

UNIVERSITIES UNDER INFLUENCE

**How the tobacco industry infiltrates
Swiss academic institutions**

BRIEFING PAPER

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A systematic survey conducted by OxySuisse has documented the close ties that some academic institutions have with the tobacco industry. These collaborations enable the tobacco industry to associate itself with recognized scientific figures, giving it an appearance of scientific legitimacy, ultimately allowing it to influence legislation to its advantage and thereby increase its profits.

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KEY POINTS

→ 16 out of 31 institutions engaged in collaboration with the tobacco industry between 2019 and 2025.

→ 29 collaborations between Swiss academic institutions and the tobacco industry were identified.

→ Institutions within the Federal Institutes of Technology (ETH domain) are the most affected, with 11 collaborations, followed by cantonal universities (10) and universities of applied sciences (7). Only one collaboration involves university hospitals.

→ 23 out of 29 collaborations involve Philip Morris.

→ 4 institutions refused to provide contracts relating to these collaborations, in breach of the Transparency Act.



A LONG-STANDING RELATIONSHIP

The tobacco industry has a long history of interfering in scientific research through manipulation, disinformation, and the discrediting of independent studies, with the aim of defending its commercial interests. In Switzerland, there are some emblematic cases that illustrate these practices, notably the [Rylander affair](#) at the University of Geneva, where a professor secretly collaborated with Philip Morris for more than thirty years to downplay the risks of secondhand smoke^{1,2}, and the [controversial University of Zurich study](#) on plain packaging funded by the same company³. The country also ranks 99th out of 100 in the [2025 Global Tobacco Industry Interference Index](#)⁴, revealing a high vulnerability to the influence of this industry.


In order to assess the nature and extent of the links between the tobacco industry and the Swiss academic world, we conducted a systematic investigation of academic institutions in the country.




 The Global Tobacco Interference is published as an international tobacco lobby index by the Global Centre for Good Governance in Tobacco Control (GGTC) and is based on 20 indicators that are aligned with the guidelines under Article 5.3 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC). It measures the efforts of governments to tackle tobacco industry influence. A point system is used for the evaluation. The higher the score, the worse the country scores and the greater the influence of the industry.



METHODS

Data collection: Contracts relating to collaborations with the tobacco industry were requested under the  FoIA and FoI laws at the cantonal level. Between June 2024 and February 2025, the association sent requests by email or post (as required) seeking access to all contracts, including annexes, concluded since June 2019 between the institution and the tobacco or nicotine industry (notably Philip Morris, British American Tobacco, and Japan Tobacco International) or their representative bodies, including agreements related to funding and other collaborative activities. We chose June 2019 as the start date to cover at least a five-year period (given that the first requests were submitted in June 2024), ensuring a timeframe that is both sufficiently extensive and recent. The request for documents was supplemented by extensive research on the websites of universities and tobacco companies, as well as on online platforms such as LinkedIn, Google Scholar, PubMed and Google.

Data analysis: The data were subjected to thematic content analysis and systematically compiled and organised according to the type of collaboration, field of activity, presence or absence of financial exchanges, and whether or not the collaborations resulted in publications. The analysis did not focus on the scientific validity or quality of the results of research conducted in collaboration with the tobacco industry. We also examined the collaborations to identify aspects that may raise concerns regarding transparency, confidentiality clauses, potential conflicts of interest, and the thematic focus of the work. In addition, the question of transparency was considered, specifically whether institutions provided detailed information and supporting documents in response to requests. This dimension, combined with whether or not the institution collaborates with the tobacco industry, allowed for the establishment of a ranking, highlighting differences in the degree of openness among institutions.

 We obtained contracts and relevant documents using transparency legislation: – at the federal level, the Federal Act on Freedom of Information (FoIA), which applies in particular to institutions within the ETH Domain; – at the cantonal level, the various cantonal freedom of information laws (FoI), which apply to universities and universities of applied sciences depending on their location.

31

swiss academic institutions were included in the investigation

6

federal institutes of technology (ETH Domain)*

10

cantonal universities

10

universities of applied sciences

5

university hospitals

* The ETH domain comprises the Swiss Federal Institutes of Technology in Lausanne (EPFL) and Zurich (ETH Zurich), as well as four research institutes: the Paul Scherrer Institute (PSI), the Swiss Federal Institute for Forest, Snow and Landscape Research (WSL), the Swiss Federal Laboratories for Materials Testing and Research (Empa), and the Swiss Federal Institute of Aquatic Science and Technology (Eawag).

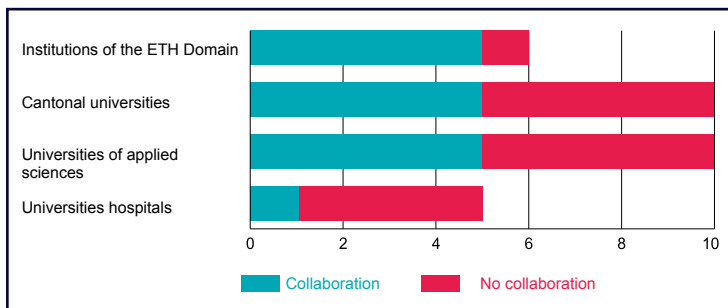


SURVEY RESULTS

Of the 31 higher education institutions included in our investigation (6 federal institutes of technology, 10 cantonal universities, 10 universities of applied sciences, and 5 university hospitals), 16 maintained partnerships with the tobacco industry between 2019 and 2024, with a total of 29 collaborations identified.

Institutions within the ETH Domain are the most affected (11 collaborations), followed by universities (10 collaborations) and universities of applied sciences (7 collaborations). Only one collaboration involves university hospitals [🔗 Figure 1](#).

🔗 Figure 1 – Number of academic institutions having collaborations with the tobacco industry, by type of institution



These collaborations take a variety of forms, including joint research and publications, tobacco industry employees teaching at universities, university researchers undertaking commissions for the industry, industry-funded workshops, co-supervision of doctoral theses, and participation in joint projects.

With regard to topics addressed, **the majority of these collaborations concern tobacco and nicotine (14 collaborations)**. These are followed by issues related to entrepreneurship (6 collaborations), health (4 collaborations), and plants (4 collaborations). One collaboration pertains to the field of toxicology, although no additional information was provided.




Our web-based research also revealed several collaborations or links with the tobacco industry that were not disclosed by the academic institutions themselves. This suggests that the cases identified likely only represent a fraction of all existing collaborations. A key question therefore remains: how many links are still unknown to this day?




A SIGNIFICANT LACK OF **TRANSPARENCY**

Although most of the institutions contacted complied with the transparency obligations set out in cantonal and federal legislation, obtaining the documents often required multiple exchanges and follow-ups, sometimes with sustained pressure. Some institutions, however, firmly refused to disclose the requested documents.

Of the 31 institutions contacted:

- **One** refused to respond regarding its links to the tobacco industry:
 - Fachhochschule Nordwestschweiz (FHNW)
- **Four others** refused to provide the requested documents:
 - Two schools of the Haute École spécialisée de Suisse occidentale  (HES-SO);
 - Scuola universitaria professionale della Svizzera italiana (SUPSI);
 - Universität Luzern (UniLU).


 HEPIA (Haute école du paysage, d'ingénierie et d'architecture de Genève) and EHL (Ecole hôtelière de Genève)


Faced with these refusals to respond or to provide the requested information, OxySuisse initiated four legal actions to obtain access to the relevant documents (against HEPIA and EHL, part of HES-SO, as well as FHNW and SUPSI). To date, all rulings have been in favor of OxySuisse, including one final decision (HEPIA). Three cases remain pending (FHNW, SUPSI and EHL).

By refusing to comply with transparency rules, these institutions choose to protect the private interests of an industry whose practices run counter to the public interest and public health, to the detriment of their own mission.



THE CASE OF THE FHNW (UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES AND ARTS NORTHWESTERN SWITZERLAND): A BLATANT LACK OF TRANSPARENCY

FHNW refused to act on our request and did not provide any information regarding its collaborations with the tobacco industry. Our research nevertheless identified two concrete collaborations between the FHNW and Philip Morris. Despite several requests, FHNW maintained its refusal, invoking confidentiality, the existence of overriding private interests, and the claim that these contracts were governed by private law and therefore not subject to transparency legislation. This interpretation was challenged by the cantonal transparency officer of Aargau, who considered that the principle of transparency applied to these contracts and that FHNW had not convincingly demonstrated the existence of valid grounds justifying their non-disclosure. Despite this, FHNW, through its president, confirmed its refusal. OxySuisse therefore referred the matter to FHNW's complaints committee, which has to date issued a decision in favor of our organization. In its ruling, the committee rejected FHNW's argument that these contracts were governed by private law, merely noting that  "the law on public information, data protection and archives [...] applies to all public bodies"⁵. It called on the institution to comply with transparency legislation and to issue a new decision. After consulting with the company concerned, the school issued a new decision maintaining its refusal to disclose any information or provide any documents.

 Quote in original language:
"Das Gesetz über die Information der Öffentlichkeit, den Datenschutz und das Archivwesen [...] gilt für alle öffentlichen Organe"



COLLABORATING WITH A DEADLY INDUSTRY

Why is collaborating with the tobacco industry problematic? Those who claim that the tobacco industry has changed, that it now seeks to protect the health of smokers by developing less harmful products, are, whether knowingly or not, echoing its propaganda. The tobacco industry cannot in any way be considered an “ordinary” industry. Its flagship product, the cigarette, kills on average one in two regular users⁶ and is responsible for the deaths of 9,500 people each year in Switzerland⁷. Despite communication campaigns in which the tobacco industry claims to be moving away from cigarettes, it continues to sell them in enormous quantities, particularly in low-income countries. Philip Morris increased sales of its leading cigarette brand, Marlboro, by 3.7% in 2024⁸.

The history of the tobacco industry is marked by decades of scientific manipulation, concealment of the risks associated with its products, and aggressive lobbying against public health policies⁹. For an academic institution, collaborating with this industry poses a serious risk to scientific integrity, academic freedom, research transparency, and its reputation.

Even if some of these collaborations do not directly concern tobacco or nicotine and may appear harmless, the tobacco industry derives scientific legitimacy from them, which it uses to improve its image, an image tarnished by decades of fraud and manipulation¹⁰.



THE CASE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF LUCERNE: A CYNICAL AND OPAQUE STUDY

In 2020, Christoph Schaltegger, professor of economics at the University of Lucerne, conducted a study¹¹ commissioned by Swiss Cigarette, the umbrella association representing the three multinational tobacco companies operating in Switzerland: British American Tobacco, Japan Tobacco International, and Philip Morris. According to this study, smoking generates a net economic benefit for Swiss society. This conclusion is based in particular on the fact that the premature death of smokers reduces expenditure by the Old-Age and Survivors' Insurance (AVS) system by shortening the duration of pension payments. The study was neither peer-reviewed nor published in a scientific journal. Nevertheless, its findings were made public a few weeks before the 2022 vote on the popular "Children without Tobacco" initiative. This case raises important ethical and scientific concerns, particularly regarding the independence of academic research and the use of scholarly work for political purposes.



RECOMMENDATIONS

To address these concerns, the report puts forward several key recommendations:

- Swiss academic institutions should strictly comply with **transparency** laws and fully disclose all their collaborations with commercial entities, in accordance with the recommendations of the European Federation of Academies of Sciences (ALLEA)¹².
- Swiss academic institutions should initiate structured discussions on the ethical risks of collaboration with the tobacco industry and adopt an enforceable **code of conduct** grounded in ethics, environmental responsibility, scientific integrity, and public health.
- Scientific integrity officers and integrity bodies should be systematically informed and trained on tobacco industry **influence strategies** and the risks they pose to the independence, credibility, and transparency of research.
- Swiss academic institutions should systematically integrate a **dedicated module** into relevant training programmes on tobacco industry tactics and the broader commercial determinants of health.
- Ethics committees should receive targeted information and **training on** the specific risks linked to collaborations with the tobacco industry.
- Switzerland should foster an open and informed **public debate** on the risks linked to the growing commodification of academic research.

Alongside this publication, OxySuisse is also establishing a secure whistleblowing system aimed at strengthening transparency and encouraging members of the academic community to report breaches of scientific integrity committed by the tobacco industry in Switzerland.



CONCLUSION

This report highlights the deep-rooted influence of the tobacco industry within the Swiss academic sphere and the risks that these collaborations pose to the ethics, transparency, and reputation of academic institutions. It calls for a comprehensive approach to safeguard the integrity of scientific research and uphold the public service mission of Swiss universities




HOW TO ACT...

As a health prevention **professional**

- Contact relevant institutions and politicians in your region to express your concerns about collaborations with the tobacco industry.
- Demand concrete steps: total transparency and the termination of cooperation with the tobacco industry.
- Use key facts on tobacco industry interference and the impact of the tobacco epidemic to support your arguments and share them within your network.

As an **employee** or **student** at a university

- Advocate internally (committees, management, student representatives) for clear rules on cooperation and conflicts of interest.
- Initiate a collective statement or a petition to the university management.
- If you are aware of any links between your university and the tobacco industry, we invite you to send us this information securely and confidentially via  our contact channels.

 transparencyandtruth.ch/ressource/canaux-de-contact-securises/

As a **citizen**

- Demand explanations and transparency from the institutions concerned.
- Contact political representatives and demand stricter rules for such collaborations.
- Support civil society organizations and share reliable information on the tobacco industry with the public.



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IMPRINT

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transparencyandtruth.ch/en/ressource/the-tobacco-industry-swiss-universities/

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