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The European University Initiative – investigating alliance formation and initial profile developments

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Abstract

The European University Initiative (EUI) – launched by the European Commission in 2018 has been received with considerable interest from higher education institutions in Europe with hundreds of institutions forming new alliances. While the EUI-initiative in many ways is a continuation of a long history of collaboration across national borders in Europe, the initiative also contains novel elements – not least with respect to the institutional commitments the new alliances are based on. This paper offers new insights into the alliance formation process, and the profiles of European university alliances. Based on a series of qualitative interviews with key persons at alliance level, our findings demonstrate quite complex alliance formation processes where both collective and individual networks of institutions were activated, and where different path-dependencies shaped the membership of the alliances.

Keywords European University Initiative · University alliances · Strategic collaboration · Organizational identity · Organizational image

Introduction

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 and Foskett, 2010; Stensaker, 2013; Vukasovic and Stensaker, 2018; Gunn, 2020; Charret and 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 diverse, and include risk-reduction, interest articulation, branding attempts, enhancement of the competitiveness of the institutions involved, serv-

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ing economic interests, and teaching, learning and innovation collaborations (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Stensaker, 2013; Lambrechts et al., 2023; Maassen et al., 2023).

These partnerships, networks and alliances are generally established at the initiative of the involved higher education institutions themselves. From that perspective it can be argued that the European University Initiative (EUI) represents an innovative foundation for inter-university collaboration, since it is externally initiated and provides the selected alliances with a basic grant and various additional options for acquiring competitive EU funding for intra-alliance educational and research collaborations.

The EUI is inspired by a speech given in 2017 by the French president Macron who suggested to establish European Universities consisting of a network of universities across Europe. President Macron argued in his speech that these European Universities would be the drivers of educational excellence in Europe. In collaboration with the Member States, the European Commission elaborated the general ideas presented in Macron's speech into the European Universities Initiative (EUI) programme, which introduced its first pilot call for applications for the status of European University alliances in 2018.

While educational collaboration in European higher education has a long history (Gunn, 2020; Jungblut et al., 2020), the EUI contains some novel aspects as it intends to stimulate European university cooperation from being in essence project based, to firmly institutionalized, long-term programmatic collaborations. In this, European University alliances are required to achieve two key objectives: firstly, promoting common European values and principles, and secondly, contributing 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 were very positive until now, and in spring 2023 there are already 44 European University alliances with over 340 higher education institutions as members. These numbers can be expected to increase further through upcoming EUI calls.

Although it is still relatively early days for the EUI, various studies have already been published addressing how this programme 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 traditional, large, comprehensive, 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 and 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

pre-existing ties, similarities in institutional characteristics, and complementarity appeared concurrently in many alliance formation processes.

Hence, there is an interesting dynamic being played out as alliances are formed, characterized by complexity where different trade-offs could be imagined in the formation phase. For example, while establishing a new alliance based on an existing network indeed may have advantages with respect to reducing transaction costs and building trust (Maassen et al., 2022; Craciun et al., 2023), one could also argue that new partnerships would have certain advantages with respect to future positioning or for further developing academic ambitions (Lambrechts et al., 2023). This article analyses how the formation dynamic has played out in practice with the aim to contribute to a better understanding of how alliances are being shaped.

Based on these considerations, the following two research questions will be addressed in this article:

- What are the main factors characterizing the search for, selection and inclusion of member institutions in the formation process of European University alliances?
- How are the academic and thematic profiles of current European University alliances related to the identities of the alliances?

University alliance formation – between path-dependencies and preferred profiles?

Alliances and strategic partnerships between universities have been analyzed from various analytical perspectives (Robertson, 1992; Middlehurst, 2002; Bartell, 2003; Beerkens, 2004; Gunn, 2020; Stensaker, 2018; Maassen et al., 2022; Charret & Chankseliani, 2022). In this article, we will use an institutional theory perspective, which has often been used in studies of internationalization and globalization processes, including in higher education (Scott, 2001; Djelic & Sahlin-Andersson, 2006; Drori et al., 2006; Ramirez, 2010).

The relevance of an institutional perspective – and especially in contrasting different versions found within this broad theoretical framework – is that factors impacting alliance formation including historical ties and path-dependencies, but also factors emphasizing future strategic ambitions, can be given a theoretical embedding. Classic sociological versions of institutional theory (Selznick, 1957) would, for example, argue that universities are formed and characterized by their history, uniqueness and identity ("who we are as a university"), and that these factors are crucial for understanding how a given university would select partners in a university alliance. More recent sociological versions of institutional theory (Scott, 2001) would on the other hand argue that due to the environmental uncertainties facing universities, and their need for legitimacy in their surroundings, alliance formation are dominated by imitation and an adaptation to images and profiles ("who we want to be as a university") perceived as relevant and/or successful by key stakeholders (Greenwood et al., 2011). Hence, it is possible to argue that *organizational identity* is a concept closely related to "old" institutionalism while *organizational image* is a concept more closely related to "new" institutionalism – leading potentially to two very different outcomes with respect to the formation of alliances.

The concept of organizational image is within an institutional perspective often seen as a product of externally inspired adaptation processes (Scott, 2001; Wildavsky, 2010). Therefore, organizational images are produced externally as generic scripts considered as 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). For our purpose, typical examples of such scripts could be images of what a 'European University' should look like, including images that are adapted to 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 offered a powerful potential script to follow. In this situation, alliance formation could be expected to be framed by the need for risk-reduction and the capability an alliance would have to respond to the various expectations stemming from the EUI call (Fumasoli et al., 2015). Hence, having universities with different characteristics and complementary capabilities, such as international experience, geographical location, and a strong profile with respect to student mobility, forming an alliance could provide this ability to be responsive, enabling alliances and their members to pursue both exploitation and exploration strategies (Nguyen et al., 2016).

The concept of organizational identity is also of relevance in an institutional perspective (Stensaker, 2015), not least as a way of describing how individual organizations are institutionalized (Selznick, 1957), 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 – an joint understanding of central, enduring and distinct elements characterizing a focal university (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Previous studies have 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 mutually attractive (Labiance et al. 2001). Finding partners 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 are shaped in a more organic fashion in this perspective, it can be argued that alliances formed by universities with similar identities potentially could translate their existing identities in ways that fit external demands (Czarniwska & Joerges 1996; Sahlin-Andersson, 1996; Sevón, 1996; Seeber et al., 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).

The concepts of organizational identity and image presented here should be seen as ideal-types, although it should be underlined that they are not mutually exclusive (Stensaker, 2015). Status and prestige may in this respect be factors that in various ways could condition alliance formation with respect to both identity and image (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016; Brancovic, 2018). For example, high status universities may be important to include for gaining external legitimacy for a new alliance, and low status universities could be preferable partners if they share similar characteristics with those they are intended to partner

with. However, for institutions with high status and prestige, the EUI may also offer more options that those enjoyed by low status universities.

Data and methodology

The data informing the study stems mainly from interviews with persons in central leadership or management roles in ten recently established European university alliances. The interviewees include general secretaries of the alliances, chairmen/heads of the management or executive board, and/or the formal coordinators of the alliances. Requests for interviews were sent out to all university alliances, and ten alliances responded positively, which covers almost 25% of the existing alliances. The interview guide was semi-structured and was sent to interviewees before the interview. The interviews covered six predefined areas of interest: governance structures (bodies, budget management and mission), comparison between being in an alliance and participating in other EU projects, main educational programmes and activities, research activities, transmission of European values and principles, and future developments. In this article, data mainly stems from the governance parts of the interviews, more specifically how alliances were formed and took shape. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, interviews were conducted on-line by one of the researchers, and lasted between 35 and 45 min. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Supplementary data were collected from the webpages of the selected alliances – including mission and vision statements, and data on key characteristics of member institutions. The current study focuses on the alliances formed as a result of the two first rounds of EUI calls.

Of the ten alliances included, four were selected in the first call and six in the second, representing 89 European higher education institutions in total. These ten alliances span 27 countries, with most alliances included having members from France (12), Germany (11), Spain (8), Italy (6) and the Netherlands (5).

The interview data were thematically analysed focusing on specific parts of the interviews that dealt with how the alliance was formed, and the interactions between universities leading up to the formal establishment of the alliance. The first round of analysis was done by one of the researchers that did not conduct the interviews. In this round, keywords related to each dimension were used to extract samples of data from the interviews. The extracted samples were in the second step checked for reliability by the two other researchers, and all three researchers agreed on the data selected in the final step. One of the researchers has a central position in a European university alliance. This researcher did not participate in the interviews, but participated in the interpretative process. While such involvement may represent an interpretative bias, it could also have advantages with respect to an insider understanding of the issues at stake.

To get a broader understanding of the current academic and thematic profiles emphasized in the EUI calls' selection decisions, the websites of all 44 alliances were used to categorise the alliances according to key institutional characteristics of their members (see Table 1). This categorization was guided by the framework suggested by Albert and Whetten (1985) where organizational identities are construed along three dimensions: centrality ("this defines us"); endurance ("consistency over time") and distinctiveness ("this differ us from others"). These dimensions are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but offer a methodology to guide the thematic analysis undertaken. In the second step of the analysis, the profiles of

the alliances as described in their vision/mission statements were mapped (Table 2) – allowing for understanding better the relationship between path-dependencies (identities) and future profiles (images). To enable a more simplified categorization, generic labels ("vocational university", "technical university") are used in presenting alliance identities, while we apply generic keywords ("entrepreneurship", "coast") when describing future profiles.

Findings

What factors and processes characterized the search and inclusion of member universities in the alliance formation process?

Our interviews with representatives of the ten alliances selected show that the alliance formation process was strongly influenced by previous partnerships, networks, and institutional connections of the participating universities. Of the ten alliances studied, nine reported that such historical relationships were crucial in the formation of the new alliances.

In several of the selected European University alliances, largely bilateral connections and collaborations between participating universities formed important 'building blocks' in the alliance formation process. Typical examples include:

"…as far as I know, there were some connections among, for example, University (X) and University (Y). University (Y) had a connection with University (Z), which had a connection with University (U), and so probably one called the other. For sure, here at University (X) we have historical connections with University (Y), we have our joint degrees and also … a partnership, it's a kind of a small alliance, just two universities giving joint diplomas, joint degrees etcetera". (Alliance 1)

"I would say that it is new as an alliance, but it is based on a lot of collaborations that we had prior. Those collaborations were mostly bilateral, with two or three members… It was very easy to set up the group of partners because we (already) collaborated, we had a lot of bilateral collaborations that we were able to utilize very quickly". (Alliance 2)

"…Alliance 3 is a strategic partnership of 6 specialized universities in Europe… When … the European universities alliances came out, we all knew it was something for us because we have been an alliance with a Brussels office, which works very much on research and innovation collaboration, agenda setting and policy forming, but we never really got into a coordinated joint approach of education and we saw this external funding as a good starting point for us for really look into what we could do in education together…". (Alliance 3).

"The alliance itself is new, but we did have relationships between different universities and different groups of universities between each other. We had common research projects, common grants together with exchange of staff and exchange of students. Between our universities we collaborated on Erasmus projects, so there were links between us before the project was created, but not of course to the extent as it is now". (Alliance 4)

"This really makes Alliance 7 unique, we celebrate (soon) our XXth birthday. All partners of the alliance, that's why we are so big, we didn't want to split up, so we took all

partners in the alliance … this makes a huge difference, that we have already known each other for decades … there is a lot of common trust". (Alliance 7)

Another common feature among alliances highlighted in the interviews is that the focal institutions initiating the new alliance formation process generally shared key characteristics, such as being specialized (e.g. in arts or business administration), technical, or comprehensive professional or research-intensive universities. A smaller number of university alliances was formed by shared geographical characteristics, e.g. being universities in larger cities or in coastal areas.

Another interesting characteristic of the analyzed alliances is that some of them were established as an amalgamation of smaller networks of similar types of universities:

"Yes, actually Alliance 6 is a merger of two existing networks, because before Alliance 6 we had already an institutional partnership between 5 universities … and for the European University call we merged with another existing network, between the University C, University D, and University E which was already more or less in that partnership. And then we also … involved University F (from Eastern Europe)". (Alliance 6)

The latter quote does indicate that it was not just established networks and existing collaborations that formed the foundation for a formal European University alliance. Some of the newly formed alliances invited one or two new partner universities enabling the emerging alliance to cover the diversity found in Europe. The new partners were not randomly selected though – alliances were making sure that the new partners fitted the external demands related to the call:

"But Alliance 7 is not something that is set in stone … so we have welcomed a new member, but we were already in touch with them before. It's natural that alliances grow and … maybe lose some partners on the way, so we added one partner, it's natural…". (Alliance 7)

"…unfortunately, we knew that University D and University F couldn't get funded, and the European commission wanted to have something inclusive (to cover) a lot of different geographical regions … so we were looking for additional partners in eastern Europe and got University G and University H on board". (Alliance 3)

Hence, the selection of new members into alliances that were largely based on existing collaborations combined two criteria: the characteristics of potential new members related to the identity of the core universities, and the extent to which the new members matched certain demands emphasized in the call.

Yet another feature of the new alliances is that several of them have grown out of larger networks, often more interest-based configurations with a different purpose. Hence, existing university alliances such as LERU and the Guild seem to have been breeding grounds for several of the new European University alliances that have been established – introducing a new dynamic between older networks and the new alliances:

"There were a lot of relationships already ... I don't know if you heard .... but there is this network called the X, that is a European network of research-intensive universities, and many of the universities of Alliance 9 are in fact members of the X ... through the X some of the universities, especially University O, K and L started to talk together. Afterwards, they discussed with University M, and M then talked with N and it was a bit like this". (Alliance 9)

"There were for sure links between the partners, in some cases they were multilateral links, so you already had participation in the same associations, like S, T or other groups, you had for sure bilateral collaborations among these institutions". (Alliance 10)

Thus, while our data indicate that the member institutions of European University alliances share a relevant collaboration history and specific characteristics, this does not imply that these new alliances are merely an extension of already existing networks and shared activities – new partners and areas for collaboration have been introduced. Furthermore, it seems that the new alliances have boosted some innovations and new initiatives:

"Perhaps some of the thematic areas might be the same (as in the previous collaboration), but ... everything that is being developed is completely new. The multilingualism part is completely new. The liberal arts and sciences, they were discussed before, but ... never actually delivered anything ... the entrepreneurship concept is completely new as well". (Alliance 5)

"... so everything that we do in Alliance 2, is first of all based on ... the plans that we already had before, and ... the activities that we already had going. We were engaged in joint European projects, we were discussing the possibility of having joint European degrees, and of course work on (creating) a pedagogical university. What we did as a strategy, we knew which universities were stronger in each field and those are the universities that lead each of our work packages". (Alliance 2)

The latter quote also suggests that some of the educational innovations developed within the new alliances were not only related to the academic content, but also included novel ways of organizing and offering study programmes, with those universities being recognized as having expertise in particular areas getting the responsibility of managing the work taking place in the area in question.

How are the academic and thematic profiles of European university alliances related to the identities of the alliances?

A mapping of the institutions forming the 44 alliances established by Spring 2023, demonstrate a considerable number of similarities between the universities that came together in the European University alliances (see Table 2). Based on the self-descriptions found on their webpages of what is central, enduring and distinctive about their alliance, it is possible to carve out a number of different alliance identities – although our analysis also demonstrates that while these identities indeed may be presented as central and enduring, they might not be so distinct compared to other alliances as most alliances categorized themselves with identities as "research-intensive" or "technical" (see Table 1).

As indicated above, the identities of the alliances were not just associated with the academic profiles. While the majority of the alliances consist of research-intensive, technical

Table 1 The key institutional characteristics of universities forming European University alliances

Key institutional characteristics	Number
Research-intensive	10
Technical	10
Diverse (unable to determine a clear identity)	7
Specialized	6
Entrepreneurial	3
Coastal	2
Vocational	2
Old	1
Regional	1
Urban	1
Young	1
Total	**44**

or specialized ('mono-disciplinary') higher education institutions – there are a few alliances that have been formed based on their geographical location (urban, costal), or other key institutional characteristics (e.g., old, young). Our grouping of universities based on the web-sites of the alliances is in line with studies that have described alliances based on more quantitative data of their membership (Craciun et al., 2023).

Of the 44 current European University alliances, only seven consist of institutions that have a more diverse identity where it is not possible to categorize them according to the three dimensions of central, enduring and distinctive. The latter alliances tend to highlight various dimensions as central and distinctive.

However, while specific characteristics of the participating universities may have been important in the forming of the alliances, this does not imply that the institutional identities associated with the formation of the new alliance necessarily put constraints on the profiles of the alliances after establishment. This can be illustrated by categorizing the thematic and academic profiles of the 44 alliances after their establishment (see Table 2).

Comparing table one and two also shows that new profiles have been developed. As Table 2 indicates, many of the alliances that highlighted in their formation institutional identities as research-intensive and technical universities further refined and made their profile more distinct after forming the alliance. A trend emerging from the strategic mission and vision documents of the alliances is that the new profile often is geared towards objectives and ambitions that can be related to more global challenges, such as global health, democracy, education, and sustainability. Hence, institutional identities have not blocked the further development of alliance profiles.

While only one alliance was formed by institutions presenting themselves with a regional identity (see Table 1), Table 2 shows that six alliances have developed thematic profiles after the establishment that are strongly related to a regional focus and to regional priorities. Identifying with social sciences as a strategic alliance profile is also a trending finding, and many of the alliances that consist of research-intensive universities seem to have gone in this direction. This is especially interesting as Lambrechts et al. (2023) found that rather few alliances had members with dominant social science characteristics. Nonetheless, having a regional or a social science profile is among the main thematic profiles of the 44 alliances.

Table 2 The key academic and thematic profiles of the European University alliances after establishment

Key academic and thematic profile of the alliances	Number
Regional	6
Social Sciences	6
General	6
Sustainability	6
Education	3
Entrepreneurship	3
Health	3
Technical	3
Art	1
Coast	1
Engineering	1
Film	1
Rural	1
Sea	1
Space	1
Urban	1
Total	**44**

Discussion

Our findings suggest that universities and colleges with similar institutional characteristics and previous collaborations and ties, found each other when the new European University alliances were established. This is a finding confirming other studies conducted on the implementation of the EUI programme (Charret & Chankseliani, 2022; Lambrechts et al., 2023; Craciun et al., 2023).

However, our study offers additional insights into the dynamics of alliance formation. First, it indicates that the process of alliance construction was in many cases rather fragmented and de-centralized in that networks and ties of individual institutional members were as important as the networks and ties existing at alliance level. Maassen et al. (2022) have argued that alliances as an organizational form may be rather weak in coordination, due to the power and influence of individual members. Based on our findings it can be assumed that individual universities had a strong impact on alliance formation. This implies that important aspects of alliance formation were more distributed than `organized` at alliance level, although the involved partners agreed, for example, on the characteristics a new partner should bring. At the same time, our data indicate that as the process unfolded, the responsibility for bringing in new members shifted over time, creating a `snowballing` effect.

A second insight from our study is that European University alliance formation processes also represent a possible `breaking up` of existing networks and ties. This may happen when previously self-standing networks decide to integrate or merge, or when existing networks are being split up in several new alliances, as evidenced in our data. Consequently, the EUI could represent a disruption or at least a new dynamic in the landscape of international university relations in Europe – not least due to the high number of universities now being members of an European University alliance. However, as higher education institutions may be member of several alliances and networks, there is also a possibility that the EUI may lead to a sort of `Matthew effect` where those universities that already have many interna-

tional links and networks further strengthen their position. The latter argument is supported by the fact that many large research-intensive universities with extensive international collaboration networks have joined one of the 44 selected European University alliances (Lambrechts et al., 2023).

A third insight coming out of our study concerns the dynamics involved when 'old networks' are transformed by adding new member institutions. In this situation, one could imagine that existing path-dependencies within the 'old network' would prevail, as institutionalized practices and cultures are difficult to change (Hall & de Guy, 1996). However, as our data suggests, in a number of alliances with new partners there are observable changes taking place in the thematic profile of the alliance. Sometimes, this thematic profile is opened up as when alliances are seeking to develop a more distinct profile in areas such as sustainability, health, or entrepreneurship – reflecting agendas that are recognizable both from the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and from political priorities high on the agenda both in the EU and in a number of countries throughout Europe (European Commission, 2020). In other cases, for example, in some of the alliances having members consisting of research-intensive universities or technical universities, a more distinct profile was developed after the establishment. Hence, by having to comply with the demands of geographical diversity defined in the call, one could argue that this diversity also may have brought new dynamics into the alliances with respect to the development of their profile.

Applying our theoretical perspective, it is also possible to note how concepts such as organizational identity and organizational image may add to our understanding of the alliance formation processes, and the dynamics involved. While existing organizational identities have played a distinct role in the search for partners based on similar characteristics, the revised thematic profiles of many of the new alliances after the establishment might suggest the creation of a new 'meta-identity' for some alliances. This is a development in line with the incremental and organic developments characterizing identity change processes in the traditional versions of institutional theory (Selznick, 1957). This is an insight which could nuance the weight currently given to the `path-dependent` characteristic of European University alliances – offering a more dynamic perspective on alliances and their developments.

Furthermore, also the concept of organizational image may add to our understanding of alliance formation. Several of the alliances analyzed in the underlying study have emphasized external demands and expectations significantly in the formation process, leading to adaptation of alliance characteristics fitting well with the criteria listed in the calls from the EUI. In addition, the fact that many alliances also have developed thematic profiles focusing on the SDGs is perhaps an indicator that global ideas and scripts have been important in this process (Scott, 2001).

It is also possible to find arguments for how identity and image are mutually interdependent in creating some of the dynamic witnessed in the alliance formation processes. It is, for example, possible to argue that the membership of a European University alliance is a result of a 'translation' process (Czarniawska-Joerges & Sevòn, 1996) implying efforts to find a workable balance between traditional identity characteristics and the images the new alliance would benefit from. Vukasovic and Stensaker (2018) have demonstrated that many alliances and international associations show tendencies of 'drift' in their mission, vision, and activities over time.

Pointers for future research

The EUI is still in its early stages, but the European Commission has signaled a further expansion of the number of European University alliances (European Commission, 2022). With this in mind, and based on research already conducted (Charret & Chankseliani, 2022; Maassen et al., 2022; Lambrechts et al., 2023; Craciun et al., 2023), several future research themes can be identified.

First, while European University alliances are interesting to study as a self-standing object, our study suggests that investigating how individual higher education institutions impact and are impacted by alliance membership is an important area for future studies. As European University alliances prioritize specific collaboration areas and develop more distinct profiles, it would be interesting to analyze how individual member institutions of these alliances are impacted by the strategic developments that take place at alliance level – and consequently how various elements signifying the current identity (e.g., `technical` university) are affected by new profiles (e.g., `sustainable` university). While the current study investigated the first two EUI calls for alliance establishment, the outcome of the most recent call suggests that some alliances have lost members, and that alliance membership is not necessarily a long-term commitment for all higher education institutions involved. How alliances navigate both internal and external competition and collaboration is a key research theme, as such the outcomes of these navigations can be expected to have implications for issues related to status and prestige, and system diversity at European level (Capano et al. 2020; Maassen et al., 2023). The participation of universities and colleges in several partnerships, networks, interest organizations and alliances, could represent interesting dilemmas, as membership of multiple formal collaborations potentially increases influence, competitiveness, and institutional status internationally (Brancovic, 2018; Maassen et al., 2023), while it also ties up organizational resources and capacity that may negatively affect their domestic roles and responsibilities (see also Vukasovic et al., 2018).

Second, the impact of EUI alliances on the European higher education landscape should also be investigated beyond the European borders. Strategic inter-institutional collaborations in higher education are not solely a European phenomenon (Stensaker, 2013; Maassen et al., 2023), and although it has not been a key dimension in the current article, our interviews show that several of the covered alliances are in the process of developing a global strategy, where partnerships with higher education institutions outside Europe is an emerging issue. Hence, there might be interesting questions to address when studying European alliances from a more global perspective.

Third, while almost 350 higher education institutions are currently member of one of the 44 European University alliances, most of the higher education institutions in Europe are currently not included in the EUI. As such, one could argue that the alliance formation processes so far represent a new divide in Europe, and the alliance initiative could represent an interesting research opportunity in relation to the overarching Bologna process and how the further integration of European higher education will unfold in the years to come (Jungblut et al., 2020). With respect to the possible divide the European University alliances represent for the further development of the European Higher Education Area, questions of how and to what extent alliance establishment also impacts other higher education institutions in Europe could be investigated in more comparative designs.

Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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