SYSTEMATIC POTENTIALS FOR CO-OPERATION: UCE AS A GATEWAY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION?

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ABSTRACT

Depending on the point of view, University Continuing Education (UCE) can be framed as being part of Higher Education (HE) or not. UCE and HE are two unequal partners under the umbrella of universities. This article aims to clarify the relations between HE and UCE before calling for action for cooperation. Using the Swiss educational system as an example, aspects of horizontal and vertical cooperation as well as qualitative aspects of working together are discussed. The aim is to systematise the concept of cooperation with a focus on structural and institutional perspectives, including contextual preconditions. From this perspective, UCE can span institutional boundaries and be a gateway to HE.

INTRODUCTION

This article aims to clarify the positions of Higher Education (HE) and University Continuing Education (UCE) before recommending courses of action for cooperation. Very different meanings can be embedded both in HE/UCE and in cooperation. This will be shown in the context of the Swiss education system. A systematic approach could be of use as a basis for discussing cooperation between HE and UCE, as well as for developing appropriate explanations and models for universities' specific institutional contexts.

The first section explains the Swiss context as a basis for contextualizing HE and UCE. In the Swiss education system UCE holds a unique position: the structure of UCE, which is outside the HE study programmes (Bachelor, Master, PhD), nevertheless uses the terminology of the Bologna Process, such as the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), or the three cycles of degrees. The aim is not to generalise the Swiss context (which, indeed, includes different institutional solutions and not just one model), but to discuss the conceptual framework based on the specific Swiss example. The Swiss educational system is suitable because UCE is partially systematised into programmes that could serve as a reference for cooperation with/into universities and be of interest to a wider audience.

In the second section, the different levels of UCE are explored. This is particularly important for the exploration of cooperation. Aspects of cooperation are more general in nature, but again, a strong tradition in Swiss Vocational Education and Training (VET) of "learning site co-operation" can be conceptually generalised and extended to models of cooperation in different educational settings (see Fazekas and Field, 2013). Of course, before conceptual frameworks are adapted to different settings, they need to be placed within the context of actual conditions in a country or in an educational system.

The third section presents four different models of co-operation between HE and UCE. These models demonstrate the necessity to clarify conceptual frameworks in advance. With this systematic, institutional, and conceptual approach, misunderstandings could be avoided, and universities could develop clear courses of action.

The conclusion addresses horizontal, vertical, and qualitative aspects of cooperation related to the question of UCE being a gateway to HE.

THE SWISS CONTEXT

The target level of this article, tertiary education, follows compulsory primary and secondary school education. In Switzerland, a distinction is made between a professional and an academic pathway of HE. Within the academic pathway there is a choice of three different types of universities[1], running Bachelor-, Master-, and in some cases PhD-programmes.

In addition to HE being part of the formal education system, continuing education also includes a wide range of work-adjacent learning, general and political adult education. Upper continuing education lies at the intersection of higher and continuing education. In terms of degrees, it is positioned outside the formal education system. Nevertheless, in addition to courses, conferences, modules, etc., Switzerland has created UCE programmes with three cycles: Certificate, Diploma and Master of Advanced Studies (CAS, DAS, MAS). These programmes do not lead to degrees that are recognised in the HE system and, conversely, Bachelor, Master and PhD are not part of the UCE study programmes. We see two different educational areas operating under one umbrella: the HE programmes with tertiary degrees and the UCE programmes with certificates.
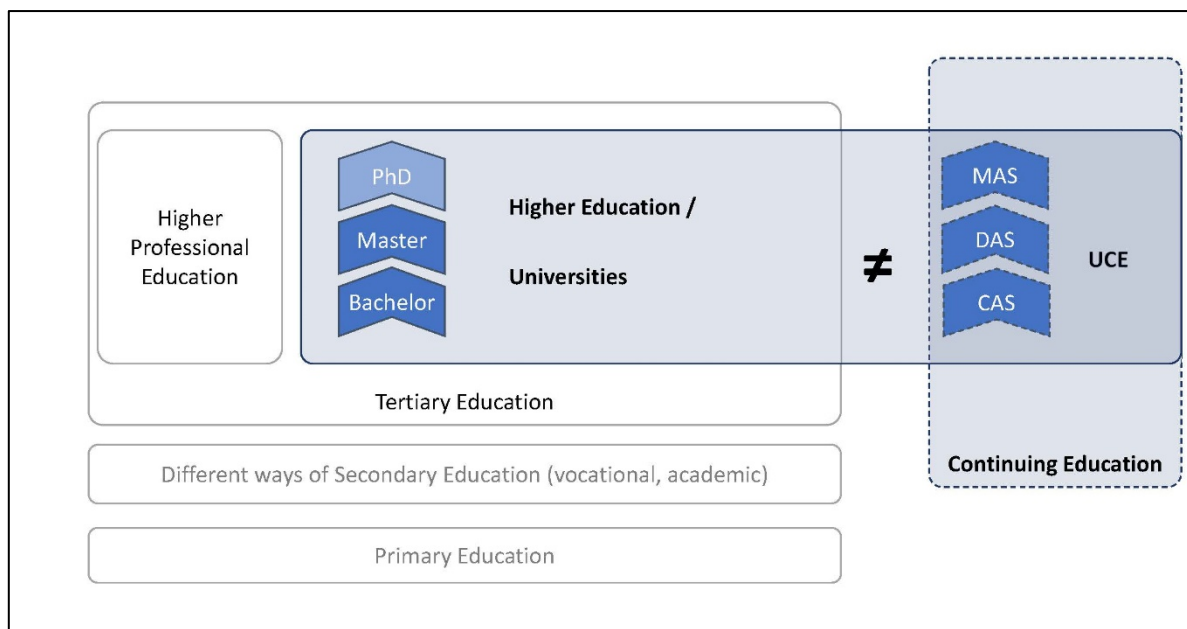

Figure 1: Sketch of the Swiss Education system with a focus on University HE and UCE (source: own elaboration; see also SERI 2019).

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[1] In Switzerland there are three types of academic HE institutions: Universities, Universities of Applied Sciences and Universities of Teacher Education (SCCRE, 2023, pp. 194f.). In the following, they will be referred to as "universities" because the differences do not have a significant impact on the argument.

Looking at UCE programmes in more detail reveals that: they have adopted a recognised structure of CAS, DAS, and MAS that mimic the three cycles of HE as per the Bologna Process (Bachelor, Master, doctorate (PhD)). All universities can offer all HE and UCE programmes, except for the PhD, which may not be offered by Universities of Applied Sciences and Universities of Teacher Education (Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft, 2019, Art. 4, 1c).
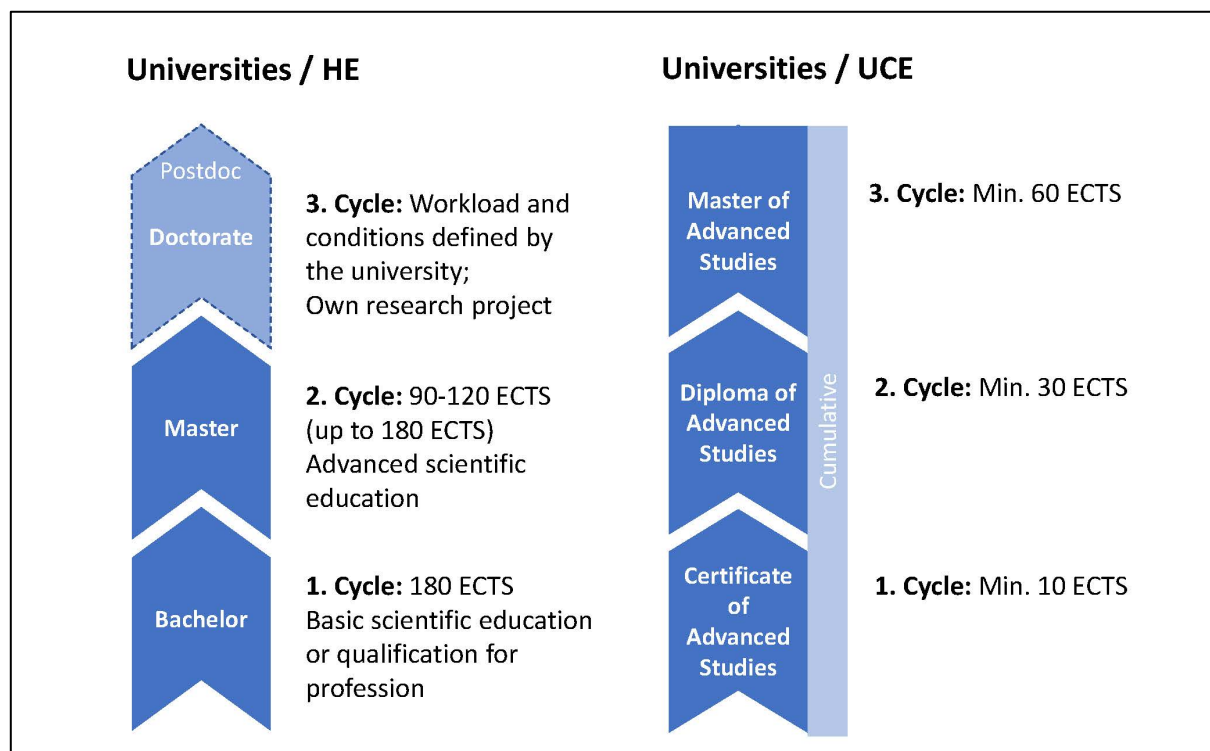

Figure 2: HE and UCE cycles at Swiss universities (source: own elaboration; see also Weil and Eugster, 2019, p. 144)

In addition, continuing education is defined as one of the four academic areas at universities and thus distinguished from study programmes (Bachelor, Master, PhD), research, and services. In a broader sense, UCE may include programmes, modules, courses, conferences, etc. as well as customised educational services, such as in-house training and consulting (see swissuniversities, 2017, p. 105) which might take place outside the university.

Against this backdrop, the relationship between UCE and HE may vary according to their positioning: HE can systematically include or exclude UCE. This might lead to different preconditions in governance, funding, and target groups. Accordingly, this has an impact on shaping cooperation between UCE and HE.

MULTIPLE LAYERS OF UCE

The multiple layers of the education system have been studied in different contexts (for continuing education, see Schrader, 2011, p. 107). The following approaches present different framings for UCE relationships within universities (see also Tremp and Weil, 2023, p. 25).

-   *Systematic*: positioning within the education system (e.g., universities (tertiary A) as distinct from higher professional education (tertiary B))
-   *Institutional*: positioning of UCE within HE institutions (e.g., UCE as a third space position between academia and management)
-   *Functional*: distinguishing UCE as one of the four academic areas of universities (e.g., UCE in comparison to study programmes, research, and services)
-   *Social*: connecting different academic settings (e.g., using UCE as an academic community across faculties)
-   *Economic*: realisation of UCE markets (e.g., UCE customer relationship management)
-   *Curricular*: Designing UCE into a curriculum and/or relating it to HE curricula (e.g., UCE curriculum for school principals in Switzerland)
-   *Didactic*: applying UCE methodologically in teaching (e.g., designing teaching-learning settings with heterogeneous groups of adults)
-   *Competence-based*: Applying UCE as competence development (e.g., qualification framework for UCE)
-   *Individual*: embedding UCE as part of a learning biography (e.g., UCE as part of an academic career)
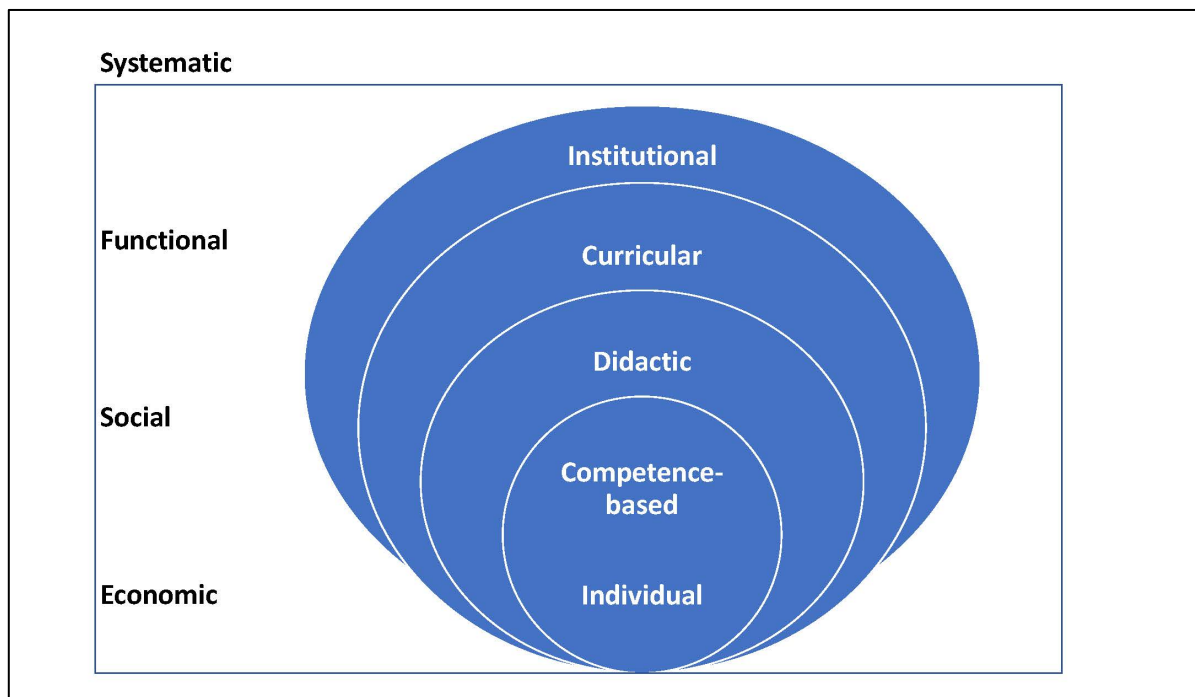

Figure 3: Layers of HE and UCE (source: own elaboration; see also Schrader, 2011, Tremp and Weil, 2023)

Again, each of these generalised approaches may also lead to differing or even contradictory responses when it comes to, for example, legal frameworks, quality assurance, accreditation or relationships with research and practice. Therefore, cooperation and the position of UCE within universities may vary depending on the approach or combination of approaches. The layers provide a base for designing relationships and locating the unique position or the specific aspect of cooperation. More specifically, the layers allow one to address internal and external target groups regarding academic staff development as an institutional responsibility (see Kamm *et al*., 2016, p. 138).

SYSTEM BOUNDARIES AND OVERCOMING THEM

Cooperation is only necessary when certain aspects have been previously conceptually separated, which is the case for HE and UCE. From a holistic standpoint, it would thus be necessary to (re-) link UCE's and HE's two positions. This has been discussed for the intersection of research and teaching at universities (Tremp, 2005, p. 341f.). Now, looking at the systematic and institutional approach of HE and UCE, four categories are suggested as a typology for their relationship:

1) **"Systematically and institutionally separated"-model:** Universities are exclusively focused on HE. UCE is offered by different institutions. UCE is not systematically recognised in HE.
2) **"Institutionally integrated but systematically separated"-model:** One institution provides HE and additionally UCE. They are linked to two different educational system segments and function separately, although the infrastructure, topics, and staff might be shared.
3) **"Institutionally separate but systematically integrated"-model:** The HE system includes UCE programmes, both learning pathways are recognised mutually. But the providers of UCE and HE are institutionally separated.
4) **"Systematically and institutionally integrated"-model:** HE and UCE function as part of the same framing and are mutually recognised. So, initial and continuing education are open to both students and adult learners (examples: open courses, MOOCs) and are provided from and integrated in the same institution.
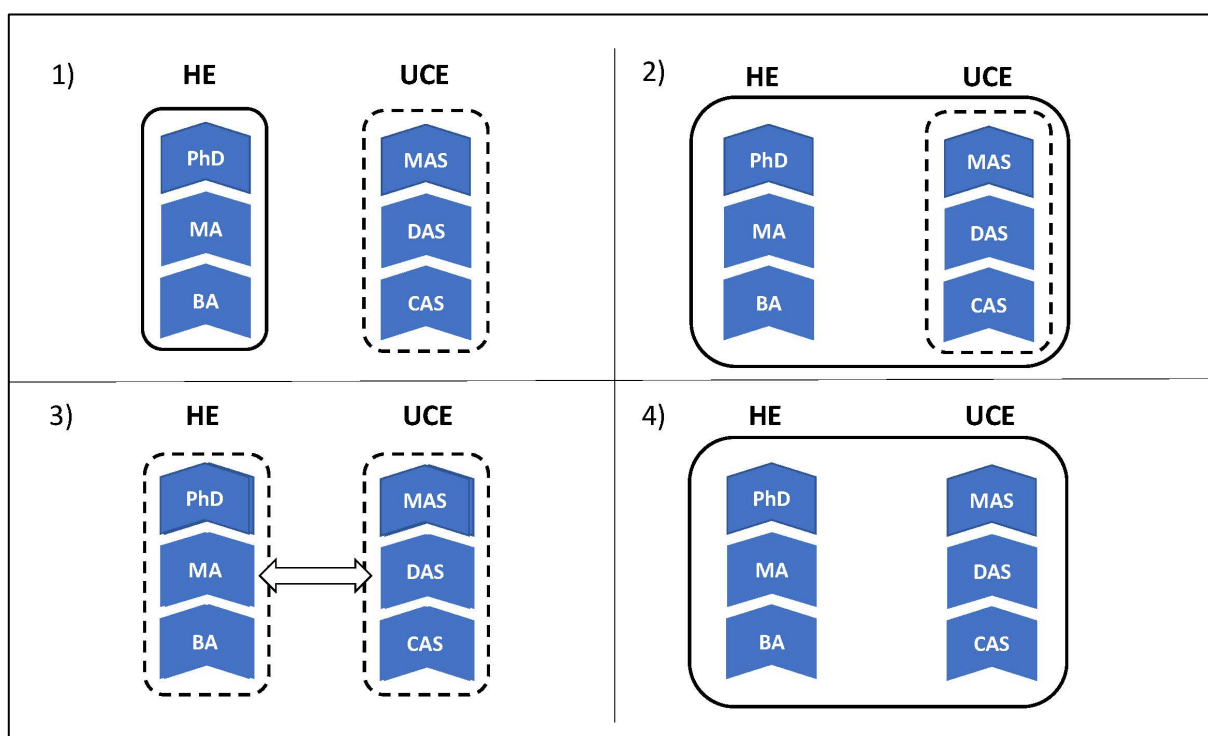(see Gonon and Weil, 2021)

Figure 4: Four models of systematic and institutional cooperation between HE and UCE
(source: Gonon and Weil, 2021)

The notion of cooperation can carry different meanings within the four models of relating HE to UCE. Now, the qualitative aspects of cooperation are of interest for further discussions. Kyrer (2001) differentiates between:

1) Exchange of information
2) Exchange of experience
3) Agreement
4) Community of work
5) Community of goods
6) Community/company foundation

In other areas, such as VET, a more systematic approach to cooperation is evident than in HE. In the Swiss VET system, learning site cooperation brings together institutionally separated schools, companies, and professional associations. Thus, it is a conceptual and curricular collaboration with a common educational agreement (Fazekas and Field, 2013). This could be a good example of model 3 (see figure 4), where institutionally separate learning sites are structurally (or even curricularly) integrated. Unlike VET, HE and UCE belong to two different parts of the education system (tertiary and continuing education), so model 2 might be the more likely next step in cooperation – a systematic separation but offered and designed within one institution: the university. The quality of cooperation may be evidenced by exchange of experience, of staff or infrastructure, and/or by a systematic agreement between HE and UCE programmes. Model 4 could be discussed as a complete integration and re-organisation of the Swiss education system. Model 1, in fact, indicates no cooperation on a systematic or institutional level at all.

Coming to the questions about which areas are part of an agreement as suggested in model 2 and 3: we have a clear understanding of positioning HE as tertiary education. For UCE, this position is not so clear, because there are at least two different ways of doing it (intersection of HE and continuing education, see figure 1). For continuing education - and especially for UCE - a distinction can be made as to whether it is a resumption after an initial degree, or continuous informal and formal learning in the professional biography. This tension is visible when positioning UCE as postgraduate education or as Lifelong Learning (LLL). This needs to be recognised for cooperation missions.

–   *Postgraduate education (Quaternary Education):* UCE can be conceptualised as postgraduate education, where the continuation or iteration with HE is crucial. From this perspective HE at universities includes both tertiary education and "quaternary" education as its continuation.
–   *Lifelong learning*: UCE is a form of continuing education and opens HE institutions to participants with different levels of prior learning. Recognition of competences can lead to academic higher education degrees (Bachelor, Master, PhD).

CONCLUSION

Based on the presented levels of working together, as well as the positioning of HE and UCE, horizontal, vertical, and qualitative aspects of cooperation can be summarised in conclusion:

–   *Horizontal cooperation*
    We can look at UCE as a gateway to HE as it brings participants with professional experience and academic background into universities. They could potentially disrupt the fixed scheme of Bachelor, Master and PhD (see Weil and Eugster, 2019). For horizontal cooperation, this could also mean working together with different learning venues inside and outside universities and recognising the UCE postgraduate's experience as a learning resource for HE.

- *Vertical co-operation*
  Vertically, HE and UCE could be defined as two different segments of the education system on different levels. The concepts of LLL or recurrent education are available for defining cooperation. Also, the perspective of curriculum, individual biography, and the institution as an iteration could be considered (see also Kraus, 2017). UCE can be positioned as the second educational mission for universities, being a gateway into HE.
- *Quality of cooperation*
  When we talk about opportunities for cooperation, we need to look at the qualitative aspects of working together. Is it an exchange of information, staff, or space? Are there conceptual connections in the curricula of universities? These questions shape the potential agreements for cooperation that clearly set out the areas of working together between HE and UCE plus the areas where no cooperation is intended. Additionally, the qualitative parameters of how HE and UCE work together could be discussed.

The Swiss example of a systematic and institutional approach could potentially be used to facilitate discussions about where UCE is positioned in HE, and in society. The need to clarify UCE and cooperation concepts before calling for action should be demonstrated, as it can entail very different meanings. With a clear conceptual framework in mind, UCE can be a gateway into universities to participants far beyond the established target groups of HE.

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