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Avoiding Peripheralisation: Swiss and British Higher Education Institutions' Participation in the European Universities Initiative

Research Report

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1. Background

The European Universities initiative (EUI)

The European Universities initiative (EUI) is a flagship higher education (HE) policy launched by the European Commission in 2017 to build a high-quality, resilient, and competitive European Education Area (EEA). Unlike the intergovernmental Bologna Process, which focused on voluntary policy convergence, the EUI is an EU-led strategy designed to create deep, long-term transnational alliances. These alliances aim to foster systemic integration through joint curricula, shared research infrastructures, and seamless student and staff mobility, leading the future transformation of European higher education. By early 2026, the initiative expanded significantly, now encompassing 73 alliances involving more than 650 higher education institutions (HEIs) across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

Switzerland and the UK in EUI

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).

In the UK, Brexit has fundamentally altered the relationship with the EU, significantly impacting the higher education and research sectors. The most immediate change was the loss of full participation in the Erasmus+ programme. This was replaced by the Turing Scheme, which represents a political choice to prioritise outward, global mobility. However, its non-reciprocal nature and less comprehensive funding have limited opportunities for both UK students to study in the EU and for EU students to come to the UK, contributing to a sharp drop in EU student enrolment (Brooks & Waters, 2026; Highman, 2019; Highman et al., 2023; Horton & Fras, 2021; Mayhew, 2022; Neville et al., 2024; Wakeling et al., 2025).

Switzerland, as a non-Member State has always had a unique, and often complex relationship with the EU and its core programmes and policies. Its journey can be characterised as one of close, voluntary Europeanisation, followed by politically driven periods of partial exclusion: In February 2014, following a referendum on migration, Switzerland's association with the Horizon 2020 research program was suspended with the country reclassified as a 'third country', removing the right of Swiss applicants to access European Research Council (ERC) grants, the Maria Curie-Sklodowska Actions (MSCAs) and access to EU funds for the remainder of the programme. Switzerland also lost its association with the Erasmus+ programme. In September 2014, a temporary arrangement reached by

the Swiss Federal Council and the EC allowed Switzerland to participate fully in the ERC and MSCA schemes. However, for broader collaborative projects, Switzerland was still treated as a third country until January 2017 when, following the ratification of the so-called Croatia Protocol, Switzerland re-joined Horizon2020 as a fully associated country. The same year, a motion was accepted by the Federal Council to enter into negotiations with the EU on accession to the Erasmus+ successor programme (2021-2027). A more significant phase of exclusion began in 2021 when negotiations for a framework agreement with the EU broke off, influenced in part by the EU's desire to protect single market integrity post-Brexit. This led to Switzerland's status in Horizon Europe being downgraded to a non-associated third country and stalled negotiations for re-association with the new Erasmus+ programme.

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 initiative. 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. The following institutions are currently participating as of early 2026:

Switzerland (Associate Members)

More than 50% of all Swiss universities and universities of applied sciences (UAS) are now involved in EUI alliances.

- **University of Basel (UNIBAS) – EPICUR**
- **University of Bern (UNIBE) – ENLIGHT**
- **University of Geneva (UNIGE) – 4EU+**
- **University of Lausanne (UNIL) – CIVIS**
- **University of St. Gallen (HSG) – ENGAGE.EU**
- **University of Zurich (UZH) – Una Europa**
- **Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Lausanne (EPFL) – EuroTeQ**
- **Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETH Zurich) – ENHANCE**
- **Bern University of Applied Sciences (BFH) – PIONEER**
- **University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland (FHNW) – ChallengeEU**

- **University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland (HES-SO) – UNITA**
- **Zurich University of Applied Sciences (ZHAW) – EELISA**
- **University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI) – EUonAIR**

At least two further HEIs were members of alliances which failed in securing the funding thus far, and at least one other is currently exploring the possibility of joining as a guest/partial member.

United Kingdom (Associate Members)

The following UK institutions maintain their European presence through self-funded EUI participation:

- **University of Birmingham – EuniWell**
- **University of Durham – ARQUS**
- **University of Edinburgh – Una Europa**
- **University of Essex – YUFE**
- **University of Glasgow – CIVIS**
- **University of Warwick – EUTOPIA**
- **King's College London (KCL) – Circle U.**
- **London School of Economics (LSE) – CIVICA**
- **Edinburgh Napier University – UREKA**
- **Cranfield University – SUNRISE**
- **University of East Anglia – AURORA (member until 2023)**
- **University of Oxford – NeurotechEU (member until 2023)**

In this research project, we explored the complex motivations driving Swiss and British HEIs participation in the EUI, considering the specific environmental factors present. We examined 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 scrutinised 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.

This project report serves as an executive synthesis of our broader ongoing study. While our full dataset addresses systemic obstacles and institutional strengths in detail, this report foregrounds our overarching aim: exploring *how do HEIs in the UK and Switzerland navigate their non-associated status, and what underlying logics drive their participation in the European Universities Initiative?* To unpack these dynamics, we view our preliminary findings through a multifaceted theoretical lens, encompassing legitimacy management (Suchman, 1995), knowledge-based theory (Grant, 1996), and resource dependence theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978).

Methodology

In this study, we have adopted a comparative case study design with embedded units of analysis to explore institutional engagement in non-EU contexts (Yin, 2013). The primary data included a qualitative questionnaire and semi-structured, in-depth interviews.

Data: Qualitative Questionnaire

The study began with the distribution of a qualitative questionnaire to the participating HEIs in Switzerland as part of another earlier (non-research) project carried out in 2023. Later, consent to use the responses for research purposes as part of this project has been obtained, and additional questionnaires have been shared with new Swiss HEIs joining alliances (including those that have applied and were awaiting a decision at the time of the data collection in 2024) as well as British HEIs. The questionnaire explored themes of challenges, underlying complexities, strategic benefits, and relevance to national systems. The written responses collected before the interviews were analysed thematically to inform and refine final interview protocol. NB, as completion of the questionnaire was not a prerequisite for participating in the interview, the sample (of HEIs) here is smaller (UK n=7; CH n=8).

Data: Semi-Structured Interviews.

The core empirical data consists of 33 semi-structured interviews conducted between April 2024 and February 2025 with the key stakeholders in both countries (Table 1). Participants were selected using purposive sampling to capture both operational and leadership perspectives within the HEIs themselves, as well as the national policy perspective.

Interviews were conducted by the respective researchers in their national context: one researcher conducted all interviews in Switzerland, and the other in the UK, to ensure

contextual understanding of the distinct national policy environment being discussed by the participants.

In Switzerland, the sample comprised 22 interviewees from 12 HEIs, including both universities and universities of applied sciences. Approximately 40% of the interviewees held senior leadership, strategic decision-making roles, such as vice-rectors, rectors’ advisors and deans. The remaining participants were individuals responsible for operational duties - delivery and management of the EUI alliance work, such as coordinators and project officers. Final sample is highly representative, including 10 of the 14 HEIs participating by early 2025. The interviews with HEI representatives were supplemented with 3 interviews with other stakeholders - representatives of SERI, Movetia - the national agency for exchange and mobility, and Mission of Switzerland to the EU.

In the UK, the sample comprised 8 interviews: 7 with the operational staff in participating UK HEIs (it was decided that the perspectives of operational personnel were the most relevant and reflective of the institutional approaches to the EUI alliance work), supplemented by 1 interview with a national stakeholder organisation - the Universities UK (UUK). UUK was chosen for its representativeness of the UK HE sectors, and its direct, overarching engagement in advocating for UK HE participation in the EEA. This one interview provides a sufficient, high-level perspective to contextualise the policy environment being actively navigated by the UK HEIs, while reflecting the relative lack of unified, formal government-level support or coordination on the EUI initiative when compared to Switzerland.

United Kingdom	Switzerland
<p>7 HEIs (research universities) participating at the time of data collection:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 7 operational personnel (institutional coordinators) 	<p>8 HEIs (2 UAS, 6 research universities, participating, 1 research university with ‘guest/partial’ membership, 1 (UAS) which successfully applied in 2024, and 2 HEIs (1 UAS, 1 research university) which applied in 2024 but were not successful:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 8 operational personnel (institutional coordinators) 6 senior leaders 8 in dual operational/senior leadership roles

1 other national stakeholder	3 other national stakeholders
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Table 1. Number and type of interview participants per country

Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted in accordance with ethical standards for social science research. All participants (interviewees and questionnaire respondents) were fully informed about the research purpose, procedures, data use, and the voluntary nature of their involvement. Interviewees received a detailed Information Sheet and signed an Informed Consent Form, while questionnaire respondents were provided with equivalent information prior to accessing the survey.

Participants provided explicit consent to be interviewed and audio-recorded, or to submit written responses via the questionnaire. They were assured of their right to withdraw at any time and to refuse to answer any questions. To ensure participant and institutional privacy, all interview transcripts and questionnaire data were anonymised prior to thematic analysis and publication, meaning names and institutional affiliations were removed. All recordings, transcripts, and raw survey data were stored securely; raw recordings were deleted after transcription, and consent forms were kept separate from the anonymised data.

2. Findings

The empirical evidence gathered through this study indicates that HEIs view participation in the EUI as a strategic countermeasure against the potential peripheralisation of the Swiss and British higher education sectors. For institutions in both contexts, the decision to join an alliance was not merely a reaction to external funding opportunities but a deliberate assertion of institutional agency within a contested policy space. In the United Kingdom, the logic of participation is defined by a pragmatic necessity to maintain a presence in Europe amidst the uncertainties of the post-Brexit environment. Having initially used the EUI as a low-risk entry point during the Erasmus+ pilot phases (as British HEIs were able to receive funding from the EU until the formal UK exit from the Union), British HEIs now view participation as a mechanism to prevent isolation from established European networks. Viewed through the lens of resource dependence theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), British HEIs use the EUI as a conduit to manage new external dependencies, securing access to established European networks, collaborative infrastructure, and talent pools that domestic alternatives (like the Turing scheme) cannot fully replace. Notably, more HEIs have joined the alliances once funding was no longer available with only two leaving the initiative.

The Swiss logic is anchored in a strategic imperative to maintain institutional competitiveness following the protracted reality of exclusion from core European programmes. Interviewees frequently employed the metaphor of a 'moving train', with one senior leader at a Swiss research university describing the urgency as trying to "*jump on the train while it's moving*", asserting that participation was a non-negotiable act to avoid being left behind as the EEA (and EHEA) undergoes systemic integration. Operating under these same resource dependencies, Swiss engagement serves as a deliberate manoeuvre to secure access to external resources (talent, network and collaborative infrastructure) and ensure that their institutions remain embedded in the regional landscape despite their lack of formal association with the European programmes.

Diversity of Participation and Institutional Status

The profile of participating institutions reflects a broad cross-section of both sectors. In the UK, the group is predominantly composed of research-intensive universities, including many members of the Russell Group. Switzerland demonstrates a more varied landscape, with active participation from both research-intensive universities and Universities of Applied Sciences.

While these HEIs are formally considered 'associate members' of the EU project, the vast majority are treated as full members within the alliances themselves. Despite taking a 'backseat' regarding strategic financial decisions and the inability to lead an alliance, British and Swiss members were, by and large, functionally integrated as equal peers by their European partners. In the Swiss context, this engagement is resource-intensive, typically involving at least one full-time member of staff and several others with dedicated time for alliance work. In the UK, due to more limited resources dedicated to the alliance activities, the alliance-related tasks are usually carried out by part-time staff, or staff responsible also for other (usually internationalisation) activities. While British institutions adopt a more 'pick-and-choose' approach to which activities they engage in, Swiss HEIs participate in nearly all alliance activities, including the co-leading of work programmes, ensuring they remain integrated at a functional level despite their political status.

Alliance Choice

The strategic choice of which alliance to join was rarely a product of a generic European vision, but rather a reflection of institutional profile, prior connections, and existing path dependencies. Engagement with the initiative strongly reflects a legacy of participation in long-standing university networks, which provided the trust-based foundations necessary for such intensive cooperation, establishing what a senior leader at one Swiss UAS termed a "*network of trust*" that breaks down traditional barriers, confirming findings from our earlier

work (Charret & Chankseliani, 2023; Lambrechts et al., 2024; Lambrechts, 2025). Many institutions prioritised alliances where they already held successful bilateral relationships, viewing the EUI as a mechanism to formalise and scale these ties into long-term, systemic engagements. For instance, certain institutions chose specific alliances whose thematic focus—such as civic science—explicitly mirrored their own institutional missions and historical commitment to citizen participation. This decision-making process was frequently described as a top-down strategic mandate initiated by executive leadership to prevent institutional isolation, followed by a process of facilitated engagement intended to secure faculty and student buy-in.

Bypassing National Narratives through Strategic Re-Assertion

Beyond maintaining a mere presence, British HEIs have used the EUI participation to strategically re-assert their agency in direct opposition to domestic political agendas, a process rooted in institutional legitimacy management (Suchman, 1995). The data supports a notion of a concerted institutional rejection of the singular 'Global Britain' narrative championed by the national government, which institutions perceived as prioritising a global rather than an European outlook, through schemes such as Turing. Participants indicated that EUI participation provides a unique opportunity to “free” their institutions from *“some of the worst impacts of Brexit”*, allowing them to bypass national policy divergence. By securing alliance membership, these institutions are not passively accepting their new position but are actively maintaining a “seat at the table” within European policymaking. This allows them to counteract the threat of losing historical policy influence and to preserve collaborative links that interviewees feared might be jeopardised by the national government’s shift toward bilateralism and transnational education.

In the Swiss context, the strategic re-assertion of agency takes the form of sophisticated political signalling directed at both Brussels and Bern. Faced with a diplomatic stalemate and the breakdown of framework negotiations, Swiss HEIs have adopted EUI participation as a “political act” to manage their pragmatic and moral legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). The message to Brussels is one of continued alignment, providing evidence to *“show that we want to be fully on board”* with European cooperation. Simultaneously, the engagement serves as an internal signal to the Swiss government to *“demonstrate strong interest from Swiss universities in European projects”*, highlighting the urgency of re-association to avoid being relegated to 'rule-takers' rather than 'co-shapers' of future European standards. This is further underscored by the significant financial cost institutions are willing to bear, including a 40% own-funding contribution that exceeds the standard EU requirement, thereby demonstrating a tangible commitment to the European project.

Internal Transformation and Functional Alignment

As reported in our upcoming publication (Charret & Lambrechts, 2026 forthcoming), the practical implications of these strategic choices have led to substantial internal transformations. In the UK, this has manifested in the formalisation of European engagement strategies, marking a shift from pre-Brexit collaborations that were largely organic to the creation of explicit 'Europe Strategies'. Institutions are now establishing dedicated roles to monitor 'European metrics', such as staff retention and collaborative publication patterns, to safeguard their European credentials. These new structures serve as a public demonstration of commitment to staff and students, signaling that the institution remains an international actor despite exclusion from European frameworks.

In Switzerland, the focus is increasingly on functional convergence and the acquisition of new competences. Drawing on the knowledge-based view (Grant, 1996), institutions use the EUI to deliberately expand their organisational boundaries, integrating external specialist knowledge from their European partners to safeguard and build internal expertise. Swiss HEIs see opportunities for future funding through seed grants and impulse funds for collaborative projects that would otherwise not materialise. The EUI serves as a critical 'testing platform' for policy innovations like Blended Intensive Programmes, short joint programmes, and innovative mobility formats. These activities help combat 'de-skilling', that is the concern that administrative "routines [getting] lost" might turn European programmes into a "blind spot" for Swiss staff, and mitigate the disadvantages of non-association for early-career scholars. Furthermore, senior leadership repeatedly noted that the initiative strengthens reputation and international visibility, allowing Swiss HEIs to leverage existing partnerships into more structured and deep forms of academic engagement.

Barriers and Systemic Concerns

Despite the positive outlook, significant barriers persist, highlighting the friction of operating under severe resource dependencies (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). British HEIs remain concerned about long-term funding sustainability, the marginal research dimension of the current EUI framework, and a perceived lack of internal buy-in. In Switzerland, the disparity in funding with EU partners remains an issue, leading to a frustrating "two-speed Europe" dynamic. This is compounded by administrative complexity, described by operational staff at a Swiss research university as a "*huge administrative overhead*" and an "*eerie burden*," and the strain on resources. The 'onboarding' process into an already active alliance—described as jumping onto a "moving train"—presents ongoing challenges for integration for HEIs joining existing alliances. Participants in both countries expressed a mix of optimism and skepticism regarding the long-term strategic plans of the alliances, noting that while the investment is high, the future remains tied to the dynamic and often unpredictable nature of European political developments.

3. Conclusions

Our findings demonstrate that Swiss and British HEIs have exercised significant strategic agency to remain integrated within the European higher education landscape despite considerable political hurdles. The proactive engagement with the EUI has allowed these institutions to navigate periods of exclusion and maintain their international standing by converting political barriers into functional advantages. Looking ahead, the landscape is shifting toward a more stable framework for transnational cooperation as both nations navigate their respective roads to re-association. For Switzerland, a definitive path has been established with re-association to the Erasmus+ programme anticipated in 2027, supported by interim national funding throughout 2026 to bridge the current gap. In the UK, the successful re-association with Horizon Europe has paved the way for the opening of formal discussions to re-join Erasmus+ in late 2025, signalling a potential return to reciprocal European mobility and a more sustainable funding model for EUI participation. The persistent political signalling from Swiss HEIs appears to have been effective in supporting the diplomatic momentum toward re-association, while in the UK, the consistent institutional commitment to European networks likely played a role in the new government's strategic change of direction toward closer educational alignment with Europe.

4. Dissemination Activities

Publications

Charret, A. & Lambrechts, A.A. (forthcoming 2026). *Re-Europeanising Higher Education - Exploring the Diverse Logics of Swiss and British Participation in the European Universities Initiative* (under review)

Presentations to date

Lambrechts, A.A., & Charret, A. (2025, December 18). *Re-Europeanising Higher Education - Exploring the Diverse Logics of Swiss and British Participation in the European Universities Initiative* [conference presentation]. Le Réseau d'Études sur l'Enseignement Supérieur (RESUP) Conference, Paris, France.

Lambrechts, A.A., & Charret, A. (2025, December 3). *Re-Europeanising Higher Education - Exploring the Diverse Logics of Swiss and British Participation in the European Universities Initiative* [conference panel presentation]. Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE) Annual Conference, Nottingham, UK.

Lambrechts, A.A., & Charret, A. (2025, September 5). *Re-Europeanising Higher Education - Exploring the Diverse Logics of Swiss and British Participation in the European Universities Initiative* [conference panel presentation]. Consortium of Higher Education Researchers (CHER) 37th Annual Conference, Poznan, Poland.

Lambrechts, A.A., & Charret, A. (2025, August 26). *Re-Europeanising Higher Education - Exploring the Diverse Logics of Swiss and British Participation in the European Universities Initiative* [conference panel presentation]. European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) General Conference. Thessaloniki, Greece.

Lambrechts, A.A., & Charret, A. (2025, June 2). *Exploring the Swiss and British HEIs Participation in the European Universities Initiative* [conference paper presentation]. European Universities Initiative 5 Years On: A Research and Practice Symposium. Lugano, Switzerland.

Lambrechts, A.A. (2024, September 4-6). *Beyond Strategic Alliances: A Nuanced View of Swiss Universities in the European Universities Initiative* [conference panel presentation]. CHER 36th Annual Conference “Higher Education and Science Feature(s): Trends, Imaginaries, and Alternatives”. Beval, Luxembourg.

5. Project Team

Principal Investigator

Dr Agata A. Lambrechts is a Senior Researcher at the Swiss Federal University for Vocational Education and Training (SFUVET) and a Scientific Collaborator at the Università della Svizzera italiana (USI). She holds a PhD from the University of York, UK. Her interdisciplinary research spans education, law, politics, and human rights, focusing primarily on the governance and policy of higher and vocational education, with a specific emphasis on EU-level initiatives. Agata investigates collaborations within the European Universities initiative (EUI) and Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) at SFUVET. Concurrently, at USI, she uses organisational and sociological perspectives to explore the diversity of European higher education institutions, the gendered nature of academic labour, and institutional collaboration within the EUI framework. She also serves as an Assistant Editor of *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*.

Co-Investigator

Dr Antonin Charret is a Junior Research Fellow at St Edmund Hall, University of Oxford, where he researches higher education and research policy in the European Union, with a specific focus on the European Universities initiative. He is also a Co-investigator on the

'Beyond Research on Research' project for the Centre for Global Higher Education (CGHE) and teaches Comparative and International Education. During his time at Oxford, Antonin contributed to various international comparative research projects for CGHE, the UKRI CGRF-funded 'Talk Together' project, and the 'Close the Gap' project. He has published as first author in the journal *Higher Education* and presented his work at conferences hosted by organisations such as SRHE, ECPR, and UACES. Antonin has also served as a reviewer for journals including *PCI Organization Studies* and *Higher Education*.

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