

## European Universities Initiative: Re-Europeanisation of European Higher Education

Agata Lambrechts<sup>1,2</sup>, Antonin Charret<sup>3,1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Università della Svizzera italiana, Lugano, Switzerland. <sup>2</sup>Swiss Federal University for Vocational Education and Training, Lugano, Switzerland. <sup>3</sup>University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom

### Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

### Abstract

In this study, we explore the complex motivations driving Swiss and British higher education institutions (HEIs) participation in the European Universities Initiative (EUI) - a flagship higher education initiative of the EU, which aims to foster transnational cooperation in education and research among HEIs across Europe. In doing so, we consider the specific environmental factors present: exclusion from Erasmus+ and earlier exclusion from Horizon. We examine their decision-making processes in joining the EUI, selecting alliances to join and the approaches to collaboration within the alliances. We scrutinise the challenges and obstacles they have faced thus far due to their *associate member* status. Finally, we explore the anticipated potential short- and long-term benefits of participation in the alliances. In doing so, we shed light on how the Swiss and British HEIs are navigating the challenging environment to manage their legitimacy and maintain their international standing and engagement with European partners.

### Full paper

#### Purpose of this study:

While both the UK and Switzerland have traditionally maintained a strong presence in the European higher education landscape, their exclusion from EU funding programs (Horizon and Erasmus+) have raised concerns about their future peripheralisation in the European higher education space (Cavallaro & Lepori, 2021; Curtois & Veiga, 2019; Garben, 2020; Highman, 2019; Highman et al., 2023; Hubble, 2016; Mayhew, 2017; O'Malley, 22.07.2021; swissuniversities, 26.05.2023; Tschanz et al., 2020; University of Bern, 2022).

While the UK and more recently Switzerland have now rejoined Horizon Europe programme as an associated country, both are still currently excluded from Erasmus+. Consequently, HEIs in both countries are also formally excluded from becoming *full members* of the European Universities initiative (EUI) - a flagship higher education initiative of the EU, which aims to foster transnational cooperation in education and research among higher education institutions (HEIs) across Europe.

Since 2022, however, they can join the EUI alliances as *associate members*, with Swiss HEIs participation funded by the national government rather than European funds, and British HEIs funding their own participation. This poses challenges for the Swiss and British institutions, yet their response to the successive calls for applications has been notable. As of early 2025, twelve HEIs, that is, more than 50% of all Swiss universities and universities of applied sciences, have joined the initiative, with further two HEIs shortly joining as partial members. In the UK, 10 HEIs are currently members.

In this study, we explore the complex motivations driving Swiss and British HEIs participation in the EUI, considering the specific environmental factors present. We examine their decision-making processes in applying for a place in the EUI, selecting alliances to join and the approaches to collaboration within the alliances. We scrutinise the challenges and obstacles they have faced thus far due to their associate member status. Finally, we explore the anticipated potential short- and long-term benefits of participation in the alliances. In doing so, we shed light on how the Swiss and British HEIs are navigating the challenging environment to manage their legitimacy and maintain their international standing and engagement with European partners.

### **Theory and methods:**

Our study draws on a multifaceted theoretical framework encompassing strategic partnerships and organisational behaviour literature. We examine whether Swiss and British HEIs employ single or multiple rationales for joining the EUI alliances and whether their actions reflect purely strategic motives or require a nuanced interpretation. Specifically, we utilise Suchman's framework of legitimacy management (1995), along with resource dependence theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) and the knowledge-based view (Grant, 1996), exploring how accessing resources, knowledge, and legitimacy shape Swiss and British HEIs' motivations. Empirically, we rely on thematic analysis of data from structured written responses and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders in both countries.

**Findings:**

Preliminary findings suggest that multiple rationales drive participation. Findings indicate that the symbolic significance of participation in European spaces and being recognised as 'European universities' has been a key motivation for their involvement in the initiative. Beyond symbolic value, strategic considerations have been of fundamental importance - Swiss and British HEIs perceive participation in the EUI as an opportunity to protect their global reputation and ensure the best prospects for their students and the development of, especially young, academic personnel. Maintaining the countries' positions as leaders of innovation and an opportunity to play a role in shaping the future of the higher education sector have also been stressed as vitally important. The associate membership does indeed appear to cause multiple challenges, not least those related to resource allocation. Despite these, Swiss and British HEIs appear, by and large, to be committed to a long-term strategic partnership with their European partners. These preliminary results highlight the agency of Swiss and British HEIs in negotiating Europeanisation and averting peripherality - actively shaping their position within the European HE landscape by leveraging resources and (pre-existing) relationships with European partners to overcome challenges created by exclusion from the European funding programmes.

**Originality/value of paper:**

By combining complementary theories, we contribute to the growing body of literature on transnational alliances in higher education (see for example Stensaker, 2018; Fuchs et al., 2023), offering a more refined analysis of rationales behind alliance formation (as called for by Fehrenbach & Huisman (2022)), taking into consideration institutional contexts and specificity of the EUI as both a top-down and bottom-up scheme.