

Abstract

UNIVERSITIES UNDER INFLUENCE

How the tobacco industry infiltrates Swiss academic institutions

BACKGROUND

The tobacco industry has a long record of manipulating scientific research to serve its own commercial interests, notably by influencing studies, disseminating misleading information, and discrediting independent science. In Switzerland, documented cases such as the “Rylander Affair” at the University of Geneva and the industry-funded plain-packaging study at the University of Zurich exemplify these practices. **Switzerland ranks 36th out of 37 in the European Tobacco Control Scale and 99th out of 100 in the Global Tobacco Interference Index**, highlighting the country’s vulnerability to industry influence.

METHODS

This study examined 31 Swiss higher education institutions (universities, universities of applied science, federal institutes of technology and university hospitals). Requests for access to documents were submitted between April 2024 and February 2025 on the basis of federal and cantonal transparency legislation, covering contracts for the period 2019–2024. This approach was supplemented by systematic online research to identify any undeclared collaborations. The data were analyzed to determine the existence and nature of collaborations with the tobacco industry, as well as the level of transparency of the institutions, assessed in particular by the transmission of the requested documents.

RESULTS

Results show that 16 of the 31 institutions have collaborated with the TI since June 2019, including internationally renowned institutions such as EPFL and ETH Zurich. **In total, 29 collaborations were identified.** Institutions within the ETH Domain are the most affected, with 11 collaborations, followed by cantonal universities (10) and universities of applied science (7). **Philip Morris dominates these interactions, being involved in 23 of the 29 collaborations identified.** These collaborations take various forms, including joint research and publications, industry employees teaching at universities, university researchers carrying out industry assignments, industry-funded workshops, co-supervision of dissertations, and participation in joint projects. **Furthermore, several institutions refused to disclose their contracts or provided incomplete documents, despite their legal obligations.** Legal proceedings were initiated in four cases. To date, all court decisions (including some interim rulings) have been in favor of OxySuisse. Three cases are still ongoing.

CONCLUSION

The investigation systematically documented a significant presence of the tobacco industry in the Swiss academic landscape and has revealed a serious lack of transparency regarding these collaborations. In response, **academic institutions must engage in an open, structured, and critical debate on the ethical implications of such relationships.** This debate should be grounded in clear principles (environmental responsibility, scientific integrity, and public health) and lead to concrete safeguards, oversight mechanisms, and codes of conduct aimed at protecting the independence of research and maintaining public trust.