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Institutional and structural barriers to sustainable leadership careers in higher education

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ABSTRACT

As higher education institutions face intensifying pressures, effective leadership has become a cornerstone of institutional resilience. Yet leadership careers in higher education remain ad hoc and fragmented. This article explores how senior leaders perceive institutional and structural barriers that hinder sustainable leadership careers. Combining the Systems Theory Framework with the Sustainable Careers Model, we refer to sustainable careers as the alignment between individual needs and institutional conditions, leading to viable trajectories. Drawing on a mixed-methods study on senior higher education leaders in Switzerland (survey $N = 312$; 24 interviews), we show that perceived key barriers include weak succession planning, insufficient preparation, limited peer exchange, expanding competency demands, and excessive managerialisation, reinforced by systemic knowledge expectations and cultural hierarchies privileging academic prestige. Addressing these challenges requires institutional reforms that strengthen professionalisation, succession planning, role clarity, and peer networks, alongside structural measures such as simplifying accountability, expanding mobility, and building system-wide leadership programs.

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Sustainable careers; higher education management; institutional barriers; structural barriers; Systems Theory Framework of Career Development; higher education leaders

Introduction

In today's challenging environment for higher education institutions – shaped by financial constraints (McCowan, 2017), geopolitical instability (Moscovitz & Sabzalieva, 2023), rapid digitalisation (Tømte et al., 2019), and rising accountability demands (Huisman & Currie, 2004; Macheridis & Paulsson, 2021) – higher education leadership is not just a managerial function but a strategic capacity central to institutional resilience (Smith & Hughey, 2006; Tight, 2022). However, unlike the typically well-defined careers in the corporate sector, higher education leadership careers tend to be ad hoc and fragmented (Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017; Hempsall, 2014; Whitchurch, 2006). These career patterns are not merely the result of individual career choices but are strongly influenced by structural and contextual factors like personal circumstances, available resources, and

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support systems (Schweitzer et al., 2023). Thus, understanding leadership trajectories in higher education requires a shift from focusing solely on individual agency to examining the institutional and structural conditions that enable or constrain sustainable career progression (Schweitzer et al., 2023). This article contributes to that shift in perspective by identifying the systemic barriers undermining sustainable leadership careers in higher education.

Existing research has examined effective leadership styles and competencies (e.g., Davis, 2014; Davis & Jones, 2014; Youngs, 2017), barriers to accessing leadership roles (e.g., Burkinshaw & White, 2019; Lashari, 2023; Sparkman, 2021), inadequate preparation for leadership roles (e.g., Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017; Hempsall, 2014), and the operational difficulties of managing complex academic institutions (e.g., Jansen van Vuuren et al., 2025; Lizier et al., 2024; Webber, 2016). Yet little is known about the *sustainability* of leadership careers in higher education – that is, how leaders can maintain a viable career trajectory over time.

To address this gap, this article investigates the institutional and structural barriers that undermine the sustainability of higher education leadership careers. We refer to sustainability as the continuous alignment between individual needs and institutional conditions, promoting individuals' well-being, health and performance over time (De Vos et al., 2020). Instead of directly assessing these outcomes, we focus on the perceived barriers that may impede their realisation and challenge the long-term sustainability of leadership careers.

Understanding what disrupts this alignment is crucial for sustaining fulfilling leadership trajectories and for reinforcing institutional resilience. Existing research highlights leadership behaviours and effectiveness but often underplays the organisational and systemic conditions shaping sustainable careers. In response, we combine the Systems Theory Framework of Career Development (Patton & McMahon, 2021) with the Sustainable Careers Model (De Vos et al., 2020) and apply this integrated framework to the Swiss higher education context.

The Swiss higher education system offers a critical case (Flyvbjerg, 2006) for examining structural and institutional barriers to sustainable leadership. Its decentralised governance, shaped by multiple federal and (inter-)cantonal legal frameworks, and its combination of institutional diversity, strong autonomy, and loosely unified regulation make it both a distinctive and instructive case amid intensifying global pressures.

Adopting a mixed-methods research design – building on data from a larger research project on senior higher education leaders in Switzerland, including a standardised online survey and qualitative interviews (Perich et al., 2024, 2025) – we show that institutional barriers constrain the sustainability of higher education leadership careers, reinforced by structural hierarchies privileging academic over managerial competence. From the leaders' perspective, key institutional barriers include the lack of peer community and systematic leadership development, inadequate preparation and succession planning, and expanding competency demands. They perceive these challenges as intensified by complex stakeholder management and the excessive managerialisation of leadership roles. Our findings underline the need for higher education institutions to professionalise leadership, ease operational pressures, strengthen succession planning and leadership development, and enhance the recognition of leadership roles.

Literature review

Leadership in the higher education context

Contemporary higher education leadership has been significantly shaped by global pressures, New Public Management (Broucker & De Wit, 2015), and the adoption of corporate practices (Croucher & Lacy, 2020; Hempsall, 2014; Lizier et al., 2024). Today's leaders are expected to engage in data-driven decision-making, academic entrepreneurship, and revenue generation (Webber, 2016). As managerial logics and performance metrics gain prominence, leaders must reconcile such corporate expectations with academic collegial values (Lizier et al., 2024). Volatile institutional environments further intensify these demands, requiring not only technical skills but also adaptive, values-driven leadership (Jansen van Vuuren et al., 2025).

Leadership roles in higher education are rarely confined to formal management functions. They are inherently hybrid, relational, and often temporary – blending academic authority, organised coordination, and peer-based influence (Bolden et al., 2008; Whitchurch, 2006). This hybridity amplifies the complexity of sustaining a leadership career, as legitimacy depends not only on formal competencies but also on academic credibility and cultural alignment. Viewing leadership careers as both structurally situated and socially negotiated helps illuminate why their sustainability hinges on a dynamic alignment between individual identity, institutional expectations, and broader governance structures.

Despite rising institutional demands, access to leadership roles in higher education remains uneven, with women persistently underrepresented due to structural and cultural barriers (UNESCO, 2025) such as gendered norms and limited mentorship (Burkinshaw & White, 2019; Lashari, 2023). Similarly, racialised environments constrain Black male executives' trajectories despite formal diversity commitments (Sparkman, 2021).

Beyond access barriers, research highlights systemic shortcomings in the preparation and support of higher education leaders. Research by Hempsall (2014), Gigliotti and Ruben (2017) and Perich et al. (2025) highlights the lack of coherent career trajectories and structured preparation, pointing to a systemic failure to cultivate sustainable career pathways. Many higher education leaders feel unprepared for their roles, having advanced based on academic performance rather than through formal leadership development (Hempsall, 2014). Their fragmented, overly demanding roles are shaped by short-term managerial pressures – factors deterring potential candidates and fuelling burnout (Hempsall, 2014). Gigliotti and Ruben (2017) similarly describe leadership development in higher education institutions as ad hoc and undervalued, leaving gaps between institutional support and required competencies.

While research has examined higher education leadership in terms of access barriers, inadequate preparation, and challenges, less attention has been paid to the *sustainability* of leadership careers – understood as the ongoing person-career fit enabling well-being, performance, and long-term engagement (De Vos et al., 2020). Because sustainable careers shape both individual viability and institutional capacity, identifying their barriers is crucial. This article therefore systematically analyses perceived institutional and structural barriers to sustainable leadership, using the Systems Theory Framework of Career Development together with the Conceptual Model of Sustainable Careers.

Conceptualising sustainable careers in higher education leadership

Patton and McMahon's (2021) Systems Theory Framework of Career Development (STF) offers an integrative response to critiques of fragmentation, contextual insensitivity and limited practical relevance in career theory. Initially developed for career decision-making, cross-cultural research and practice has since expanded the STF to encompass diverse life stages and sociocultural contexts (Patton & McMahon, 2021). The STF conceptualises career development as the interaction of *personal* attributes (e.g., gender, values, ethnicity, and ability), *contextual* influences, including the *social system* (e.g., family, education, employers) and the *environmental-societal system* (e.g., policy, labour markets, historical conditions) (Patton & McMahon, 2021). A defining feature of the STF is its recognition that time, nonlinearity, and chance are integral to career development (Patton & McMahon, 2021).

The Sustainable Careers Model (SCM; De Vos et al., 2020) extends the STF by linking career development to broader sustainability discourses (Hartung & DiFabio, 2024; Schweitzer et al., 2023). It defines career sustainability as an individual's capacity to pursue viable, context-sensitive trajectories which promote well-being, health, and productivity (De Vos et al., 2020). Sustainable careers are both an individual and collective responsibility (Russo et al., 2025) and require the alignment of the three core dimensions person, context, and time: the *person dimension* concerns agency, adaptability, and career competencies; the *context dimension* captures structural and institutional conditions; and the *time dimension* underscores the cumulative and non-linear nature of careers.

The STF and SCM both challenge linear, individualised models of career development. While STF highlights the interdependence of personal, social, and environmental-societal influences – including chance and complexity – SCM conceptualises sustainability as emerging from the person-context-time relationship. Together, these frameworks position individuals as active agents whose adaptability and meaning-making shape and are shaped by their structural and institutional environments.

Structural and institutional environments can enable and constrain sustainable careers. As constraining forces, barriers undermine the long-term alignment between individual needs and organisational contexts (De Vos et al., 2020). They can be *institutional*, rooted in internal policies, practices, and cultures of higher education institutions, or *structural*, stemming from systemic forces such as national policy frameworks, labour market conditions, or performance evaluations. Unlike routine job-related challenges, such barriers are persistent and embedded, disrupting the support structures required for long-term sustainability. By prioritising short-term performance over long-term development, impairing engagement through exclusion, and restricting growth through rigid structures, they erode the person-career fit and undermine the reciprocal value for the person and institution required for sustainable careers (De Vos et al., 2020). While institutions can address internal barriers, structural ones demand coordinated, system-level responses, and neglecting them threatens both individual well-being and institutional resilience. The following section outlines how we empirically identify these barriers in the Swiss higher education sector.

Mixed methods study design

Study context

Switzerland constitutes a critical case of strategic relevance (Flyvbjerg, 2006) for examining the barriers to sustainable higher education leadership careers: It combines structural features of high-performing systems – autonomy, decentralisation, and institutional diversity – with global pressures such as resource constraints, demographic change, and rising demands for professional management.

The Swiss higher education system is highly heterogeneous, encompassing cantonal research universities, the federally governed ETH domain with federal institutes of technology and research institutes, as well as universities of applied sciences and universities of teacher education (State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation, 2025). This diversity is embedded in a federalist, multi-level governance structure that distributes authority across federal, cantonal, and institutional levels. According to the European University Association's (EUA) Autonomy Scorecard (Pruvot et al., 2023), Swiss cantonal universities enjoy comparatively high levels of autonomy – particularly in academic, financial, and staffing domains. This autonomy allows institutions to internally shape leadership rather than having it externally imposed, making Switzerland an ideal context to examine how leadership sustainability is negotiated.

From a comparative perspective, Switzerland offers a critical case for studying the sustainability of leadership careers. Clark's 'triangle of coordination' (Clark, 1986, p. 143) shows how national higher education systems differ in the distribution of authority among the state, market, and academic community. Building on this framework, scholars distinguish three governance models: (1) state-centred systems (e.g., France, Nordic countries), where ministries exert strong control; (2) market-oriented systems (e.g., the UK, Australia), dominated by competition and performance metrics; and (3) decentralised or network-based systems (e.g., Switzerland, the Netherlands), marked by institutional autonomy and collegial self-governance (Bleiklie et al., 2015; de Boer et al., 2008; Ferlie et al., 2008). Leadership tends to be hierarchical in state-centred systems and externally recruited and performance-driven in market-oriented ones, whereas decentralised systems present a distinct leadership dynamic.

Switzerland exemplifies the third model, combining strong institutional autonomy with weakly formalised leadership development (Perich et al., 2024). Its system – shaped by academic self-governance – assigns leadership roles to rotating academic staff, typically part-time alongside academic duties, creating tensions between collegial governance and managerial demands. Switzerland therefore provides a valuable setting for exploring how decentralised structures shape leadership trajectories, role expectations, and succession planning. Although the focus is national, the underlying mechanisms reflect broader global challenges in sustaining higher education leadership.

Survey and interview data

The data stem from a mixed-methods study on higher education leadership in Switzerland (Perich et al., 2024). First, we conducted an online survey among leaders at higher education institutions; second, we carried out 24 semi-structured interviews with selected survey participants. The online survey was distributed in spring 2024 to

senior leaders at 44 Swiss higher education institutions. Based on their websites, organisational charts, and governance documents, we identified senior leaders, i.e., those who belong to a function group with (1) overall institutional responsibility (e.g., rectors, presidents, directors), (2) academic area responsibility (e.g., for core functions like research, education, or specific academic units), or (3) support area responsibility (e.g., administration, human resources, infrastructure) (see online supplementary material Appendix A1). Of the 488 identified senior leaders, 312 completed the survey (response rate: 64%).

Complementing public biographical data (e.g., websites, LinkedIn), the survey provided detailed insights into respondents' characteristics, career paths, leadership development, and competency assessments (see online supplementary material Appendix A3 for survey questionnaire). Fifty-four per cent of respondents have an executive board membership with voting or advisory rights. Ten per cent are rectors, 50% hold academic area responsibilities, and 40% lead support areas (see Table 1 and Appendix A2 for details).

The 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior leaders at different career stages, from diverse institutions, language regions, and functional roles. To capture a broad spectrum of perspectives in line with qualitative research principles (Scholl, 2020), we purposively selected 24 participants from the 203 interested survey respondents. The sample comprised twelve rectors or rectors-designate, seven deans or department heads (academic area responsibilities) and five rectorate members with support roles (see Table 2). Eleven participants worked at research universities, two at research institutes, and eleven at universities of applied sciences or universities of teacher education. Seventeen interviewees came from the German-speaking part, six from the French-speaking part, and one from the Italian-speaking part. With thirteen men and eleven women, the gender distribution was nearly balanced. Compared to the gender distribution of the population of senior HEI leaders in Switzerland (31% women), the online survey sample was representative, while female leaders were slightly overrepresented in the interview sample (Perich et al., 2024).

Between June and October 2024, we conducted 24 semi-structured interviews lasting 60–120 minutes, 19 in person and five online. Each interview was conducted by two researchers, in German or English, and audio-recorded and transcribed with consent. A role-specific interview guide ensured consistency while allowing flexibility (see online supplementary material Appendix A4).

Data analysis

We analysed the interview data using a systematic, multi-stage approach in MAXQDA, guided by thematic analysis principles (Naeem et al., 2023) and the procedures outlined by Rädiker and Kuckartz (2020). The process involved five steps. First, two researchers independently familiarised themselves with the transcripts through repeated readings and reflective memos. Second, combining inductive insights with theoretical concepts, they developed an initial coding scheme. Third, after consolidating their schemes, they applied the final coding scheme to the full dataset as a flexible heuristic tool. Fourth, iterative discussions refined the coding scheme to strengthen conceptual clarity and analytical depth. Fifth, a comparative analysis identified patterns and divergences across

Table 1. Distribution of survey respondents by higher education institutions type, management level, and function group.

Higher education institution type	Total		Management level: Members of the executive board		Function group: Overall institutional responsibility		Function group: Academic area responsibility		Function group: Support area responsibility	
Universities of applied sciences (10)	86	27.6%	68	79.1%	9	10.5%	49	57.0%	28	23.6%
Universities of teacher education (12)	12	3.8%	12	100.0%	12	100.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Cantonal universities (10)	129	41.3%	57	44.2%	5	3.9%	61	47.3%	63	48.8%
Federal institutes of technology (ETHs) (2)	60	19.2%	13	21.7%	1	1.7%	33	55.0%	26	43.3%
Research institutes of the ETH domain (4)	25	8.0%	17	68.0%	3	12.0%	14	56.0%	8	32.0%
Total (38)	312	100.0%	167	53.5%	30	9.6%	157	50.3%	125	40.1%

(Perich et al., 2024).

Table 2. Interview participants by higher education institution type and function group.

Higher education institution type	Function group: Overall institutional responsibility	Academic area responsibility	Support area responsibility
Research universities (ETHs and cantonal universities) (11)	3	5	3
Universities of applied sciences and universities of teacher education (11)	7	2	2
Research institutes of the ETH domain (2)	2	0	0
Total	12	7	5

(based on Perich et al., 2024).

interviews, informing the interpretation and generating theoretically grounded insights. Appendix A5 in the online supplementary material presents the final coding scheme and code statistics. For both categories and subcodes, we report two indicators: (1) the proportion of interviewed senior leaders ($N = 24$) who mentioned a given barrier, and (2) the proportion of coded interview segments referring to that barrier among all segments mentioning either a structural or institutional barrier (i.e., coded segments; $N = 916$).

For the institutional and structural barriers identified through our coding scheme, we also present descriptive statistics on relevant survey indicators (see online supplementary material Appendix A6), to demonstrate the broader relevance of these barriers across the full study sample.

Findings

Institutional barriers

The interviews reveal six categories of institutional barriers to sustainable leadership careers (see Figure 1), with consistent patterns across the two indicators. All interviewees reported *Operational challenges* and *Leadership pathways and recognition constraints*, reflecting persistent resource and process constraints and the absence of transparent trajectories. Also widely reported were *Insufficient role clarity and leadership preparation*, *Complexity of diverse stakeholder management*, *Limits of academic self-governance*, and the *Mismatch between hiring practices and demands of leadership role*. Given the consistent patterns across indicators, the following analyses examine the proportion of interviewees referring to each category or subcode within the six institutional barriers and function groups.

Leadership pathways and recognition constraints

Lack of peer community, exchange and learning (92%) and *Lack of succession planning* (83%) illustrate the absence of institutionalised mechanisms for leadership development and knowledge transfer, leaving leaders isolated and future appointments uncertain. As one interviewee noted:

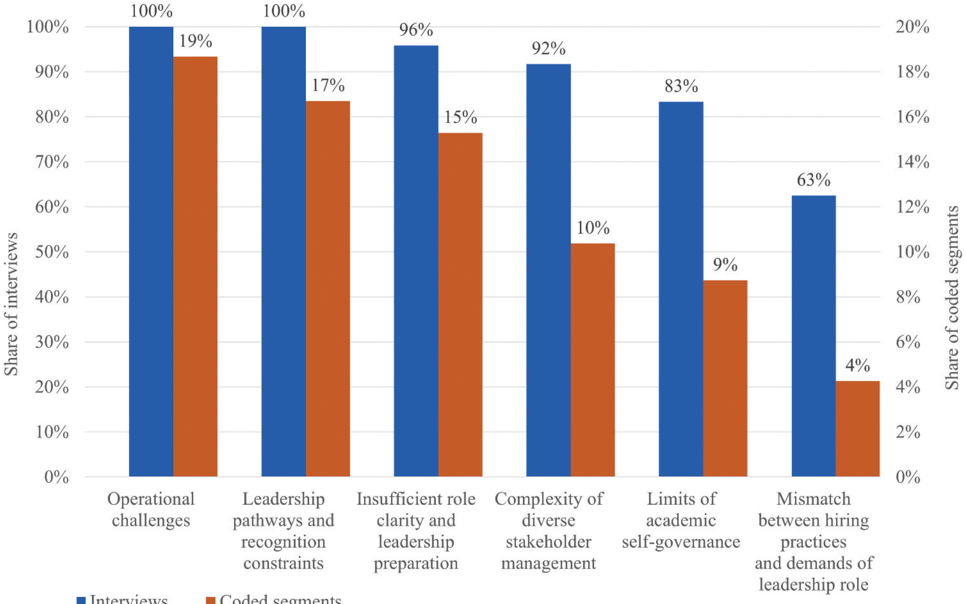

Figure 1. Institutional barriers by share in all interviews and coded segments. Note. Share of interviewees (left vertical axis; $N = 24$) and share of coded segments (right vertical axis; $N = 916$) mentioning a certain institutional barrier; own interview data.

> What we do not have is systematic succession planning, where precisely these questions are discussed: who could potentially be developed for the future, especially given that we now have to take into account factors such as age, retirement, length of study, and so on.

Further subcodes reveal cultural tensions around legitimacy and role valuation: *Dependence on academic credentials and embedment for leadership legitimacy* (63%) and *Dependence on professional competence for leadership legitimacy* (25%) indicate that aspiring leaders must derive their legitimacy from established academic or professional recognition and be firmly embedded within these communities. *Undervaluation of management roles* (54%) and *Missing valuation for support achievements* (25%) reflect a cultural hierarchy that privileges academic accomplishments over managerial competence.

Insufficient role clarity and leadership preparation

Inadequate preparation for leadership positions (88%) and *Lack of institutional support for leadership development* (88%) reveal systemic deficits in equipping leaders with the competencies needed to navigate increasingly complex higher education environments. As one interviewee remarked, 'It's a bit like saying: you are a top researcher, so now go and lead the university … ! But it's not the same thing, they are completely different skills. And I think this is still too often overlooked'.

Moreover, *Lack of role clarity for leadership positions* (38%) reflects persistent ambiguity around the scope, responsibilities, and expectations of leadership positions, whereas the *Insufficient crisis preparedness* (42%) signals a critical gap in readiness for

unpredictable events – an omission that is increasingly consequential in today's volatile environment.

Survey results reinforce these interview insights. Most participants informally prepared for leadership, acquiring competencies on the job or through personal coaching and mentoring, while only 44% have participated in formal development programs. Consistent with interviewees' concerns about inadequate preparation and weak institutional support, respondents reported difficulties in core management areas (finance, HR, change management, and management techniques) and in navigating higher education institution structures and the broader education, research, and innovation policy arena. Notably, 39% had no prior leadership experience before assuming their current role – rising to 54% among those with academic area responsibilities, typically moving directly from professorships or group leadership.

Operational challenges

A universal concern was the barrier of *Broad competency requirements* (83%), reflecting expectations that leaders master a wide range of strategic, managerial, and academic skills – often without adequate institutional preparation. As one interviewee noted: 'The challenge [...] is that one is expected to master many different skills. It is quite demanding to bring all of these together, to perform them well'.

These high competency requirements are accompanied by *Excessive managerialisation of leadership roles* (71%) and *High workload pressures* (63%), which intensify administrative demands and displace time from strategic and academic priorities. As one interviewee reflected, '[...] this naturally means juggling, balancing things out. One also must be able to endure quite a lot when the pressure is there, right?'.

Other barriers include *Resource scarcity and financial cutback pressures* (46%) – signalling that leaders must operate in increasingly constrained environments – and *Frequent necessity to deal with conflicts* (33%). Additional, though less common, operational challenges are *Lack of team support* (25%), *Strain from media and public scrutiny* (25%), and *Burden of solving human resources issues* (21%).

The survey results confirm these perceptions: Participants dedicate 36% of their working time to internal management duties, whereas activities around their core agenda and strategic initiatives take up 20% of their working time. Moreover, participants pointed to the broad and demanding competency profiles required of them and anticipated even more challenging expectations for their successors.

Complexity of diverse stakeholder management

Interviewees stressed the need to balance competing expectations from multiple internal and external constituencies. The most frequently cited barrier was the *Complexity of internal stakeholder management* (79%), underlining the difficulty of reconciling the diverse interests of employees, departments, administrative units, and governing bodies. Almost as prominent was *External stakeholder management* (71%), with interviewees highlighting the growing need to navigate relationships with government authorities, funding bodies, professional associations, industry, and the broader public.

In line with these perceptions, the survey participants state that they dedicate 21% of their working time to coordination within the higher education institutions and 12% to maintaining external relationships, e.g., with political stakeholders.

Limits of academic self-governance

In the domain of academic self-governance, the most frequently cited barrier was *Short-term appointments limiting long-term perspective* (58%), underlining that leadership terms often end before the full implementation or institutionalisation of initiatives. As one interviewee explained: 'And if you try to initiate something, then in one or two years someone else will be in charge again. So it has no lasting function'. Related constraints are *Lack of professionalism* (54%) – referring to informal, inconsistent, or weakly institutionalised leadership practices – and *Restricted autonomy in leadership roles* (46%) – highlighting tensions between formal governance authority and the practical capacity to act within entrenched decision-making norms and layered oversight structures.

The survey shows that 71% of participants hold a full-time position – combined with either heading a chair/research group or other institutional roles – while 29% serve only part-time. This distribution highlights both the limits of academic self-governance and the operational challenges leaders encounter. The share of part-time positions is highest among respondents with academic area responsibility (51%) and lowest among those with overall institutional responsibility (7%). Moreover, only 35% of respondents are in a permanent management position, whereas 18% were elected for a fixed term of office (two to five years). Part-time positions are more prominent among those with an academic area responsibility, who often continue to hold their chairs during leadership term to return afterwards.

Mismatch between hiring practices and leadership demands

Mismatch between hiring practices and leadership demands (without subcode; 63%) reflects a systemic bias towards research excellence over leadership competence, as leadership positions are typically filled through internal promotion rather than external recruitment, which hinders the professionalisation of leadership. As one interviewee noted:

> There are too many ad hoc developments, which make it difficult to plan long-term processes. And I think this is [. . .] to the fact that one is more or less elected by one's peers for a role, since there is not much competition.

Survey results support this perception: only 58% of participants reported that their positions were publicly advertised through an open application or assessment procedure, with the lowest share among those with academic area responsibility – reflecting principles of academic self-governance such as peer nomination, internal promotion, and rotation.

Differences among function groups

Institutional barriers were recognised across all three function groups though with varying degrees of emphasis (Figure 2). All interviewees across groups mentioned the most prominent categories – *Leadership pathways and recognition constraints* and

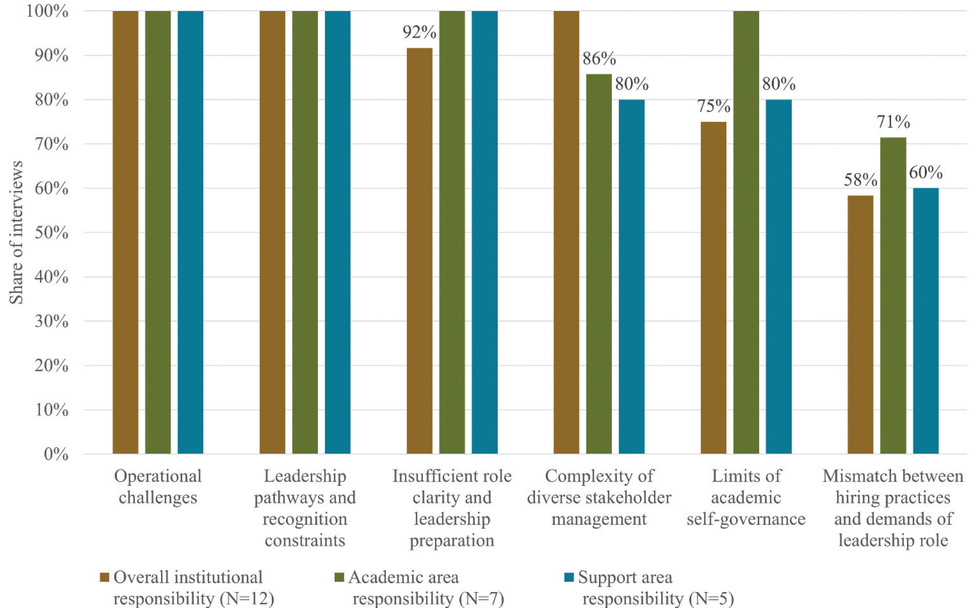

Figure 2. Differences in prevalence of institutional barriers among function groups. Note. Share of interviewees ($N = 24$) mentioning a certain institutional barrier per function group; own interview data.

Operational challenges. Interviewees with academic area responsibility stood out for universally reporting *Limits of academic self-governance*, far more frequently than their counterparts in the other two groups. Those with overall institutional responsibility reported comparably strong agreement on the barrier of *Complexity of diverse stakeholder management*. Both academic area and support area responsibility leaders consistently highlighted *Insufficient role clarity and leadership preparation* as a barrier to sustainable higher education leadership.

Structural barriers

Structural barriers were reported less uniformly than institutional ones, yet several categories emerged with notable prevalence in terms of both share of interviews and coded segments (see Figure 3). *Cultural norms and role legitimacy* illustrate enduring tensions between academic and managerial logics, while *Systemic knowledge expectations* highlight how implicit demands for institutional familiarity and socialisation restrict both entry and mobility. Concerns about *System-level governance and policy challenges* reflect overlapping accountability frameworks and the erosion of institutional autonomy, while *Resistance to systemic change* points to entrenched inertia slowing reform. *Labour market and mobility constraints* emphasise limited career perspectives and difficulties in moving across institutional types and regions. Finally, *Generational change and loss of knowledge*, although less frequently cited, signals risks around succession and the transfer of leadership expertise.

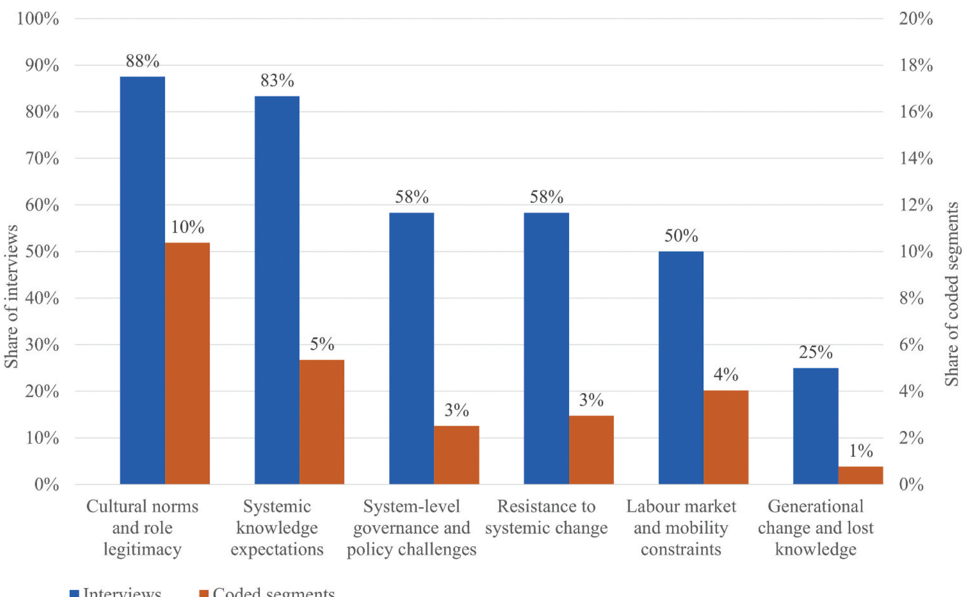

Figure 3. Structural barriers by share in all interviews and coded segments. *Notes*: Share of interviewees (left vertical axis; $N = 24$) and share of coded segments (right vertical axis; $N = 916$) mentioning a certain structural barrier; own interview data.

Cultural norms and role legitimacy

The enduring influence of academic cultural values on leadership legitimacy is evident in the subcode *Incompatibility between leadership and science roles* (83%), which captures the deep-seated perception that managerial responsibilities can undermine scholarly credibility. As one interviewee explained,

> [. . .] it is always a big challenge for everyone – or for me. Because usually there is this wish to remain at least somewhat academically active in the community, but it cannot be too much. That is precisely a major difficulty, since, for example, we have directors who are still very, very strongly engaged academically and then serve on countless committees, and on top of that receive further requests.

Lack of diversity in leadership roles and management boards (54%) highlights the persistence of representational homogeneity, with implications for inclusivity and innovation. *Tensions between management and academic leadership* (46%) further underscore the relational frictions that arise when managerial logics are perceived to conflict with academic autonomy and collegial governance traditions. Lastly, *Age-related bias in leadership acceptance* (13%) captures perceptions that younger leaders may lack acceptance within academic institutions.

Systemic knowledge expectations

The barriers of *Implicit systemic knowledge expectations* (67%) and *Expectations of institutional familiarity* (58%) indicate that leaders are often expected to possess knowledge on the higher education system prior to appointment – criteria that may privilege insiders over candidates with alternative backgrounds. *Lack of socialisation within own*

institution (13%) reveals instances where leaders are not adequately integrated into institutional values transfer.

Survey data corroborate these findings: 56% of respondents were internally promoted, with the highest share among those with academic area responsibility (67%). By contrast, only 19% came from another higher education institution and 25% from another sector, underscoring the limited value placed on external experience. Moreover, 80% of participants held Swiss nationality, reinforcing interview evidence that implicit system knowledge expectations can limit leadership access.

Resistance to systemic change

Employee resistance to change (42%) mirrors entrenched behavioural and attitudinal organisational barriers, while *Higher education institutions' inertia toward systemic reform* (38%) indicates the system's failure to sustain momentum for transformation. This dual resistance – bottom-up and top-down – creates a reinforcing cycle that slows the implementation of strategic initiatives and discourages leaders from pursuing ambitious changes.

System-level governance and policy challenges

Systemic constraints on higher education institution autonomy (38%) reflect external frameworks that limit institutional independence, while *Overlapping and conflicting accountability structures* (29%) highlight that multiple oversight bodies impose contradictory demands. Additionally, *Lack of coherence across governance levels* (13%) points to persistent misalignments between institutional, regional, and national policy objectives.

Labour market and mobility constraints

Career path lock-in after leadership roles (38%) and *Limited mobility across higher education institution types and regions* (33%) indicate that leadership appointments can restrict future academic career options and that the sector remains segmented with few cross-institutional opportunities. The less frequent *Lack of career perspectives* (8%) point to perceptions of an overall ceiling to advancement. The high share of internal promotions and the low share of participants who switched from another institution expressed in the online survey underline the limited labour market for higher education leaders.

Generational change and lost knowledge

Generational change and lost knowledge (no subcode; 25%) highpoints to the structural risk that leaders' retirements without systematic knowledge transfer may undermine continuity and strategic momentum in a system heavily reliant on insider expertise. As one interviewee noted: '[...] it was certainly also a risk that practically everyone retired at the same time, and that I then had to put together an entirely new team'. The survey findings support this concern with an average respondent age of 55 years and 26% between 60 and 69 years old, underscoring that generational change is a pressing challenge in the Swiss higher education sector.

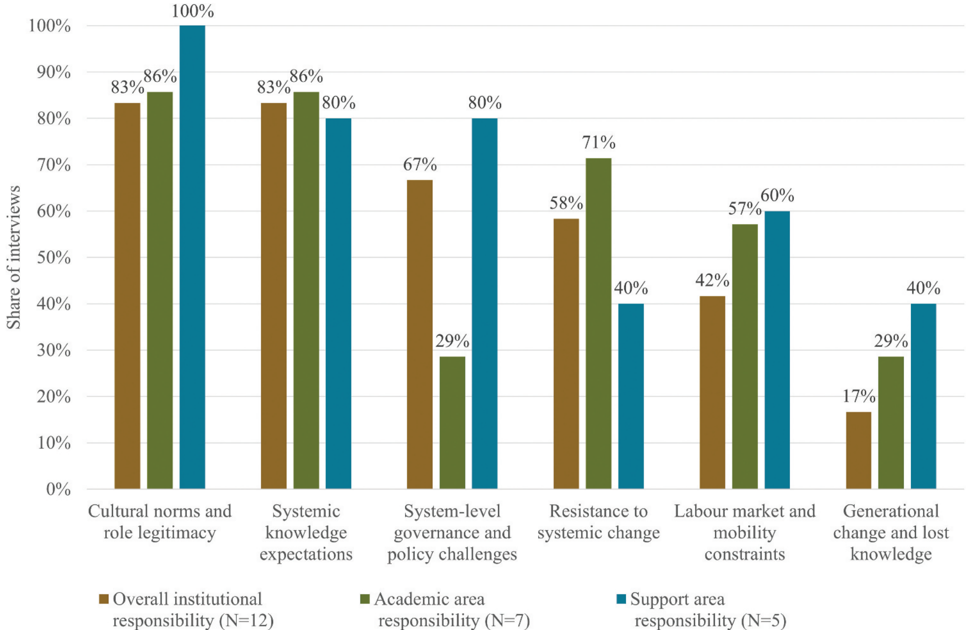

Figure 4. Differences in prevalence of structural barriers among function groups. *Notes*: Share of interviewees ($N = 24$) mentioning a certain structural barrier per function group; own interview data.

Differences among function groups

Regarding the structural barriers, respondents in all three function groups placed the most weight on *Systemic knowledge expectation* and *Cultural norms and role legitimacy*, indicating a strong insider knowledge gatekeeping effect especially for individuals whose authority is not based on academic capital (see Figure 4). Moreover, leaders with support area responsibility give comparatively strong agreement to *System-level governance and policy challenges* and *Generational change and lost knowledge*, suggesting operational memory risks in support domains. Leaders with academic area responsibility show exceptionally deep agreement on *System-level governance and policy challenges*, while reporting comparatively strong concerns about *Resistance to systemic change*.

Discussion and policy implications

By shifting the focus from short-term effectiveness to the long-term viability of leadership careers – conceptualised through the lens of sustainable careers (De Vos et al., 2020) – this study extends prior work on access barriers, leadership effectiveness and leadership challenges (e.g., Lashari, 2023; Lizier et al., 2024; Sparkman, 2021). It focuses on perceived barriers rather than observable outcomes, highlighting conditions that may undermine career sustainability.

Institutional barriers such as fragmented pathways, inadequate preparation, unclear roles, and weak peer support illustrate the SCM view that sustainable careers depend on a strong person-context fit over time. When institutions underinvest in structured pathways and supportive networks, this alignment erodes,

limiting leaders' capacity to sustain viable trajectories and reducing the reciprocal value central to SCM's person-context-time model. This argument echoes findings by Hempsall (2014), Gigliotti and Ruben (2017), and Perich et al. (2025) that leadership development in higher education remains largely informal. Our results also show that expanding competency demands intensify role strain. From an STF perspective, these barriers are embedded in social systems – such as recruitment norms – that privilege research credentials over managerial competence. The absence of structured peer communities further leaves leaders professionally isolated, with few opportunities for collective reflection or cross-institutional learning, thereby limiting knowledge exchange and weakening a shared professional identity.

Time-related factors further exacerbate these institutional deficits. Short-term mandates, weak succession planning, and generational turnover highlight the temporal dimension of sustainability emphasised in both STF and SCM. Moreover, segmented labour markets restrict leaders' mobility, while stakeholder complexity and excessive managerialisation compound operational pressures and reduce space for strategic action. These patterns align with studies on New Public Management (Broucker & De Wit, 2015), intensifying accountability demands (Huisman & Currie, 2004; Macheridis & Paulsson, 2021), and the diffusion of corporate practices into academia (Croucher & Lacy, 2020; Hempsall, 2014; Lizier et al., 2024). Together, they show how expanding administrative demands and shrinking autonomy disrupt the STF balance between individual adaptability and systemic constraints and weaken the long-term person-career fit emphasised in SCM.

By tying credibility to academic rather than managerial contributions, persistent cultural norms undermine leadership legitimacy. The perception that leadership detracts from scientific credibility (Hempsall, 2014; Lizier et al., 2024) and the reliance on internal promotion (Burkinshaw & White, 2019; Sparkman, 2021) illustrate how exclusionary practices restrict diversity and reinforce path-dependent careers. STF interprets these patterns as the reproduction of exclusionary norms within the academic system, while SCM shows that failing to recognise leadership contributions weakens the reciprocal value between individuals and institutions that sustains long-term careers.

Survey results show that over half of senior leaders with academic responsibilities hold part-time leadership roles alongside research and teaching. This group most often identifies the limits of academic self-governance as a barrier. Their dual role heightens tensions between collegial norms and growing managerial demands, illustrating how sustainability risks arise not only from structural complexity but also from the lived contradiction of being both peer and manager within the same institution – a tension also noted in studies of middle-management leaders (Chilvers et al., 2018; Thornton, 2020).

Our findings also reaffirm that academic leadership extends beyond formal roles or managerial authority. Consistent with prior research (Bolden et al., 2008; Middlehurst, 2004; Whitchurch, 2006), it is relational, hybrid, and embedded in professional norms and collegial structures. Senior leaders operate at the intersection of academic, administrative, and strategic roles, where legitimacy depends on both institutional alignment and scholarly credibility.

Leadership practices also vary across institutional contexts. At research universities, they tend to rely on academic prestige and peer recognition; at universities of applied sciences, they are shaped more by external collaboration and professional relevance.

These contextual differences illustrate that leadership is not a uniform function but a set of practices embedded in specific institutional traditions and governance arrangements.

Finally, our analysis shows that the perception of leadership sustainability depends on systemic design. Institutional practices and structural arrangements often misalign leaders' capacities with organisational demands, undermining career viability. Sustainable leadership thus requires institutions and systems to re-balance the person-context-time relationship that underpins careers (De Vos et al., 2020).

At the *institutional level*, reforms should directly target the erosion of this alignment. Succession planning and structured development pathways should counteract the short-termism of academic self-governance and generational turnover. Recognising managerial competence in recruitment and promotion challenges the privilege of academic performance and may restore reciprocity between organisational needs and leadership careers. Similarly, clarifying roles and reducing operational overload is crucial for encouraging leaders to invest in strategic vision. Furthermore, peer exchange and mentoring networks can counter leaders' isolation and build stronger professional communities.

At the *structural level*, reforms must address systemic inertias. Nationally coordinated leadership programs could strengthen the system's collective capacity, while mobility-enhancing instruments – such as exchange schemes or recognition of international leadership experience – combat labour market lock-in and reduce insider bias. Additionally, simplifying accountability frameworks across federal, cantonal, and institutional levels may protect leaders from contradictory demands.

Taken together, our findings reveal barriers that are not temporary difficulties but enduring features of governance, organisational culture, and labour markets. Consequently, the policy implications highlight that sustainable leadership requires more than strengthening individual competencies, relying on institutions and systems to recognise leadership as a profession demanding continuity, legitimacy, and strategic capacity.

Conclusion

Drawing on SCM and STF, this study demonstrates that sustainability of higher education leadership depends on not only individual adaptability but also institutional and systemic design. Barriers identified across the Swiss higher education sector – fragmented pathways, weak succession planning, limited preparation, insufficient peer support, managerialisation, and persistent cultural hierarchies – reveal how misalignments between leaders and their organisational contexts may undermine viable long-term careers. Without professionalised roles, clearer pathways, and supportive peer and mobility structures, institutions risk deterring prospective leaders, losing expertise, and weakening organisational resilience.

Some limitations apply to these findings. First, the extent to which barriers to leadership effectiveness overlap with those constraining sustainable career trajectories remains unclear, as sustainability depends on a dynamic person-context fit that fosters well-being, health, and productivity over time (De Vos et al., 2020). Future research should more systematically examine this intersection. Second, although the survey broadens the empirical base, the relatively small and uneven interview sample limits generalisability, and self-reported data may introduce bias. Third, as the study does not assess specific

sustainability outcomes such as well-being, health, or performance (De Vos et al., 2020), future longitudinal or mixed-methods designs should incorporate direct outcome measures to clarify how institutional and structural barriers shape long-term trajectories across contexts.

Switzerland's decentralised governance model shapes some barriers – such as short mandates, insider recruitment, and low mobility – while others, including escalating competency demands and the privileging of academic over managerial capital, reflect broader transformations across higher education systems. In this sense, Switzerland functions less as an exception than a magnifier, illustrating which challenges stem from governance-specific arrangements and which arise from global pressures towards managerialisation, accountability, and changing academic work. Future comparative research should examine how different governance models – decentralised, state-centred, and market-oriented – shape leadership trajectories and which policy instruments best support sustainable careers in each context. Such work is essential for identifying scalable practices and clarifying how institutions can balance autonomy, accountability, and professionalisation.

Ultimately, sustainable leadership requires institutional and policy frameworks that embed continuity, legitimacy, and mobility into academic career structures. While Switzerland offers a distinctive federalist context, the barriers identified resonate internationally. Promoting sustainable leadership is therefore not only a national priority but also a global imperative for strengthening the long-term resilience of higher education.

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