

Competition for Students and Legitimacy between Adaptation and Self-Marketing: The Rise of Degree Programs on Digital Transformation in Switzerland

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Fig. 1 Number of Degree Programs related to Digital Transformation by Fields

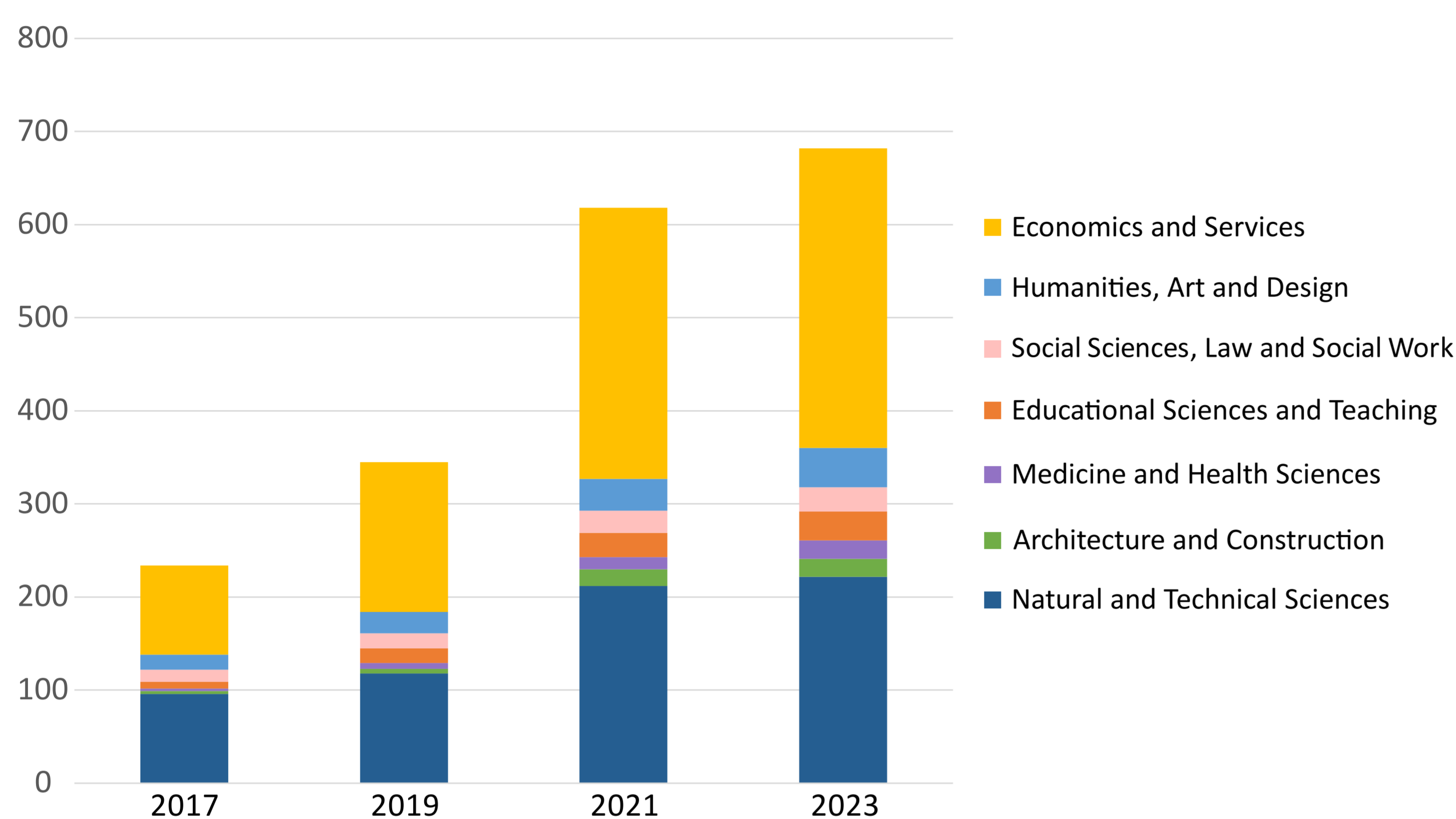


Fig. 2 Types of Degree Programs in 2023

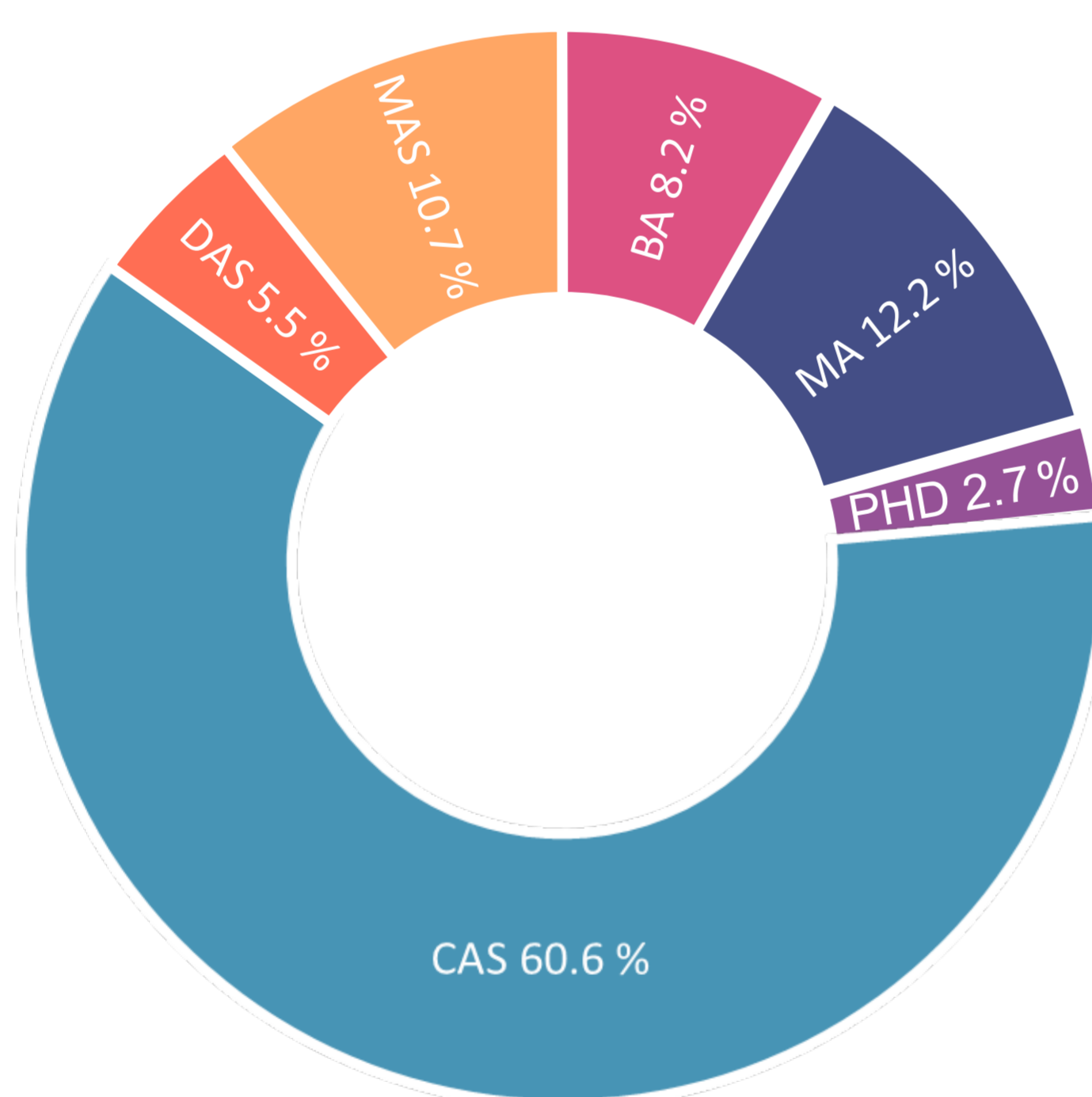
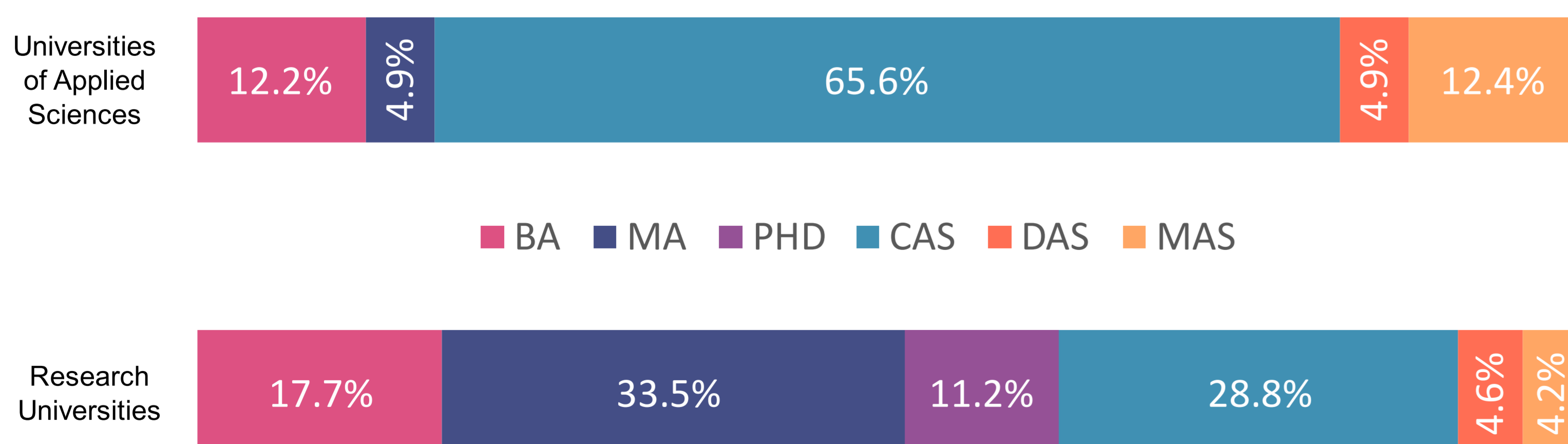


Fig. 3 Degree Programs by University Type



1. Observation and empirical findings

We have compiled an inventory of all study programs of Swiss HEI between 2017 and 2023 that claim to be relevant in view of the ongoing digital transformation. In doing so, we have used a dictionary with keywords in 3 languages (D, F, EN) and searched the university course catalogs.

Our analysis confirms a significant increase in study programs that claim relevance to digital transformation topics in their announcements and advertisements.

Three key observations drawn from our data:

- An increase can be seen in all fields and subject matters, but there are significant differences in quantity (fig. 1).
- Universities of applied sciences (UAS) prove themselves as particularly entrepreneurial providers in the branch of continuing education. All Swiss UAS have created new offerings and adapted existing ones to the master trend of “digital transformation” quite quickly. In any case, programs in the field of continuing education make up the largest share of the program inventory with 76.8% (fig. 2).
- At research universities (RU), growth can be observed at all levels of study, namely also at the master's and doctorate level (fig. 3). These differences between RU's and UAS's offerings across study levels reflect policy directions on institutional types in Switzerland.

2. Interpretation and policy context

As actors, universities and disciplinary fields compete for material and immaterial resources. They can gain relative advantages over others through deliberate adaptation efforts in order to secure financial support, legitimacy, and recognition from relevant stakeholders in their environment.

This said, we are taking the regulatory and organizational conditions of the “new governance” of the Swiss public higher education system as a backdrop. Swiss universities form an organizational field, which is characterized by high environmental dependency, external incentives, as well as organizational and disciplinary competition.

Greater responsiveness and adaptability have been both an important argument and an urgent requirement since the organizational reforms of the 1990s.

3. Conclusion on two faces of adaptation

The analysis of study program development (2017-2023) shall contribute to an assessment of how the Swiss HE-system is adapting to a subject which opens new opportunities and to which high relevance is attributed in the environment by manifold stakeholder groups.

Our research reveals an impressive adaptation activity in the field of study programs. In terms of analysis and interpretation:

- The wide diffusion of degree programs that claim a relevance towards “digital transformation” signals attractiveness and relevance to students, as well as legitimacy to external stakeholders, especially political and economic ones.

Is it all about marketing, then? Further research is needed to assess the extent to which the actual teaching content relates to digital transformation.

Project Information & Contact

Digital Strategies: Universities and Disciplines as the Agents of Change?
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