

DEVELOPING AN ORGANIZATIONAL BASIS FOR ALLIANCE RESILIENCE:

**POLICY RECOMMEDATIONS FOR THE
INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF THE EUROPEAN
UNIVERSITY INITIATIVE (EUI)**

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ABSTRACT

The European University Initiative (EUI) is in many ways already a significant innovation in the European higher education landscape – both with respect to the number of alliances created and through the number of activities that have been launched by these alliances. While the long-term financial basis of the alliances is an important issue to discuss and clarify towards 2030 and beyond, it is also important to pay attention to the organizational and governance dimensions that can facilitate and make alliances resilient in the years to come. The current white paper review existing research on alliances – including what is being done on the EUI, and highlight key characteristics that seems important for alliance functioning and persistence. On the basis of existing research and drawing upon experiences within Circle U. in the pilot phase, this white paper ends by recommending attention to four factors alliances need to be aware of when building resilient collaborations in the years to come.

1 INTRODUCTION

Over the last decades, the European Commission has repeatedly underlined the crucial role of higher education, research, and innovation in the further development of the EU – economically, socially and culturally (Chou & Gornitzka, 2014). However, it remains a challenge for the Commission to coordinate its policies in these key knowledge areas effectively. This concerns both the vertical coordination with the involved national and regional governance levels in the member states, and the horizontal coordination among the involved EU DGs and agencies. As pointed out by Maassen & Stensaker (2011: 766) over a decade ago, European policy-making in key knowledge areas has become a locus of complex interactions that connects different levels of governance and includes governance actors representing a variety of policy interests. As there are often different institutional logics – specific ways and means of doing things – attached to the governance of research, innovation and higher education respectively, a lack of coherence and integration poses an important challenge for realizing the intended outcomes and ambitions of European and national knowledge policies (Maassen & Stensaker, 2011).

This complexity continues to be an important feature of European policy-making in research, innovation and higher education. Recent studies have identified, for example, coordination challenges that occur when multi-level and multi-actor dimensions are dominating policy processes – resulting sometimes in creative solutions, but also in deadlocks that may have negative outcomes (Chou et al., 2017; Vukasovic et al., 2018). In addition, policy-making is further complicated by adding issues, such as digitalization and the contribution of higher education to society to the European policy agenda (European Commission 2020).

The coordination challenges in knowledge policies are also addressed in the latest ‘European Strategy for Higher Education’ from the European Commission (2022). This strategy seeks to promote and support cross border cooperation between universities within Europe and argues that for realizing the strategy, vertical coordination between all involved actors, that is, the EU, the member states, regions, civil society and the higher education sector, is essential. In addition, the Commission wants to create horizontal synergies between the European Education Area, the European Research Area, and the European Higher Education Area (European Commission, 2022: 16). It is further acknowledged that universities are highly important for the implementation of the political agenda of the EU since the success of many EU initiatives, e.g. for recovery and resilience, is dependent on the contributions of universities. The effectiveness of the contributions of universities, it is argued, can be enhanced through transnational cooperation, e.g. in the form of formal university alliances.

As such, the European University Initiative (EUI) represents an important and innovative, and not least comprehensive foundation for inter-university collaboration in European higher education linking education, innovation and research in a more integrative way. While educational collaboration in European higher education has a long history (Gunn 2020; Jungblut et al. 2020), the EUI represent a novel development intended to stimulate European university collaborations from being in essence project based, to more long-term and institutionalized collaborations. In addition, European University alliances are expected to contribute to achieve two key objectives: firstly, promoting common European values and principles, and secondly, contribute to strengthening the European knowledge economy. Furthermore, geographical diversity in the composition of these alliances is a condition for any applying alliance to be selected, indicating how the EUI also is meant as an inclusive instrument for creating a more equal development of higher education and science throughout the continent (European Commission 2020).

The response from higher education institutions to the various EUI calls for applications have been very positive, and there are currently already 50 European University alliances with more than 430 higher education institutions as members. These numbers can be expected to increase further.

This European strategy for universities is part of a higher education policy package for building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation. The initiatives aim to unlock the full potential of the higher education sector as the promoter of skills and knowledge and the engine for innovation and solving societal challenges. Incentives for transformation of universities take a central place in the strategy where the objective

of the Commission is to stimulate the further rollout of the European Universities initiative under the Erasmus+ programme, while also linking this initiative with other EU instruments, such as Horizon Europe and the Digital Europe Programme (European Commission, 2020). The EUI is novel in that it clearly signals an interest in an integrated use of the instruments at the disposal of the European Commission, at the same time as it demonstrates an interest in the potential of university alliances as an organizational solution to the challenges of effective policy coordination. The current white paper addresses this challenge through 1) a review of research on university alliances, including the theoretical perspectives relevant to understand this kind of inter-organizational collaboration, and 2) proposing four key factors alliances need to pay attention to when building resilient and more institutionalized forms of partnerships¹. While acknowledging that other factors, including that of long-term funding and sufficient resources, are also critical for sustaining alliances in the long run, the key message in the current white paper is that organizational and governance factors are important for the success of alliances at European and national level, and not least for the legitimacy of alliances among their staff and students.

2 THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND RESEARCH ON UNIVERSITY ALLIANCES

A profound development in higher education during the latter decades is the emergence of strategic inter-institutional collaborations within and across national borders in the form of partnerships, networks, and alliances (Beerkens 2003; 2004; Beerkens & van der Wende 2007; Olds 2009; Maringe & Foskett 2010; Sakamoto & Chapman 2011; Stensaker 2013; Vukasovic & Stensaker 2018; Gunn 2020; Charret & Chankseliani 2022; Maassen et al. 2022; Lambrechts et al. 2023; Craciun et al. 2023).

The underlying rationales driving these new forms of inter-institutional collaborations are quite diverse, and include risk-reduction, interest articulation, branding attempts, enhancement of the competitiveness of the institutions involved, economic profit, and innovation in teaching and learning (Altbach & Knight 2007; Inkpen & Tsang, 2007; Stensaker 2013; Stensaker, 2018; Lambrechts et al. 2023; Maassen et al. 2023). The rationales suggest that it is theoretically possible to apply different perspectives on university alliances (Middlehurst 2002; Bartell 2003; Beerkens 2004; Gunn 2020; Maassen et al. 2022; Charret & Chankseliani 2022).

2.1 THEORETICAL INSIGHTS AND CONTRIBUTIONS ON UNIVERSITY ALLIANCES AND INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL COLLABORATION

In general, it is possible to argue that three broader theoretical perspectives have been central in research on alliances and inter-organizational collaborations; resource-dependency theory, institutional theory, and organizational perspectives emphasizing networks and strategic partnerships between universities.

Initially, the resource-dependency perspective has been applied to explain the economic logics relating to alliance and consortia formations and the persistence of these establishments over time (Beerkens, 2004). This perspective has been often linked to theories of globalization and to how processes of globalization and internationalization has affected the higher education sector (Beerkens, 2003; Altbach & Knight, 2007), and have been applied to understand how universities partner up to establish overseas campuses, exploit market opportunities in other countries, etc. (Olds, 2009; Wildavsky 2010). The economic logic underlying the resource-dependency perspective is also valuable in that it demonstrates how alliance collaboration often is based on a combination of mutual exploitation and exploration strategies (Nguyen et al. 2016).

However, universities are special kind of institutions often characterized by strong historical identities and distinct forms of internal organizing embedding their discretion and capacity for engaging in international partnerships (Beerkens & van de Wende, 2007). This has opened up for institutional theory as a relevant theoretical perspective for interpreting alliances and their functioning, not least to understand how such organizational constructs handle situations characterized by a high degree of uncertainty, how organizations imitate each other, and those organizations perceived as successful to obtain legitimacy (Scott 2001; Greenwood et al. 2011). Alliances and their functioning are in this perspective often seen as a product of externally inspired adaptation processes (Scott 2001; Salmi 2009; Wildavsky 2010). For example, organizational 'brands' could be potential scripts and archetypes for imitation (Greenwood & Hinings 1996; Ramirez 2010). The popularity of the concept of 'world-class university' and the impact of global rankings may serve as illustrative examples (Salmi 2009; Hazelkorn 2011).

Such scripts are also relevant to understand the EUI, and conceptual images of what a 'European University' should look like – not least scripts deriving from the generic ambitions set out for these alliances by the European Commission (2020). As the European Commission also offered monetary rewards for the selected alliances, one could argue that the calls framing the EUI are well embedded in both resource-dependency perspectives and institutional frameworks. In this situation, alliance formation could also be explained as a need for risk-reduction and the capability an alliance would have to respond to the various expectations stemming from the EUI call (see also Fumasoli et al. 2015). Hence, having universities with different characteristics and complementary capabilities (international experience, geographical location, strong profile with respect to student mobility etc.) joining an alliance could provide this ability to be flexible and adaptable to external demands. For some of these universities, status and prestige may in addition be factors that in various ways could condition alliance formation and continuity (Hemsley-Brown et al. 2016; Brancovic 2018).

An institutional perspective is not solely focused on the external environment, as the concept of organizational identity also could be relevant as a way of describing how individual organizations – or alliances - become institutionalized over time as different forces, actors and groups inside the organization over time create unique ways of interacting - leading to organizational coherence and the development of a distinct identity (Selznick 1957; Stensaker, 2015). Empirical studies have, for example, shown how alliances and networks in higher education are shaped by universities perceiving they have similar organizational identities (Vukasovic & Stensaker 2018), or at least organizational characteristics that are seen as attractive to others (Labianca et al. 2001). Finding partners in an alliance formation process that are similar to oneself may have many advantages in terms of lower transaction costs in the establishment process and where mutual trust can be easier to achieve (Charret & Chankseliani 2022). In this perspective, uncertainty is avoided and risk-reduction is achieved by teaming up with universities that are seen as 'legitimate' partners, even though they may not have the complementary qualities needed to respond to all the expectations derived from the EUI call.

At the same time, as organizational identities tend to be shaped in a more organic fashion in the institutional perspective, it can be argued that alliances formed by universities with similar identities may still develop and transform as they over time translate their identities in ways that fit external demands (Seeber et al. 2015; Stensaker 2015). The latter may, for example, be easier for alliances consisting of universities that are large, resourceful and experienced in international collaborative work (Barbato et al. 2021) – a key characteristic of universities joining the EUI (Craciun et al. 2023).

European university alliances could also be analyzed and understood from organizational theories focusing on networks and strategic partnerships. Not least could university alliances be understood as 'meta-organizations' – they are special kinds of organizations characterized by the fact that other organizations, and not individuals, account for the membership (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008).

Interestingly, university alliances can actually be seen as organizations 'taking over' their own environment in that they turn part of their environment into an organizational form (Ahrne & Brunsson 2005: 447) – providing a link between this perspective and resource-dependency theory. However, meta-organizations can be considered as quite 'weak' organizations in that members are expected to be equal, where no member is above another in hierarchical terms and that consensus may be needed for agreeing in important decisions

(Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Torfing, 2012). Therefore, this perspective assumes that university alliances are not very fast-moving entities and that joint decisions always have to be embedded by the individual university. In this incremental way of moving forward, the argument is that alliances and the actions taken by their members become co-constitutive – they set the conditions of possibility for each other (Owen-Smith & Powell 2008).

Alliances could in this way also be seen as a form of innovation in organizational structures (Lounsbury & Crumley, 2007). According to Stark (2009), alliances can be described as heterarchies where a number of interdependencies exist, characterized by complex collaboration and most likely competing principles of performance and worth. The implication is that there can be internal dynamics within alliances shaping developments, and that the governance and internal organizing of alliances are highly important mechanisms for achieving the objectives set for the alliances.

To take advantage of the many possible opportunities of alliances is still challenging as such collaborations – especially between similar types of organizations – also imply a form of internal competition (Inkpen & Tsang 2007). Social network theorists have argued that the latter may be a key explanation for the fact that organizational alliances can be characterized as unstable, ineffective and with quite poor performance (Muthusamy & White 2005). The risk of one partner behaving opportunistically exploiting the knowledge and assets of another partner is a potential danger in such collaborations. To make matters more complicated, organizations are usually embedded in a broader web of formal and informal networks and links making it a challenging task to assess and identify what collaborations should be prioritized and which partners should be engaged with. European Universities can be said to fit the latter description rather well as they – in addition to being part of a distinct type of alliance – also may have a high number of other external collaborations going (Vukasovic & Stensaker, 2018).

For organizations that are part of strategic alliances, establishing trust within the group is often considered a key factor in explaining why partners share information, commit themselves, and engage in deep collaborations (Muthusamy & White, 2005). As such, trust is the distinguishing feature that creates strong ties between organizations and allows for new knowledge to be created through what Vedres and Stark (2010: 1183) label inter-cohesion – where groups of organizations ‘fold into’ each other in ways that enables sustainability over time. While trust can be said to be a basic condition for such sustainability, research on inter-organizational relations has demonstrated that there are a number of potential factors that can influence the life-span of an alliance including the ways knowledge within the alliance is shared, the type of knowledge the alliance possesses, alliance characteristics, cultural factors, etc. (Inkpen & Tsang, 2007; van Wijk et al., 2008).

2.2 RECENT RESEARCH INVESTIGATING AND INTERPRETING THE EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INITIATIVE

Although it is still relatively early days for the EUI, various studies have already been published addressing how this policy initiative is being put into practice. Gunn (2020) offered initial reflections on what the new alliance landscape would look like, identifying possibilities for more inclusive and open-ended alliances as well as alliances more based on existing status hierarchies.

Generic findings so far are that many European University alliances are formed by larger, more comprehensive, older and internationally oriented research-intensive universities (Lambrechts et al. 2023; Craciun et al. 2023). This overarching picture does still contain some interesting nuances. Based on data from the European Tertiary Education Register (ETER), Lambrechts et al. (2023) found that alliance formation is characterized by a combination of three factors: i) pre-existing networks of institutions (See also Charret & Chankseliani 2022; Maassen et al. 2022), ii) similarities in institutional characteristics, and iii) complementarity in institutional characteristics.

Craciun et al. (2023), also using data from ETER combined with data from U-Multirank, found a similar pattern of diversity regarding alliance formation, demonstrating that pre-existing ties were especially important for those applying to the first EUI call, but that new types of partnerships are more often found in later EUI rounds of alliance selection. Lambrechts et al. (2023) further argued that similarities in institutional characteristics and complementarity appeared concurrently in many alliance formation processes. However, a recent article also shows that alliance formation was not fully path-dependent, and that the formation process was quite often more fragmented and de-centralized where individual members of the alliances played a dominant role in bringing new partners on board (Stensaker et al., 2023). Furthermore, that new alliances also represent a 'breaking up' of some existing networks and alliances bringing a new dynamic into the European higher education landscape which might impact alliance profiles and future positioning (Stensaker et al., 2023).

In an article studying the internal governance and organization of a selection of alliances applying and further developing a meta-organizational perspective on European university alliances, Maassen et al. (2022) examined the importance of internal coordination with respect to governance, mechanisms of conflict resolution, member commitment, and cultural characteristics of member organizations as crucial factors for alliance integration and coherence.

3 CREATING RESILIENT RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN ALLIANCES

Based on existing theorizing of university alliances, current research on the European University Initiative, and extracts from the monitoring and evaluation framework applied by Circle U in the pilot process – we offer the following policy recommendations as pointers for alliance resilience and persistence in the years to come. These recommendations may not be relevant for all alliances as the level and ambition of alliance integration may vary between the alliances. However, for those alliances that enter into partnerships with transformational aims, alliances may be a way to renew and reform internal practices, routines and 'ways of doing things' where alliance membership is not only about new ways to internationalize but a renewal of the existing ways of operating also for the individual university.

3.1 COORDINATION

The degree of organizational coordination provides information of the potential a given university alliance may have for consistent performance over time. Organizational coordination can take place in various ways, from developing more loose networks to the establishment of a formal organization (Owen-Smith & Powell, 2008; Torfing, 2012) to developing standards and rules which over time become accepted as guidelines for organizational action (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2000; Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). **To establish several different coordination mechanisms offers diverse ways to drive convergence in both practices and performance.** The extent of coordination mechanisms established in existing university alliances suggests that many alliances are actively attempting to modify one of the main problems of meta-organizations; their 'weak' starting point regarding internal governance (Maassen et al. 2022).

However, it cannot be taken for granted that all coordination mechanisms established are pulling the alliances in the same direction (Vukasovic & Stensaker, 2018). As alliances also have to take into account that there is a 'project' that must be reported upon, for example in the form of work packages, internal 'silos' may easily develop and reduce the potential for knowledge transfer and organizational learning (Muthusamy & White, 2005; van Wijk et al., 2008). As a number of decisions are made at various levels in the alliances running the risk of being disconnected from overarching aims and objectives, **governance arrangements within the alliances need to be relatively simple and visible** enabling the organizing of the day-to-day work. Related to this, **it is important that alliances continuously monitor, evaluate and learn from their internal operations as they mature and develop.** Agreeing upon what the key outcomes are in the focal alliance

and how they could be monitored in a systematic way may imply some reporting to be undertaken, but could in the long run be an effective way of preventing unnecessary bureaucracy in alliance coordination work.

3.2 CONFLICT RESOLUTION

University alliances are also in need of mechanisms for conflict resolution. As members may have divergent interests and different preferences on a number of issues, developing an agreed upon practice for solving conflicts can be seen as a mechanism for securing the sustainability of an alliance (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005). As suggested by Ahrne & Brunsson (2005: 441), the weak central authority found in most meta-organizations may pave way for two types of conflict resolution: voting or consensus-oriented practices. However, while voting mechanisms may allow for quick solutions this is also a mechanism that may have a potential negative impact on the alliance, especially if some members always find themselves on the losing side. Consensus-oriented conflict mechanisms may on the other hand be quite slow, although they might strengthen the bonds between the members (Vedres & Stark, 2010).

The ***strong consensus-orientation in decision-making within the alliances tend to reduce internal tensions and interest differentiation among alliance members*** (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005; Maassen et al. 2022). The main challenge with this form of conflict resolution is nevertheless the time aspect – the fact that decisions may take some time to agree upon running the risk of missing opportunities and failing to achieve what has been set out as objectives for the projects within the deadlines set, not least toward the European Commission. At the same time, ***consensus-oriented conflict resolution may enhance the commitment from members and bring them closer together as partners*** (Vedres & Stark, 2010). Allowing for decisions to mature is not always the preferred option for the impatient, but it may have positive benefits.

3.3 CULTURAL NURTURING

Whether university alliances are resilient in the long run is also dependent on membership enthusiasm and engagement (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). As many of the selected European university alliances have been set up after a tender initiated by the European Commission, there is a risk that the commitment to engage in the alliance will be reduced if the economic resources currently available dry out (Beerkens, 2004), or if alternatives to existing alliances develop (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005).

Cultural nurturing may affect the sustainability of inter-organizational collaboration (Muthusamy & White, 2005). Such characteristics are related to whether the members of an alliance share similar norms and values, have similar historical trajectories, or whether they find a good balance between engaging in a new organization and preserving the historical identity of the individual university (Labianca et al., 2001). If new practices and processes in an alliance deviate too much from existing ways of doing things, individual members may find it easier to withdraw from the alliance or to be less engaged in joint activities (van Wijk et al., 2008). The overarching rationale and what kind of engagement these university alliances signal is thus an important signifier for future sustainability. ***Justifications for alliance visions and strategies that match and further develop the existing identity of the members is in this respect a key element for long-term resilience*** (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991; Stensaker et al., 2023).

As long as key values and norms are respected, alliances may also transform and develop as organizations. New practices established through working together within alliances may in this respect be seen as natural steps forward and an innovation that is not seen as dramatic and revolutionary (Lounsbury & Crumley, 2007) and a development individual universities may interpret as non-threatening with respect to their identity and history (Labianca et al., 2001).

The fact that many alliances seem to consist of rather 'like-minded' institutions is also a factor that may enforce the long-term sustainability of the alliances established (Lambrechts et al. 2023; Stensaker et al. 2023).

Similar institutions and academic profiles make it easier to collaborate as social and cultural practices are more aligned in the first place (Inkpen & Tsang, 2007). However, as current alliances might have one particular feature that can be challenging with respect to culture and identity – associated partners from outside higher education – ***it is important that the ‘culture of collaboration’ developed include stakeholders outside the alliance***. As many of the associated partners operate within a different logic than those in academe, the challenge is then to create sense out of dissonance regarding these partners (Stark, 2009) – and find ways to develop the alliances in transformative ways (Stensaker, 2018).

3.4 COLLABORATIVE ADVANTAGE

Much research on the European university initiative suggests that universities with similar institutional characteristics and previous collaborations and ties found each other when the new European University alliances were to be established (Charret & Chankseliani 2022; Lambrechts et al. 2023; Craciun et al. 2023; Stensaker et al. 2023). While this could be interpreted as a path-dependent development which bring about few novel dimensions, research do suggest that long-time collaboration which is based on trust and special ways of ‘doing things’ also creates comparative advantages with respect to the products and educational programs offered (Inkpen & Tsang, 2007).

However, there is a danger that many alliances over time may become more similar reducing the innovative potential of the EUI. Key drivers behind this development could be found in the fact that the EUI is an overarching European policy initiative, and as an unintended effect of the ways and means alliances will be monitored and evaluated over time. Put together, these factors could drive convergence over time. As such, and especially if it is important to maintain diversity in the European higher education landscape, **alliances need to manage and nurture their identity in ways that distinguish and position them in the European higher education landscape**.

Such ‘identity management’ does not imply that the established alliances will lack dynamism and change. As shown in research on the EUI, the thematic profile of alliances could be opened up as alliances are seeking to develop a more distinct profile in areas such as sustainability, health, or entrepreneurship while others develop a narrower, more distinct profile (Stensaker et al. 2023). Hence, there are indications that many alliances are developing a new ‘meta-identity’ that could be transformative over time.

4 EUROPEAN ALLIANCES IN A NEW GEO-POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

In the introduction to this policy paper we noticed how university alliance developments is a global trend, and not a development that is unique to Europe. Network, partnership, and inter-organizational collaboration is currently a global phenomenon (Stensaker 2013; Maassen et al. 2023). Within the European alliances there seems to be a growing interest in building links and relationships that are extending beyond Europe (Stensaker et al., 2023). This kind of collaboration could impact the recommendations offered, although one also could argue that collaborations beyond Europe need reflect the values and norms that historically has characterized European higher education, including access and academic freedom.

The existing alliances has also a responsibility for the many higher education institutions that currently are outside the EUI. While almost 450 higher education institutions are currently members of one of the 50 European University alliances, most of the higher education institutions in Europe are currently still not included in the EUI. While diversity in the European higher education landscape is a highly valued characteristic, it is important that the EUI is not representing a new divide in Europe between those that are inside and those that are outside the initiative. Existing alliances could represent an interesting opportunity to renew the Bologna process and demonstrate how further integration of European higher education could

unfold in the coming years (Jungblut et al. 2020). As such, the European university initiative may embed both predictable incrementalism and interesting dynamics. In either form, alliances may contribute to shape new institutional logics within the field of European higher education.

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