



UCL European Institute Policy Briefing

In and out of the European Research Area: System and Institutional Resilience in the UK and Switzerland

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Introduction

The aim of this policy paper is twofold, on the one hand the characteristics of the higher education sectors in the UK and in Switzerland are outlined, focusing on their potential for resilience vis-à-vis increasingly difficult relations with the EU. On the other hand, potential avenues for cooperation in higher education and research are identified, in order to strengthen the UK and Swiss positions at European and global level.

The paper is organised into three parts: part I discusses the higher education systems in both countries, including higher education governance, funding and coordination mechanisms, stratification and functional diversification. Part II explores the differential impact of potentially disruptive relationships with the EU, highlighting higher levels of political uncertainty in the UK; higher levels of interdependence between Switzerland and EU Member States; and the impact of systemic differences on the two countries' ability to absorb external shocks. Part III identifies some opportunities for UK-Swiss cooperation, noting the opportunity for strategic bilateral partnerships, and multilateral networks.

Part I: Systems and institutions of Higher Education in the UK and Switzerland (De-)centralisation of national governance

Since devolution in 1998, the **UK** higher education system has been characterised by several and distinct levels of centralisation. Generally, these can be summarised by a rather devolved governance for higher education, as each one of the four countries is allocated a different block grant by the central government. Against this backdrop, England has set up a distinctive trajectory with the establishment in 2017 of the Office for Students and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) exercise. These have, potentially, far-reaching implications for English universities as they have been designed to protect students as consumers in the higher education market. Research policy has, on the other hand, become more centralised with the creation of UKRI (UK Research and Innovation) in 2018, composed by research councils according to disciplinary fields. The Research Assessment Framework (REF), started in 1989 (as the Research Assessment Exercise), is conducted at national level every seven years, the last one having just taken place.

As a federal country, **Switzerland** has two types of universities: cantonal universities, regulated by their own canton, and the federal institutes of technology, regulated by the federal government. Since the end of the 1990s, the Swiss higher education sector has undergone significant changes. First, block grants and multi-year contracts with the funding authorities have been introduced, along with reforms granting increasing autonomy in the governance of universities. This has involved more powerful rectors and newly established university boards of governors. It is to be noted that these boards comprise representatives of the various societal sectors and political parties, reflecting the “consociative” nature of Swiss politics. At the same time a reorganisation of the disciplinary landscape has taken place, with Engineering mostly located in the federal institutes of technology, Pharmacy and Veterinary concentrated in selected universities. Medicine and university hospitals have remained within the competences of the cantons, hence in (some of) the cantonal universities.

Funding and national coordination mechanisms

With the arrival of conservative governments in 2010, there has been a pronounced marketisation of higher education in the **UK**. This has meant primarily a changing policy focus, from universities to students, against the backdrop of significant changes in university funding and increases in student tuition fees. Nowadays institutional budgets rely between 50 and almost 100% on revenues from student enrolment, generating a focus on the student experience and on graduate employability, and an understanding of students as consumers. Universities have thus been pressured to become more publicly accountable, better performing and are more carefully scrutinised in their use of public funding. Further, universities have been asked to perform their duty of accountability beyond academia, and to demonstrate their positive impact on wider society. Overall, UK universities can be described as atomised actors in a market where they compete for resources, the most important resource being students, both domestic and international. This has had two consequences: first, prestigious and internationally renowned universities have grown significantly, while more local, specialised institutions have struggled financially. Second, UK institutions compete against each other. Accordingly, UK universities are less functionally diversified, and fall within a pecking order based on prestige and research intensity. While this is an historical feature of the system, this has been intensified by recent reforms.

In **Switzerland** a certain level of competition is present, as funding is based on a formula where student numbers play a major role. In the early 2000s, concern regarding enrolments led to a reorganisation of the national system, with some universities repositioned, according to student numbers and relative prestige. Characterised as an elitist system, Swiss higher education serves around 24% of the relevant age cohort, reaching 30% if professional tertiary education is considered (Goastellec 2017). The latter has been traditionally well organised and successful through apprenticeships. That said, it has undergone significant reforms in the last two decades, with the establishment of universities of applied sciences and teacher training institutions. These are mostly under cantonal rule.

Stratification, functional diversity and competition

The **UK** higher education system has historically been vertically differentiated according to research ranking and age-related prestige, with the University of Oxford and University of Cambridge established in the Middle Ages and the oldest Scottish universities established following the diffusion of the Enlightenment ideas. In the 19th century, as in many other countries, several universities were founded to provide the country with trained professionals, accommodate nation-building objectives and develop different regions. In 1992 the UK system became unitary with more than 30 colleges and polytechnics given university status. The main logic underlying this policy was to foster competition in the higher education sector and increase quality. Many of the 165 higher education institutions recorded with the Higher Education Statistics Agency have also established or have become part of interest groups, which primarily advocate the interests of their members in policy processes. The Russell group, funded in 1994 gathers 24 research universities; MillionPlus (1997) counts 23 former colleges and polytechnics (so-called post-92 universities); University Alliance (founded in 2006) comprises 12 locally oriented universities; GuildHE assembles 54 smaller and specialist for-profit and not-for-profit higher education institutions. 140 institutions are members of the national Rectors' Conference, Universities UK.

While **Switzerland** has only 12 universities, five of them appear in the top 100 of the Shanghai ranking, evidence of the distributed excellence across the system. There is a correlation between the size of the canton and the standing of the university, which highlights the differing financial means of the relevant public authorities, but also points to larger student markets, and to larger cities. The latter is relative to Swiss size, with Zurich (around 400,000 inhabitants), Geneva and Basel (around 200,000 inhabitants) and Lausanne (140,000), although the respective urban areas are significantly larger. While before the 1990s one could have characterised the system as comprised mostly of comprehensive universities (with medicine only in some) and federal institutes of technology focused on STEM, the Swiss higher education sector is now made up of comprehensive, multi-disciplinary and specialised institutions. The two newest universities, established in 1996 and 2000, are specialised and designed, though unofficially, as complementary to the largest institutions, which had become unable to welcome increasing numbers of students in specific disciplines (e.g. Law).

Part II Impact of the current and future relationship with the EU in HE and research policy

The UK and Swiss systems share characteristics: strong academic performance, high levels of internationalisation in the staff and student body, and a global reputation (in the top 100 positions of the Shanghai ranking there are eight UK universities and five Swiss universities).

As such, both systems have benefited from the EU Framework Programmes. However, there are several differences, which relate to diverse system governance. The UK has largely autonomous and business-run universities located in a prestige-

based hierarchy, while Switzerland has fewer universities with informal and concerted functional differentiation between the cantons and the confederation. This has notable implications for the impact of a disruptive change such as a shift from associate country to third country under the Horizon Europe programme – or non-association - in either system.

First, historical, geographical and political differences would push Switzerland to mitigate such disruptions against the background of closer ties to EU member states. This is already exemplified by the Swiss-European Mobility Programme, that constitutes de facto a Swiss-funded addition to the Erasmus Programme. In the UK, depending on general political trends, governments could take more drastic decisions, following the logic of a ‘divorce’ from Brussels or, a significant reversal following a party change in the leadership of the country. The level of political uncertainty in the UK is higher.

Second, internationalisation in Switzerland, particularly with respect to academic staff, is more reliant on European countries and particularly on its large neighbours: Germany, France and Italy. The UK, as part of the so-called ‘Anglosphere’, can draw on longer standing global relationships to attract non-EU international staff as well as students.

Third, disruptive change can be analysed at system and institutional level. The Swiss university sector is more diffuse and internally less competitive, hence it would be more resilient to sudden and negative changes. Equally, it is well funded from its cantonal and federal authorities, allowing for financial buffers. The potential impact of such a change would be mitigated by concerted efforts from the federal and cantonal governments. The UK system would be affected more significantly, but not in the same way for all universities. Hence one would expect that the stronger institutions would cope better than the others, as they would leverage their organisational capacity, financial reserves and global standing to balance possible losses (fewer EU students, fewer EU academic staff, reduced participation in European projects).

Fourth, overall, the resources to be used by individual universities to cope with possible disruption would be more distributed in the Swiss system. This means that one would expect a more efficient “effort” at national level. In the UK, the effort would be less efficient in that the aggregate of the resources used to buffer possible shocks would probably be higher and less distributed, because it would be less coordinated. However, it is possible the blow would be absorbed by the larger and wealthier universities, which have tended to be more involved with the EU Framework Programmes.

Finally, and more generally, the impact of such disruption would play out differently at different levels. The EU has undoubtedly played a key role in internationalisation, but it is neither the only actor nor a monolithic one. This is particularly so in higher education and research, where organisational capacity cannot be built in the short term just by providing dedicated funding (Fumasoli and Rossi 2021). Hence, universities with third-country status should be able to cope with possible disruptions by finding new opportunities that position them uniquely in the global higher education arena.

Part III: Opportunities for strengthened UK-Swiss cooperation in higher education

While European integration in higher education (and education more generally) has intensified in the last 20 years, it has done so building on longstanding dynamics in academia. These are based on normative frameworks and ideals such as the pursuit of academic excellence, which cannot be closely linked or limited to political and policy objectives, nor confined by geographical boundaries. These ideals can be observed, particularly, in the way the European Research Council operates (Fumasoli et al 2015; Cavallaro and Lepori 2021). In this respect the negative impact of exclusion from Horizon Europe may not be immediately visible, with the UK and Swiss higher education sectors maintaining their position as high-performing central actors for some years.

However, this advantage risks becoming increasingly limited to institutional and individual/research groups, while national systems become gradually more isolated from the European Research Area. Hence UK and Swiss universities, in the medium to long-term, risk losing not only their position, but also the organisational capabilities required to participate in large research consortia.

Given the significant performance of some universities in the UK, particularly the 24 institutions in the Russell Group, and that of the largest Swiss universities, it appears that setting up bilateral strategic partnerships could lead to a reinforced critical mass and enhance the impact of joint academic activities in Europe. While this is an inter-institutional arrangement between single universities, it can be expected to have reverberations throughout the respective national higher education sectors, although to a different extent in the two countries, given their systemic characteristics. Existing multilateral strategic alliances, such as the League of European Research Universities (LERU) could also be used as a platform to discuss and launch multi-country research enterprises.

With respect to the university missions, such strategic partnerships could articulate around education with student exchanges through joint programmes at undergraduate, postgraduate and PhD level. In this case the main objective would not be to reproduce the Erasmus Programme or the newly created Turing Scheme, but rather to shape a portfolio of selected disciplines and study levels fostering European academic talent. When it comes to research, bottom-up initiatives could be funded with seed funding based on common interests and shared themes as a starting point for larger projects.

Internationalisation offers a distinctive platform through which to organise institutional partnerships. The newly created [Global Engagement Index UK](#) (combines several indicators such as student engagement and success, offshore education, study abroad, internationalisation at home and institutional infrastructure). The UK higher education sector's capacity for global engagement is distinctive and could function

as a prism through which to develop pioneering, cutting-edge impactful activities between Swiss and UK universities.

References

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