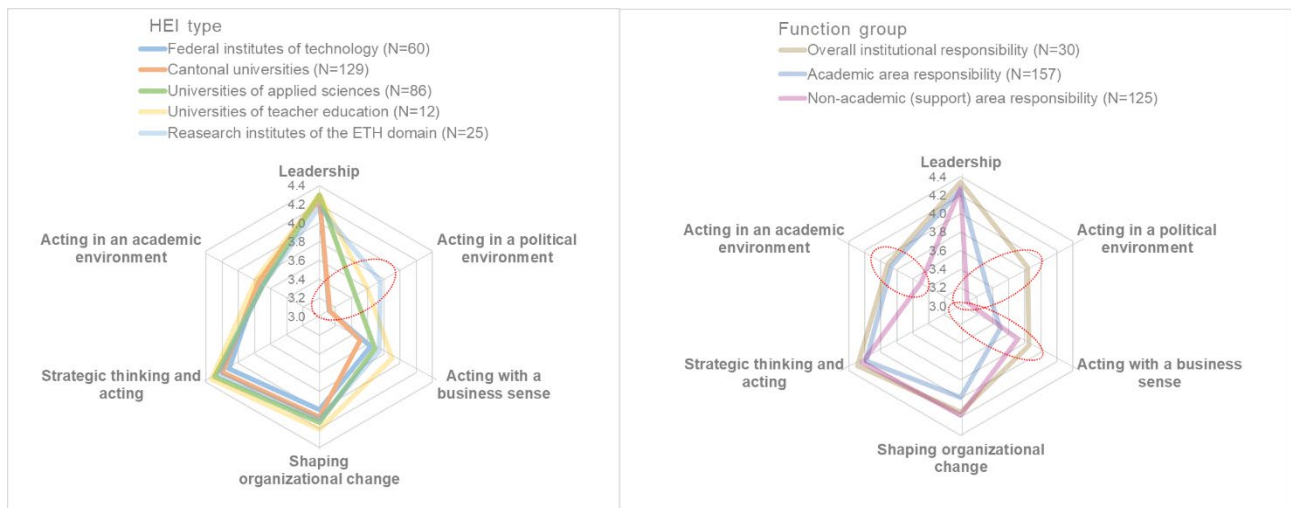
The surveyed senior HEI leaders consider «**Leadership**» (4.27) and «**Strategic thinking and acting**» (4.21) to be the **most important GMK dimensions**, ahead of the ability to shape organizational change (4.08). They only find «acting in a political environment» (3.28) to be somewhat important.

According to the respondents, **the importance of all GMK dimensions will increase in the future**. This increase is expected to be relatively strong for the GMK dimension «strategic thinking and acting» (+0.32), which is already rated as very relevant today, and for the currently relatively less important GMK dimensions «acting in a political environment» (+0.33) and «acting with a business sense» (+0.26).



**Figure 10** Current relevance of the individual general management competencies according to the senior HEI leaders surveyed (based on data from the online survey, N~312).

 **This competence requirement profile is remarkably homogeneous across different types of HEIs and organisational complexities. However, there are differences depending on the type of management position (i.e., function group) and professional background (i.e., biography).**



**Figure 11** Competence requirement profiles of senior HEI leaders by type of HEI and function group; the figures show a section of the entire scale ranging from 1 «not important» to 5 «extremely important» (based on data from the online survey, N~312).

The GMK dimension «leadership» is considered very important by all respondents and there are surprisingly few other differences in the relevance assessment among the HEI types. Only action in the political environment is considered comparatively more relevant by the respondents from the ETHs, while the cantonal universities consider this GMK dimension to be less important.

Respondents with **overall institutional responsibility** rate all GMK dimensions as very relevant and therefore have the broadest requirements profile. Respondents with **non-academic area responsibility** rate acting in an academic and political environment as less important compared to respondents with overall institutional responsibility and those with academic area responsibility. The latter see acting with a business sense as less relevant. Women attest to practically all GMK



dimensions as being slightly more relevant than men. Members of the HEI executive boards rate competences in the political and academic environment and strategic thinking higher than respondents without a HEI executive board function, with the greatest difference being in the relevance of acting in a political environment. Respondents with an academic background find acting in an academic environment more relevant, while those with a professional/mixed background consider shaping organisational change and acting with a business sense to be more important for their position.

**Today's senior HEI leaders would have liked more targeted preparation when taking on their current position, especially in terms of knowledge of basic management concepts and a systemic understanding of how universities and the political ERI arena work**



**Figure 12** Areas of competencies in which the surveyed senior HEI leaders would have liked more targeted preparation when taking up their current management position (retrospective) (based on 454 responses from the online survey; N=312).

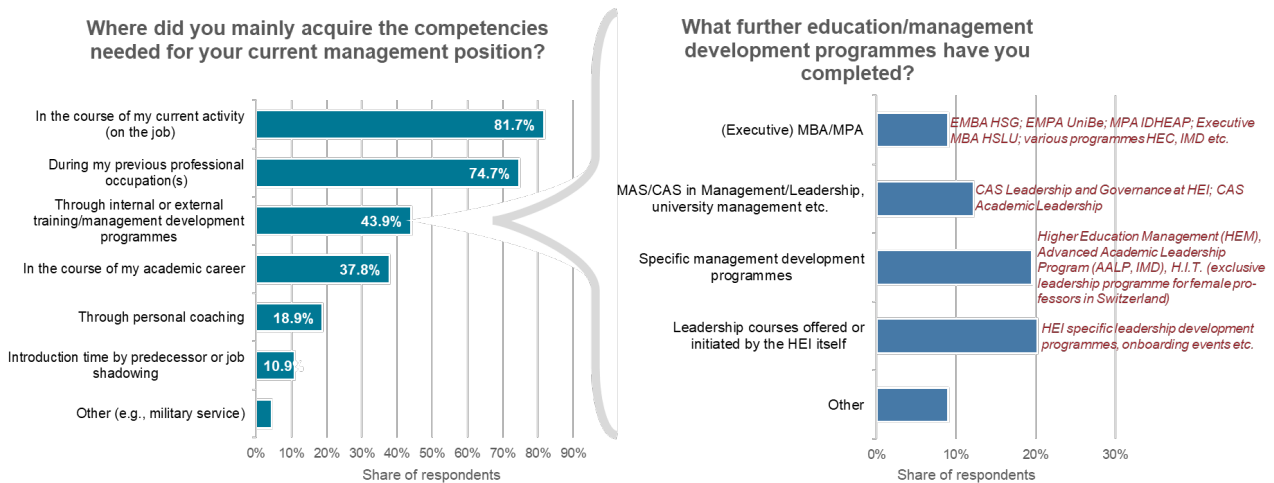


**Figure 13** Word cloud on competency gaps (454 mentions)

The respondents felt that when they took up their current position, they were particularly affected by a lack of **basic management skills, such as finance and change management**, as well as **understanding HEI structures and the Swiss political ERI arena**. In retrospect, respondents with non-academic divisional responsibility identified a potential for development in understanding the functioning of universities and the ERI arena, while those with academic responsibility emphasized management and leadership skills; senior HEI leaders with overall institutional responsibility would have liked to be better prepared particularly in terms of maintaining relationships with external stakeholders and change management



The current generation of senior HEI leaders has predominantly acquired the required general management competencies «on the job» during their current and previous positions. Less than half (43.9%) have specifically prepared for their current positions through external or internal training measures or management development programmes.



**Figure 14** Acquisition of required competencies and completed further training/executive development programmes (based on data from the online survey, N=312).

43.9% of respondents state that they have completed **specific internal or external training courses or management development programmes** in relation to their current position. Just under a fifth had taken advantage of personal coaching, 10.9% had benefited from an induction period with their predecessor or «job shadowing». The extent to which offers of internal or external further training/management programmes are used varies by HEI type and function group: For example, while 62.5% of department heads at universities of applied sciences state that they use existing offers in this area, this only applies to 16.7% of deans of cantonal universities. As our study results show, further training and management development programmes are seen as central to strengthening the competencies of senior HEI leaders. At present, however, they are predominantly preparing themselves individually to take on a management position («fit for purpose»).



Our study results show various fields of action and areas for discussion regarding the future appointment and organization of management positions at Swiss HEIs.

**a) How can diversity and inclusion in executive management bodies (especially HEI executive boards) at Swiss HEIs be further improved?**

*Focus:* Improving the composition of internal governing bodies of Swiss HEIs and the cooperation within these bodies (both at institutional and faculty/departmental level) in terms of skills, roles, cultural backgrounds and professionalism.

**b) What opportunities and challenges does academic self-governance present for HEIs and faculty deans against the backdrop of growing institutional challenges and competence requirements?**

*Focus:* Opportunities and challenges of academic self-governance within research universities. In particular, the focus is on the future of the role of deans around the tension between growing competence requirements, necessary continuity and the ability to shape strategy on the one hand and declining job attractiveness and (academic) legitimacy on the other hand.

**c) How can we further improve the development and selections processes for future senior HEI leaders, particularly in view of the upcoming necessary generational change?**

*Focus:* Strategies for the systematic identification, motivation, and development of potential future senior leaders at Swiss HEIs and the application of good governance practices for their selection – in view of the upcoming generational change.

**d) What is the potential for a cross-institutional, national programme for senior academic leaders in Switzerland (similar to established programmes in Israel, the Netherlands and Sweden)?**

*Focus:* Need and potential for a national executive programme for current and newly appointed senior HEI leaders in Switzerland across different types of HEIs and the requirements for such a programme.

**e) How can Swiss HEIs effectively manage change and promote institutional agility in the face of increasing strategic challenges?**

*Focus:* Approaches to (jointly) tackling change and the increasingly complex strategic challenges facing Swiss HEIs at all levels (e.g. budget constraints/resources scarcity, research excellence and collaboration, new forms of teaching and learning, digitalisation and AI across all spheres, sustainability), while balancing institutional stability and agility.

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