

# ETH Study on Senior Leaders at Swiss Higher Education Institutions

Initial findings of the national study,  
July 2024

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# Study design and research questions

## Research Questions

**Existing biographies:** What is the educational background and professional experience of current senior leaders at Swiss universities?

**The 'right' mix of general management competencies:** What general management competencies do today's leaders consider important to successfully fulfil their respective roles at their HEI (today and in the next 5-10 years)?

**Competence gaps and leadership development:** How was the current generation of senior leaders prepared to take on their current role? What preparation would they have wished for in hindsight?

**Institutional challenges:** What are (from the perspective of their current leadership position) the key strategic challenges that their HEI faces? How do they assess the importance of these challenges for their successors?

## Methodology

National study with own data collection:

- **Analysis of publicly accessible data:** informed selection of the senior leaders (cut-off date 1 March 2024) including their biographies and additional research on the governance and organisation of the respective Swiss HEIs
- **Online survey:** contacting the population of senior leaders via personalised emails with an integrated link to the online survey: March – April 2024
- **In-depth interviews:** semi-structured interviews with approximately 25 respondents to explore selected topics and findings in greater depth: July – August 2024

## Sample

**A total of 488 senior leaders from 44 HEIs across the full spectrum of higher education in Switzerland were included in the study ('population'):**

- From cantonal universities, federal institutes of technology (ETHs), universities of applied sciences, universities of teacher education, research institutes of the ETH domain
- Senior leaders with the following types of positions (function groups) were included:
  - with overall responsibility (rectors, presidents, directors) or
  - with academic area responsibility (pro-rectors, vice-presidents, academic functional responsibility core functions, academic heads of sub-units) or
  - with a non-academic area responsibility (support responsibility)

Excellent response rate of **63.9%: 312 senior leaders completed the survey** ('respondents')

- Respondents are representative in terms of different types of HEIs, types of functions, management levels and career paths.

# Senior Leaders at Swiss HEIs: overview by type of HEI, management level and function group



The senior leaders are active both at different **management levels** (executive board\*: 54% of respondents) and in different **function groups** (10% of respondents have an overall institutional responsibility, 50% have an academic area responsibility and 40% have a non-academic area responsibility).

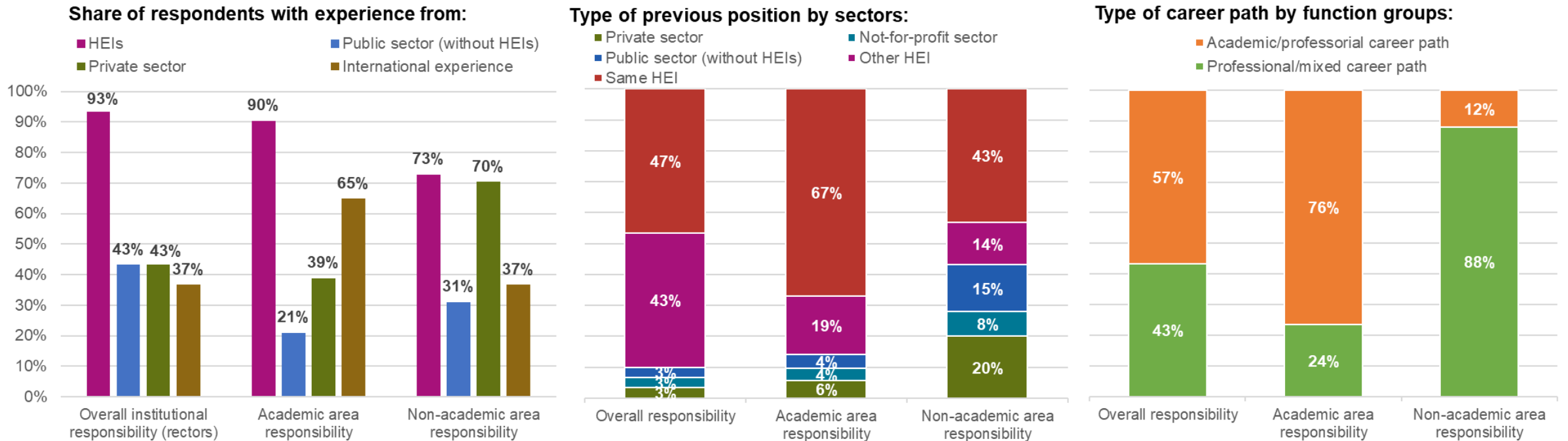
Higher education institution (HEI) (type)	number (total)	members of the (extended) executive board	overall responsibility (rectors)	academic area responsibility	non-academic area responsibility (support functions)
<b>Sample</b>					
Universities of applied sciences (10)	138 28%	108 78%	10 7%	84 61%	44 32%
Universities of teacher education (18)	18 4%	18 100%	18 100%	0 0%	0 0%
Cantonal universities (10)	220 45%	93 42%	10 5%	120 55%	90 41%
Federal institutes of technology (2)	76 16%	17 22%	2 3%	45 59%	29 38%
Research institutes of the ETH domain (4)	36 7%	24 67%	4 11%	21 58%	11 31%
<b>All HEIs (44)</b>	<b>488 100%</b>	<b>260 53%</b>	<b>44 9%</b>	<b>270 55%</b>	<b>174 36%</b>
<b>Respondents</b>					
Universities of applied sciences (10)	86 28%	68 79%	9 10%	49 57%	28 33%
Universities of teacher education (18)	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%
<b>All HEIs (44)</b>	<b>312 100%</b>	<b>167 54%</b>	<b>30 10%</b>	<b>157 50%</b>	<b>125 40%</b>

\* Executive boards include core members (with voting rights) as well as members of the extended executive board (in an advisory capacity)

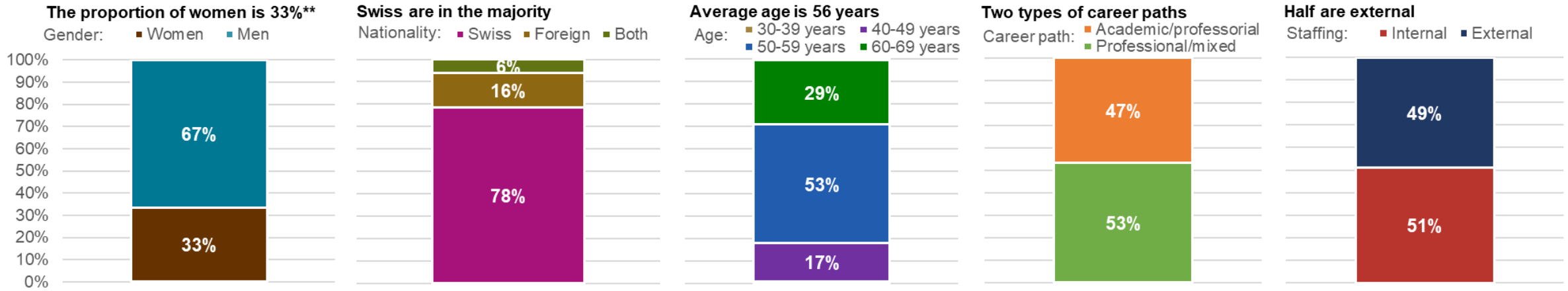
# What career paths do senior leaders at Swiss HEIs have?

The career paths of the respondents are strongly characterised by the Swiss higher education sector:

- 49% have a purely academic or professorial background, 51% a professional or mixed background
- 84% had already worked at a HEI before taking up their current position (most of them at their own HEI)
- Around one in two have experience from the private sector (52%), one in three from the public sector (31%)
- 51% have experience abroad; this proportion is highest among those with an academic area responsibility



# What is the extent of diversity in the executive boards of Swiss HEIs\*?



## Women in the lead

Prof. Audrey Leuba (born in 1965) first female Rector of the University of Geneva from 1 April 2024 (previously Dean of the Faculty of Law)



Prof. Virginia Richter (born in 1964) first female Rector of the University of Bern from 17 June 2024 (previously Vice-Rector for International Affairs and Academic Careers)



Prof. Anna Fontcuberta i Morral (born in 1975) first female President of EPFL from 1.1.2025 (previously AVP Centres and Platforms)



Prof. Regula Altmann-Jöhl (born in 1968) first female Rector of the ZHAW from 1 February 2025 (previously Director of the FHNW School of Business)



### 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

\* Executive boards include core members (with voting rights) as well as members of the extended executive board (in an advisory capacity)

\*\* Based on the population

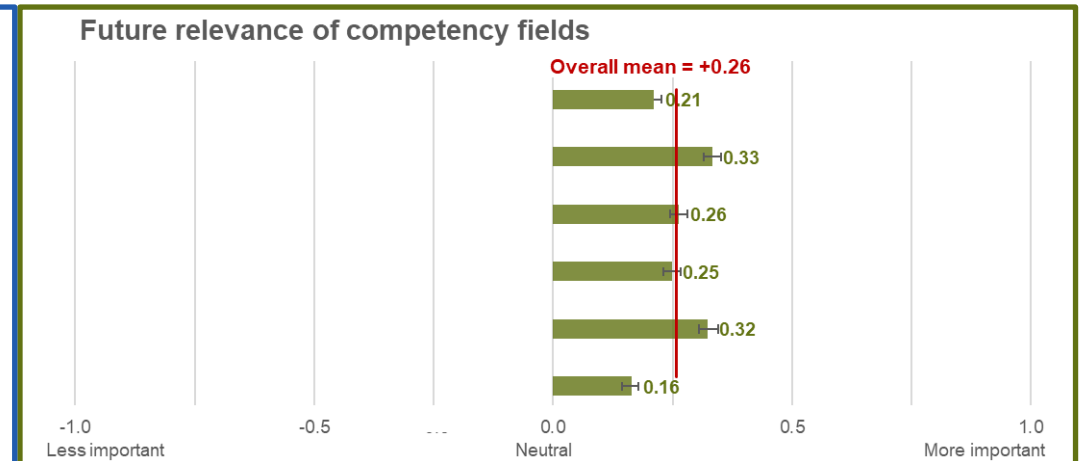
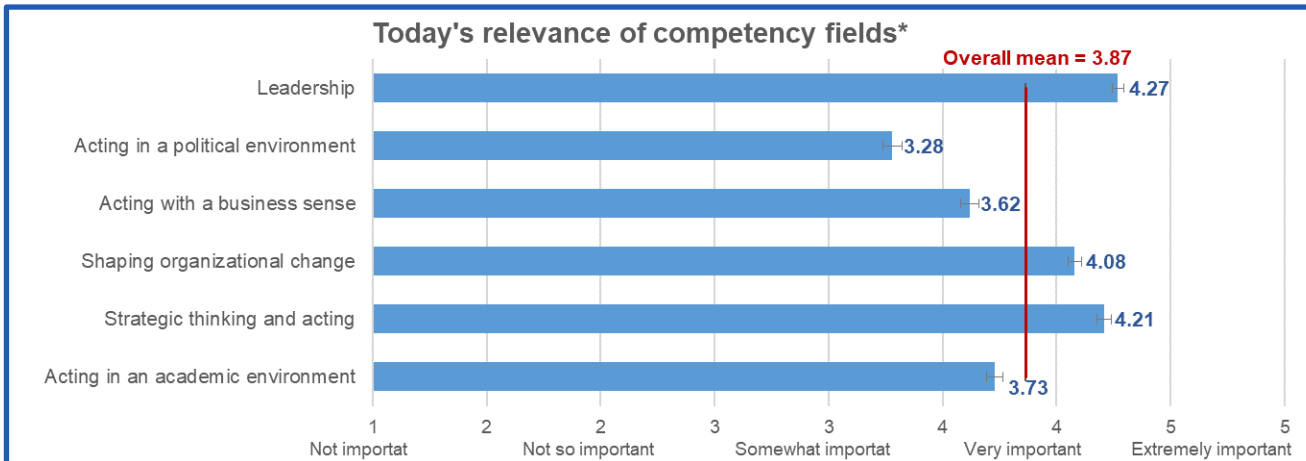
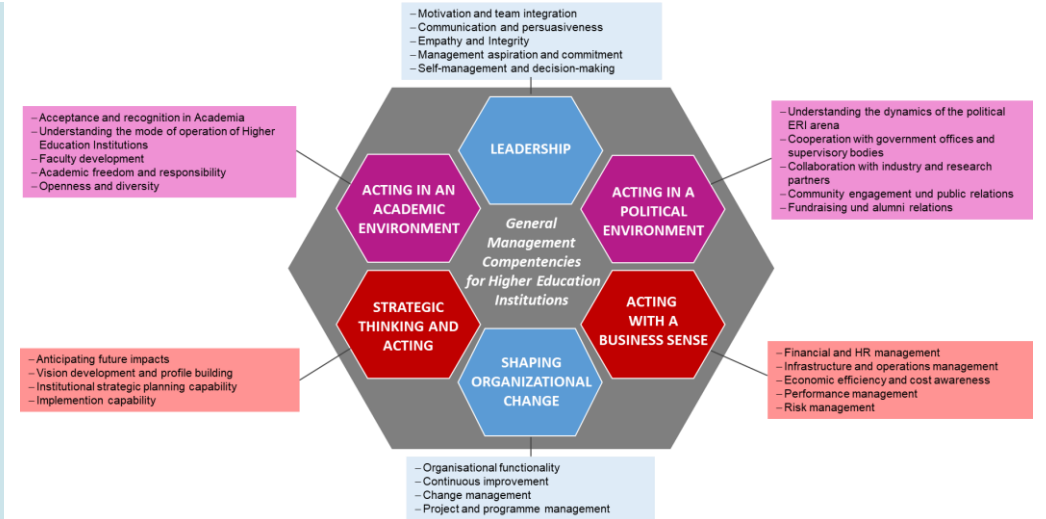
\*\*\* schillingreport 2024. The Management Boards of Switzerland's Private and Public Sectors (<https://www.schillingpartners.ch/en/schilling-report/>)

# What general management competencies do senior leaders at Swiss HEIs need?\*



The study is based on a **general management competency framework** with six competency fields and 28 competencies ('honeycomb model'). The unexpectedly **homogeneous responses** of all respondents across all types of HEIs make it clear that:

- ...the expectations on senior leaders at Swiss universities are **wide-ranging** and very **challenging** - today and in the future;
- ...**leadership, strategic thinking and acting** and **shaping organisational change** embody the three most important competency fields for the successful performance of their current management position;
- ...**acting in a political environment** and the **ability to shape organisational change** will become even more relevant in the future.



\* Figure updated 22 July 2024

# What competencies do current senior leaders wish they had received more targeted preparation for when assuming their positions?



**80% of respondents** mentioned specific competencies they felt particularly challenged by when they began their current leadership positions.

It is noticeable that they primarily lacked **fundamental knowledge** and experience in **management** ('basics') as well as a contextual **understanding of how universities and the political ERI arena work**.



# What are the most important strategic challenges for HEIs from the perspective of the respondents?



From the perspective of the surveyed leaders, HEIs face a variety of strategic challenges - today and in the future:

... among the most important challenges currently are the **availability of resources** and the associated **pressure to cut costs**, the safeguarding of **research excellence** and **collaborative capabilities**, as well as **digitalisation** and **artificial intelligence**.

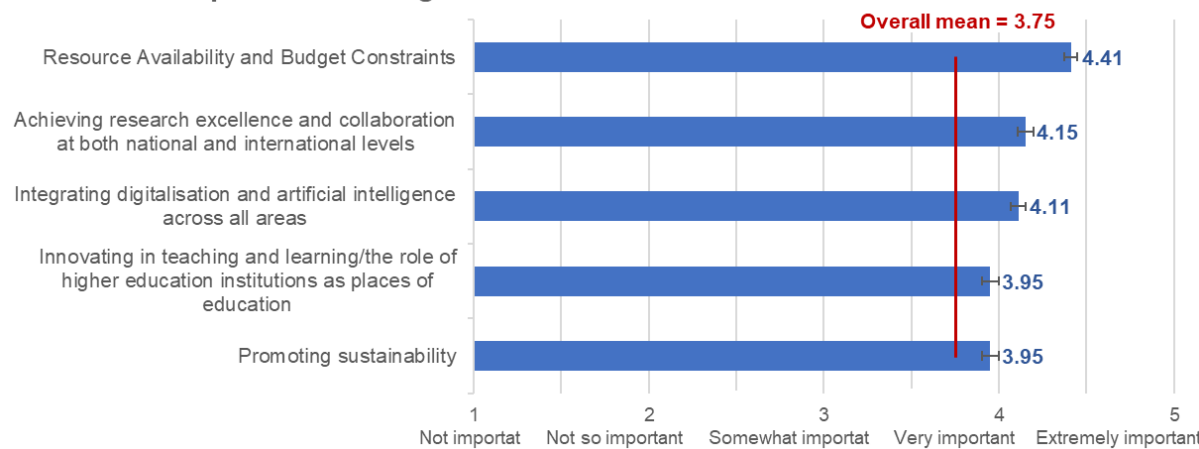
...according to the surveyed leaders, today's strategic challenges will continue to shape the higher education environment in the future and will **gain further importance**.

...the demands from the Swiss higher education area are generally considered to be very challenging.

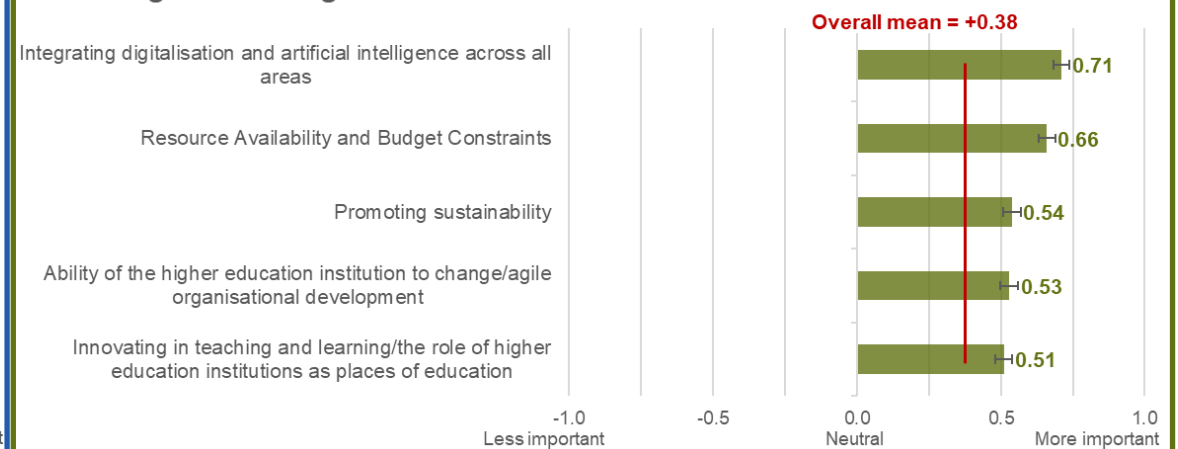
List of challenges (sorted by current relevance):

- 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 HEIs 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+regulatory considerations)
- Addressing HR challenges (e.g., diversity & inclusion, conflict management, work-life balance)
- 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/ programs/competence centres)
- Managing increasing student enrolment (also: decreasing student enrolment rates)
- Refining higher education institution's profile and ranking performance
- Leveraging synergies and focusing on site consolidation ("one higher education institution")

## Five most important challenges



## Challenges that will gain the most relevance





# Summary and Outlook

## ! Summary

The initial results of the national study indicate that leaders with general management functions at Swiss HEIs face a **variety of challenges** that require a **demanding and broadly diversified competence profiles**. The **similarities** clearly dominate across both HEI types and functions.

From the empirical findings, we identify various fields of action, in particular:

- Complementarity of career paths and competence profiles; diversity and inclusion in decision-making bodies (e.g. executive boards)
- Maintaining the ability to steer (possibilities and limits of academic self-administration)
- The challenge of managing generational change in senior leadership positions (succession planning, rejuvenation)
- 'Good governance' practices in appointment procedures for senior management positions (including rectors)
- Need for a national cross-HEI senior leadership development programme

## 🔭 Outlook

**Save-the-date:**  
**Networking event**  
**22. November 2024**  
**1:30-5:00 PM**  
**at ETH Zurich**  
(hybrid event)

Our next steps include:

- Finalisation of in-depth interviews with around 25 senior leaders on selected topics and findings
- Invitation to the networking event and distribution of individual peer group benchmarking to interested respondents in late summer 2024
- Publication of the study (report) in November 2024
- Follow-up of selected fields of action that emerge from the study results (survey and interviews)

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