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## “There is some sort of new dynamics”: Examining the impact of European University Alliances

### Abstract

The *European Universities Initiative* (EUI) marks a significant transformation in the European higher education landscape. Yet, in the fifth anniversary of the first EUI alliances only a few scientific studies examine the practices for building and sustaining successful alliances. This article provides a framework for analysing EUI alliances from a meta-organisational perspective where individuals are not just agents of their member organisations but also contribute to the meta-organisation’s strategic direction, requiring continuous negotiation to balance member and meta-organisation interests. In line with the EUI’s aim for innovation and transformation, using the innovation-diffusion model allows to grasp the impact on member universities and its potential for longevity. Based on qualitative group interviews with academic staff from nine *Higher Education Institutions* (HEIs), it presents a descriptive, impact-oriented analysis of the strategies and challenges within a European alliance along three dimensions: characteristics, commitment, and coordination.

### Keywords

european university alliances, meta-organisations, impact-oriented, organisational development

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# „Es gibt eine Art neue Dynamik“: Untersuchung der Auswirkungen europäischer Hochschulallianzen

## Zusammenfassung

Die *European Universities Initiative* (EUI) markiert einen bedeutenden Wandel in der europäischen Hochschullandschaft. Doch auch fünf Jahre nach Gründung der ersten EUI-Allianzen gibt es nur wenige wissenschaftliche Studien, die sich mit den Praktiken zum Aufbau und zur Aufrechterhaltung erfolgreicher Allianzen befassen. Dieser Artikel bietet einen Rahmen für die Analyse von EUI-Allianzen aus einer meta-organisatorischen Perspektive, in der Einzelpersonen nicht nur Vertreter ihrer Mitgliedsorganisationen sind, sondern auch zur strategischen Ausrichtung der Meta-Organisation beitragen, was kontinuierliche Verhandlungen erfordert, um die Interessen der Mitglieder und der Meta-Organisation in Einklang zu bringen. Im Einklang mit dem Ziel der EUI, Innovation und Wandel zu fördern, ermöglicht die Verwendung des Innovationsdiffusionsmodells, die Auswirkungen auf die Mitgliedsuniversitäten und das Potenzial für Langlebigkeit zu erfassen. Basierend auf qualitativen Gruppeninterviews mit akademischen Mitarbeitern aus neun Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) präsentiert er eine deskriptive, wirkungsorientierte Analyse der Strategien und Herausforderungen innerhalb einer europäischen Allianz entlang dreier Dimensionen: Merkmale, Engagement und Koordination.

## Schlüsselwörter

Europäische Hochschulallianzen, Meta-Organisationen, wirkungsorientiert, Organisationsentwicklung

# 1 Introduction

The *European Universities Initiative* (EUI) – involving more than 570 higher education institutions in 65 alliances – marks a significant transformation in the European higher education landscape. Launched under the Erasmus + programme, key long-term goals include establishing a European higher education inter-university campus, promoting student and staff mobility, offering joint and flexible curricula, and forming research teams to address societal challenges. For the implementation, the alliances are bound to a joint activity work plan that requires the

“design of relevant and efficient shared management structures [...], a shared pool of physical and virtual administrative resources, [...] joint provision of infrastructure, data and services [...] and joint digitalised processes” (Estermann et al., 2021, p. 6; see European Commission, 2025).

While forming university alliances is a global trend (Stensaker, 2018), EUI alliances stand out in that they are the result of an *external* initiative rather than the universities involved joining forces independently. To deliver on their mission, particularly the member universities are confronted with the need to adjust their internal governance model addressing the interests of their diverse university community as well as the requirements for fostering international cooperation and adapting a long-term joint EU strategy for education. Implementation occurs across multiple levels, reaching from leadership and administration to staff and student participation, leading to new institutional structures and strategies.

Various analytical perspectives have recently been used to examine alliances and strategic partnerships between universities. Reaching from examining the rationales and interconnected mechanisms that lead to strategic pathways between universities (Fehrenbach & Huisman, 2024; Gunn, 2020), the aspects of inclusiveness and exclusion (Lambrechts et al., 2024; Rensimer & Brooks, 2023) to more general studies that examine university alliances with regard to internationalisation, digitalisation and its impact on higher education policy in general (Frame & Curylo, 2025; Stensaker, 2018) and on national level (Poszytek & Budzanowska, 2023). Yet, there has

been little contribution to the examination of the transformation processes within the participating HEIs in the *European Alliances Initiative* (EUI) that refer directly to the variety of challenges and reforms involved. Palmowski & Angouri (2025) examined European university alliances as communities of practice and sites of mutual learning. Also, first analyses of the pedagogical models developed within alliances are published (Angouri et al., 2024) as well as reports on the outcomes and transformational potential of European university alliances, which are mostly rather project reports than scientific analyses (see Craciun et al., 2023; De Schepper et al., 2023; European Commission 2025).

Hence, this article applies an impact-oriented innovation diffusion approach to examine how meta-organisations (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Maassen et al., 2022), such as EUI alliances, can be institutionally designed and evolved. Therefore, drawing on qualitative interviews with academic staff from different faculties of an EUI alliance comprising nine member universities, the article provides an initial overview of the process of creating structures within the first year of an EUI alliance and analyses relevant governance challenges at the executing actors' level of the institutions.

## **2 Analysing strategies, challenges and impact within meta-organisations**

While universities are generally considered as organisations characterized by formal structures and rules as well as social norms and informal rules (Maassen & Olsen, 2007), university alliances represent a new organisational form, as their mechanisms link macro and micro levels in the European higher education sector. In line with this, Maassen et al. (2022) suggest to analyse university alliances from the meta-organisation perspective, as has formerly been elaborated by Ahrne & Brunsson (2008), since meta-organisations are entities characterized by the fact that other organisations, and not individuals, account for their membership (*ibid.*, p. 43). Stemming from the institutionalist approach, meta-organisations are viewed as “drivers

of ideas, interests and identities that make up the ingredients of institutional environments” (Maassen et al., 2022, p. 956). As such,

“alliances have the potential to form new institutional logics within the field of higher education [...] where new knowledge is developed through specific practices and initiatives within the network they constitute” (ibid., p. 957).

Our analysis is structured around the processes and mechanisms that individuals carry out in meta-organisations as actors on project level, as they introduce innovations into universities through their engagement. As they navigate the complex relationship between their own organisations’ interests and the collective goals of the meta-organisation, they shape its collective identity and strategic direction. This paper examines the *specific processes* involved in negotiating and implementing innovations within both the alliances and individual universities. For this purpose, the innovation diffusion model by Stockmann (2022) is used to analyse both processes and effects at the project level as well as their unintended and intended consequences.

Focusing on the assessment of service provision in non-profit organisations, Stockmann (2022) relies on diffusion research (see García-Avilés, 2015; Rogers, 2003) to understand aspects such as “external sustainability” or the spread of innovations by projects or programmes. His “innovation-diffusion-model” examines a programme’s – here: an alliance’s – potential for longevity, reach, system change and the ability to further develop innovations (Stockmann, 2022, p. 67). Associating the impact of a programme with its sustainability – which is achieved when the new organisational structures and behavioural changes outlast the end of the support measures (ibid., p. 67) – he distinguishes four dimensions:

*The first dimension* (project/programme-oriented type) includes the element common to all definitions of sustainability – that of *long-termism*. It is given when the target group continues to implement the project’s innovations independently *on a long-term basis*. *The second dimension* (output/performance-oriented type) considers *the scope* of impact, whether other groups beyond the original target group have adopted the innovations for their own benefit. *The third dimension* (system-oriented

type) includes the *change in the whole system* in which the innovation was introduced (e.g., in the education or economic system). This evolution of the system leads to an increase in the performance of an entire system via diffusion processes (Stockmann, 2022, p. 67). *The fourth dimension* (innovation-oriented type) takes into account that services are not simply reproduced in the same way, but that a target group, a provider or even a system can *adapt flexibly and appropriately* to changing environmental conditions (ibid., p. 68).

Our analysis suggests that this approach focusing on different dimensions of *project* implementation allows assessing the mechanisms involved in processes related to cooperation and work in meta-organisations such as EUI alliances. Moreover, distinguishing levels of implementation enables an assessment of the current phase of a project with regard to its potential for longevity, reach, system change and the ability to further develop innovations.

### 3 Data and methods

Based on eight group interviews (R1-R8) conducted in November 2024 in the work package groups of an EUI alliance project, the article presents results from the accompanying study on the project's first-year implementation. Interviewees were chosen based on the operative groups comprising academic staff from different faculties and institutions, as they form the executive level of the project. Eight groups, each of 7 till 15 participants comprising representatives from each participating university, were interviewed during their annual work session meeting. In this project, interviews are conducted on an ongoing basis during the regular project meetings and will include in future also other samplings with different actor groups, allowing for more comparisons regarding temporal and group-related development. The interviewer is not related to the alliance and works in a separately financed accompanying study. The alliance consists of nine HEIs characterized by their regional orientation in non-capital cities/regions. The research questions for grasping the mem-

bers' first-year experiences within the ongoing alliance project and the transformation processes at their universities included the following aspects: changes since the start, reasons for successful implementation, hindering factors, next steps.

For determining programme effects and conditions, the condition matrix of Grounded Theory was used (Strauss & Corbin, 1996). This analysis system, also called transactional system, allows action and interaction to be examined in relation to its conditions and consequences as well as context and interactional strategies (Strauss & Corbin, 1996, p. 78). Leaning on the axial coding presented by Strauss & Corbin (1996), the data was openly coded, continuously compared, conceptualised and categorised by using a data and text analysis software. Previously broken-down data has been recombined into categories and finally thematically grouped into four systematic categories (see Table 2):

<b>Implementation in year 1</b>	<b>Conditions and factors</b>	<b>Project and work perceptions</b>	<b>Project and work perceptions</b>
1. description of implementing general tasks	3. enabling conditions	5. perception of the alliance	7. next steps (at university)
2. process descriptions	4. hindering conditions	6. perception of work processes (on work package level, university level, general perception)	8. strategic ideas (for the project)
<b>characteristics, commitment, coordination</b>			

Table 1: Categories of the Codes

## 5 Results: EUI alliances and the impact on its member institutions

The open data coding revealed three crucial – cross-category – key dimensions for the implementation of EUI alliances: characteristics, commitment, and coordination (see Table 2). They put forward the processes of negotiation of strategies and solutions in order to implement the EUI alliance in the respective universities. At the same time, they show the effects of implementation on the universities involved.

### 5.1 Categorizing characteristics

Most of the 65 alliances consist of universities with similar profiles – for example in strategic focus, research intensity, or regional orientation. Despite the similarities, the interviewees highlight the importance of “knowing each other” for effective collaboration. Groups that already knew each other put forward the importance of trust-building encounters and their effect on a functioning cooperation. Different levels of trust lead to uneven collaboration and in some cases to a perceived lower status as partner within the alliance. Knowing each other means to have a better understanding of the other universities and “to understand the skills of the different partners, the competencies and the orientation [...] and to complete the other part” (R2: 6) for starting new projects together and initiate cooperation.

“To know each other” is all the more necessary as the universities are characterized by cultural differences and different university systems. The group interviews show that much common work is needed to bring the differing backgrounds and views to a common denominator, with regard to communication, task fulfilment, understanding of research and mobility. Cultural differences between the partner universities are associated with different ways of working, which renders the implementation of the project much more difficult than expected:

“Over time, I realized that, you know, this saying that in theory and practice are the same, but in practice they are not. [...] cultural differences, differences in the university systems, also differences the way people do things” (R2: 17).



Therefore, a successful implementation of an alliance requires also a turn in the way of thinking and understanding. The code “mindset changed”, as the most used aspect in the interviews, describes how the general mindset at the universities has changed within the first year of the alliance. Comprising different aspects, it mostly refers to “thinking internationally”, adapting to the idea of close networking within the alliance and embracing the possibilities and benefits that it offers. It is described as “becoming aware” of the extent of the project, to spread this awareness in each participating university and thus, fully implement the project in all activities and processes of the universities:

“We have developed the mindset change and understanding of what is the alliance, what is this kind of structure and what could be the benefits for the future. ... we have to convince the people that this is more than a project, it’s a transformation plan” (R4: 8).

Here, also the meaning of “internationalization” changes from merely comprising the exchange of students, to also include the exchange of knowledge, joint degree programmes and curricula.

## **5.2 Commitment**

Motivation is crucial for cooperation in projects. It directly impacts how effectively team members work together and achieve common goals. The study shows that participants are primarily driven by the idea of exchange, learning from each other and forming a “learning community” to “reflect what you are doing right or wrong” (R3: 27). Exchange is referred to aspects like “being united and moving each other” (R2: 25), “forming another perspective, without necessarily seeing the same picture” (R2: 25), staying connected, “try to commit, have the opportunity to share, to interchange, to open the door to the people to move” (R4: 18). Motivated by these benefits, also new possibilities and perspectives that open up particularly for smaller universities are put forward: “We together are able to go on a higher level” (R4: 21). Participation in international projects is described as much easier “as we know everyone” (R2: 6), including the skills and competencies of the partner universities in

the “new network where we are strongly connected” (R8: 6). Moreover, participants from the group interviews refer to the alliance project as something that is not going to end after four years. It is associated with the positive future of the participating universities and the need to endure in the European competition at higher level. The interviewees associate the sustainability of the project with institutional commitment and governance, academic integration and innovation, as well as social and regional impact.

Furthermore, being part of the alliance has contributed to increasing the visibility of the participating universities and the alliance itself. Participants note that the “brand” (R3: 4) is becoming more present within their institutions. “The logo of the alliance” (R3: 9) circulates internally; more people get involved and curiosity grows, creating “some sort of new dynamics” (R3: 14). As a consequence, cooperation between the faculties at university level has been widely increased. New positions have been created specifically for the alliance. Moreover, a heightened visibility of the universities’ participation in the alliance has mobilized cooperation with other stakeholders and improved the status of the participating institutions in the competition with other universities that are part of similar alliances.

At the same time, involving teachers and students into the alliance is described as the most difficult part of implementation in the first year. In many cases, the interviewees talk about being “a small group involved, but larger than it was before” (R3: 7). The reasons include limited time for combining teaching duties with alliance tasks and the lack of English-language courses – which in turn requires extra time effort for preparing and promoting the courses and for the students to adapt. The majority of the interviewees said that they are still advertising the benefits of the alliance and refining their strategies to engage staff and students.

Accordingly, the interviewees call for a more concrete “strategic plan” from the leadership of each university that actively demonstrates the value of the alliance (R1: 40) and integrates the project “inside of our daily routine” (R1: 35). Putting it strategically on a high priority level at each university would include, among others, equal resources for additional staff in order to simplify the project work and to render it

more visible and attractive, despite the workload. Hence, the involvement of a university's leadership is seen as a precondition for implementing the alliance in the universities.

### **5.3 Coordination**

*Efficient* communication and coordination are essential for a project's success, ensuring shared understanding of goals, expectations, and progress. Respondents report improved communication within their tasks, primarily due to regular meetings. These meetings enhanced discussion quality, facilitated the development of joint curricula, and fostered a better understanding of partners' working methods and competencies, thereby strengthening overall cooperation and communication "as we know everyone" (R2: 6). Physical meetings in particular "boost the energy of the project" (R8: 34), contribute to get a better idea of "knowing where we are going" (R3: 10) and "to identify that it's possible to do it" (R4: 18). It also helps to transmit outcomes to stakeholders, teachers and students to raise interest and engagement. Some work packages faced challenges from staff turnover at both institutional and alliance levels. To address this, efforts were made to form a stable group of competent members to ensure consistent meeting quality and reduce disruptions caused by continually onboarding new participants. Furthermore, effective communication between work package groups is considered as crucial for the alignment of efforts. Most interviewees reported lacking insight into other work packages, and stressed the importance of promoting a collaborative environment where team members can share ideas and provide feedback to achieve project objectives, as "it's connected everything all together, and all together makes some sense" (R6: 23).

Clarity of goals, expectations and structure, in other words transparency, helps all team members to understand their roles, objectives, and deadlines. Some work packages communicated the need for more transparency and clearer communication with regard to their tasks and responsibilities. Lacking clarity and direction, the participants feel "lagging behind the other work packages", "being dependent on them" and "being limited" (R5: 8). They expressed the need for more clarity and exchange

with the steering committee with regard to expectations and prioritization. In addition, some participants see a discrepancy between the deliverables and their own ideas about a successful and valuable task execution:

“I’m kind of torn also because I kind of feel that we are guided in the project plan to the things that we have to do, but are not necessarily, in my mind, the things that would bring the most value to the project, to the alliance” (R5: 22).

## **6 Discussion: Institutionalisation of alliances and transformation within the HEIs**

The descriptive retrospective analysis of the selected alliance shows how in the beginning phase of the alliance’s project’s first year actors from the meta-organisation engage to implement the measures in the participating universities and how their engagement slowly leads to innovation within the university structures. Similar to Maassen et al. (2022), our analysis reveals three central dimensions in which specific instrumental logics are processed by individual actors within an alliance, namely the handling of attributes, commitment, and coordination (see also Berkowitz, 2022). First, the core group itself, the members of the work packages consisting of academic staff from different faculties and central institutions, must go through and create changes. Here, *coordination strategies* aim to standardise meetings, ensure efficient information exchange between the work packages by setting clear agreements with the focus on eliminating or preventing information asymmetries (see Fontanari, 1996) and expecting transparency – as a prerequisite for trust (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2014) – particularly from the management level with regard to providing clarity, direction and prioritisation. Theories that describe how projects develop into systems also emphasise the importance of some essential elements on the relationship level (trust, communication and information as well as leadership and commitment) for the design of cooperation (Maschwitz, 2014, p. 89; Schweer, 2012, p. 107).

This is particularly important when, as in EUI alliances, different interests and cultures clash. For cooperation, generalised trust (built on experiences over a long period of time) and specific trust (generated through recurring encounters with the same people) seem to be of particular interest, as the analysis confirms (see Maschwitz, 2014; Ripperger, 1998). Thus, with regard to the current level of project implementation in the frame of Stockmann’s innovation-diffusion model, the project is currently situated at a program-oriented dimension, where participants continue the innovations in their own interest and for their own benefit (Stockmann, 2022). The first-year engagement of the work package groups has been first and foremost concentrated on meeting the deadlines within the tasks.

At the same time, the implementation has also started to spread in the output-oriented dimension, where also other groups have started to adopt the innovations in their own interest and for their own benefit (*ibid.*), e.g., departments and students. Here, the mindshift mechanism is key: members must recognize their commitment, motivation, and openness to change, which then helps inspire staff and students to engage. These processes of spreading innovations put forward the importance of *commitment* and strategies for a sustainable adaptation of the alliance and prove the centrality of individual actors within meta-organisations. They result from fundamental decisions and actions (Berkowitz et al., 2022, p. 2) with adoption processes starting in international teams and continuing through staff and students at the respective universities. Fostering awareness and interest among staff and students alters practices, boundaries and identities within the universities (see Lupova-Henry et al., 2021) by means of the respective actor groups. Interview data suggest that actors actively shape the alliance’s value or brand, “so that their audiences perceive them as legitimate actors in given contexts” (*ibid.*, p. 38).

By discussing and negotiating new adoptions of understanding mobility, research and internationalization, actor groups constantly “create, shape, and disrupt boundaries” (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010) and create a form of category work (Berkowitz et al., 2022, p.5). However, this requires an active exchange and adjustment also with other university leadership and the project’s steering committee.

Overall, the interview data align with a normal system development (Schweer, 2012). Participation in the alliance requires a far-reaching transformation and adaptation from leadership, participants, staff and students – thus, different actor groups. There is a difference between the ways in which core academic activities were organised before and the new ways of organising them within the alliance (Maassen et al., 2022, p. 965). The future will determine the extent to which the project content and forms of organising will take root and to what extent whole systems will be affected by the innovations.

## 7 Conclusion

EUI alliances help universities respond to growing demands for internationalisation and digitalisation but face the challenge of implementing changes across all member institutions simultaneously. Transformations occur along three key dimensions—characteristics, commitment, and coordination—driven by actors at the work package level. These actors play a crucial role in institutionalising the alliances as meta-organisations, supported by leadership and steering committees. Further analysis of coordination could reveal how actors, governing bodies, and institutions negotiate goals and strategies. Using an impact-oriented approach based on Stockmann’s innovation-diffusion model (2022), the analysis reveals that a strong project orientation remains after the first year. This model helps assess the implementation progress of innovations and understand their broader system-level impacts. Applying it to alliance research allows for a step-by-step evaluation of innovation diffusion. Future studies will need to examine the sustainability of EUI programmes beyond the initial four-year phase, explore mechanisms for more effective adaptation, and assess whether and how systemic changes occur in higher education and beyond. Overall, alliances are shown to support innovation development.

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