

Audit of critical success factors at selected Swiss Innovation Park sites

State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation;
Switzerland Innovation Foundation; entities in charge of the sites
SIP Basel, SIP Innovaare, SIP West EPFL und SIP Zurich

Key facts

The Swiss Federal Audit Office (SFAO) conducted an audit of the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI) and the Swiss Innovation Park (Switzerland Innovation). The Swiss Innovation Park is a network for industry-oriented and applied research and development, and an ecosystem for networking between universities and innovative companies. With six entities in charge of 15 sites, it is spread over a total of 13 cantons. Its aim is to promote networking and exchange between academia and industry, and to create an innovation-friendly environment. This should generate additional private investment in research and development. The Switzerland Innovation Foundation is the national umbrella organisation and acts as intermediary between the site entities and SERI.

The Confederation backs the Swiss Innovation Park with a CHF 350 million framework credit for sureties, which is limited until the beginning of 2024, as well as with federally owned land with building rights. Since 2021, SERI has assumed the basic financing of the foundation for around CHF 1 million annually.

The SFAO's audit was conducted at an early stage in the development of the Swiss Innovation Park. Some of the entities in charge of the sites are still being set up. In the course of its audit, the SFAO did not identify any major problems. In addition to the anticipated opportunities arising from the networking between academia and business to create an innovation-friendly environment, potential risks are also apparent, which SERI and the foundation should monitor closely in the future.

Prerequisites and challenges vary between site entities

The site entities are at different stages of development, differ in their priorities and have diverse challenges to overcome. For example, Park West EPFL can draw on 30 years of innovation experience, while Park East only joined the Switzerland Innovation network in 2021.

Their priorities depend on the areas of expertise of the universities, research institutes and companies at their sites. The site entities are exposed to exogenous factors that they cannot directly influence, but which have a direct impact on their development. These include Switzerland's non-association with the European Union's Horizon Europe framework programme for research and innovation and the third-country labour quotas.

International marketing and promotional activities outside Europe are the responsibility of the foundation. They are performed in cooperation with Switzerland Global Enterprise (S-GE). At the national and European level, the site entities conduct their own marketing. There is potential to pool expertise and budgetary resources in order to better coordinate and broaden marketing activities.

Self-financing of the site entities is not a foregone conclusion

The site entities are required to operate in a financially self-sufficient manner. However, as their income is mainly derived from the rental income from their infrastructure, there is a conflict of objectives with the obligation to have suitable reserve areas available for potential buyers within three to six months. There is a risk that the site entities will use their infrastructure to make a profit in order to cover their operating costs.

No centralised management – role of the Confederation needs clarification

The Federal Council mandated the foundation to implement the provisions of the Federal Act on the Promotion of Research and Innovation. The contract concluded to this effect serves as the basis for the affiliation contracts between the foundation and the site entities. It does not foresee the supervision of the foundation by the Confederation (SERI). The foundation, for its part, has no right to issue directives to the site entities.

Although the Federal Council defines the framework conditions and sets requirements that must be implemented, it does not shoulder any of the associated financial risks. The Confederation's current support measures (sureties) have a limited effect. In the case of land granted with building rights, the focus is on appropriate remuneration for building rights. The SFAO has recommended that SERI review the future role of the Confederation and adjust the framework conditions if necessary.

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