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“We need a certain mindset” – Operational and Strategic Drivers of Identity Formation in EUI Alliances

Abstract

Meta-organisations such like the *European Universities Initiative* (EUI) alliances require complex processes of institutional cooperation where the structural differences of the participating universities are translated into similarity, common aims and thus organisational identity. This article analyses how different actors within an EUI alliance project – namely operational academic staff and university rectors from nine *Higher Education Institutions* (HEIs) – shape an organisational identity *by making sense of the goals and transformations to be achieved*. Based on qualitative group and expert interviews, we show that their organisational identity is formed bottom-up by inward and outward processes that aim at managing change and transformation by maximizing institutional value, whereas university leaders play a rather symbolic role at the time of the interviews. Our findings indicate that the organisational identity approach provides a useful analytical framework for examining change and impact within EUI alliances, highlighting the importance of project benefits management.

Keywords

organizational identity, european university alliances, meta-organisations, project benefits management

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„Wir brauchen eine bestimmte Einstellung“ – Operative und strategische Treiber der Identitätsbildung in EUI-Allianzen

Zusammenfassung

Meta-Organisationen wie die Allianzen der *Europäischen Hochschulinitiative* (EUI) erfordern komplexe Prozesse institutioneller Zusammenarbeit, in denen die strukturellen Unterschiede der beteiligten Universitäten in Ähnlichkeiten, gemeinsame Ziele und damit in eine organisationale Identität übersetzt werden. Dieser Artikel analysiert, wie unterschiedliche Akteure innerhalb eines EUI-Allianzprojekts – nämlich operatives wissenschaftliches Personal und Rektor:innen aus neun Hochschulen – *durch Sinnzuschreibung zu Zielen und angestrebten Transformationen* eine organisationale Identität formen. Auf Grundlage qualitativer Gruppen- und Experteninterviews zeigen wir, dass sich diese organisationale Identität bottom-up durch nach innen und außen gerichtete Prozesse herausbildet, indem die operativen Akteur:innen darauf abzielen, Wandel und Transformation durch die Maximierung institutionellen Mehrwerts zu gestalten, während die Hochschulleitungen zum Zeitpunkt der Interviews eher eine symbolische Rolle einnehmen. Unsere Ergebnisse deuten darauf hin, dass der Ansatz der organisationalen Identität einen geeigneten analytischen Rahmen bietet, um Wandel und Wirkung in EUI-Allianzen zu untersuchen, und unterstreichen die Bedeutung eines systematischen Nutzenmanagements in Projekten.

Schlüsselwörter

Organisationale Identität, Europäische Hochschulallianzen, Meta-Organisationen, Nutzenmanagement in Projekten

1 Introduction

Aiming for a significant transformation in the European higher education landscape, the *European Universities Initiative* (EUI) alliances are characterised by key long-term goals like 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 (Estermann et al., 2021, p. 6). Implementation spans multiple levels – from leadership and administration to staff and student engagement – resulting in new institutional structures and strategies.

However, striving to achieve these goals by organisational change is made more difficult by the fact that EUI alliances are meta-organizations – in contrast to other EU projects –, entities characterized by the fact that other organisations, and not individuals, account for their membership (Maassen et al., 2022, p. 43). Because of the “considerable differences between organisations, most meta-organisations have to deal actively with the identities of their members” (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005, p. 436) in order to turn a loose consortium into a functioning, durable organisation. Particularly the idea of a “European campus” requires a meta-level identity, or sense-making; fostering such a new (meta-)campus suggests that alliances can be structured as a set of transnational localities, whereby the (imagined) “community” of the alliance (Anderson, 1983) is “at home” in various European locations (Frame et al, 2025, p.16). Furthermore, since alliances depend on voluntary commitment, staff, students, and leaders are more likely to engage if they see the alliance as tangible and legitimate. This highlights identity formation as a key driver of transformation, institutionalization, and sustainability. At the same time, existing studies focus more on the agency of the meta-organization and hardly consider the actual processes of the actors involved. For example, Lupova-Henry et al. (2021) describe organized clusters as consciously acting meta-organizations and distinguish three types of agency. Lavieolette et al. (2022) demonstrate how both internal and external dynamics interrelate to shape a coherent collective identity over time. Also, Berkowitz et al. (2022) put forward in their general introduction to the characteristics of meta-organisations the crucial role of boundary and category work.

As far as higher education and EUI alliances are concerned, publications on organisational identity formation are even less frequent. Hartzell et al. (2023) investigate stakeholder influence in university alliance identity based on EUI mission statements analysis. Another study highlights how the formation of a new academic field resulted in an identity crisis and that managing differences by achieving coherence supported identity formation (Patvardhan et al., 2015).

Building on this research gap, we use qualitative interviews to investigate how operational academic staff as well as university rectors from nine *Higher Education Institutions* (HEIs) negotiate the EUI alliance's identity in their daily endeavours. We extend analysing EUI alliances and highlight the role of actors on project level in negotiating organisational identity by handling complexity and organisational structure. Hereby, we answer the following research question:

How can identity formation within an EUI alliance be supported and how do individual actors and meta-organisational structures contribute to this?

2 Organisational identity approach

Organisational identity has become a more and more present concept in higher education research, particularly as a tool for understanding university dynamics (Stensaker, 2015) and initially as a concept to investigate resistance and transformation at the University of Illinois (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Consistent with research on strategy-making in universities, organisational identity is no longer seen as fixed and rooted in uniqueness or continuity, but as a strategic construct shaped by purposeful adaptation to a changing environment, requiring “strategic capacity, resources, and managerial oversight and engagement to implement the needed actions” (Stensaker 2025, p. 56). This analytical frame is attentive to how the organization can legitimize itself in the environment and take control over the narrative to be told. Thus, organisational identity serves as “an interpretative scheme for organisational members to make sense of internal and external changes” (Stensaker 2015, p. 108). In this analytical context, meta-organisations like EUI alliances form a new level of identity

formation where negotiation of continuity and change takes place on a meta level between multiple international actors. Several studies put forward that legitimacy is central to operate in these complex institutional environments and – as part of identity formation – is described as having a dual character: On the one hand, alignment and differentiation of the organisational members are balanced internally; on the other hand, an external coherent identity is formed by assembling and positioning legitimacy among institutional members and stakeholders (Laviolette et al., 2022; Lupova-Henry et al., 2021).

In this context, literature on organisational identity generally implies that strategic identity is predominantly crafted by leadership (Sergeeva 2024;). 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. By navigating the complex relationship between their own organisational interests and the collective goals of the EUI alliance, they shape its identity, strategy and institutional structures through inward and outward processes. We argue that identity formation is a relevant indicator – and driver – for transformation, institutionalisation processes as well as sustainability.

3 Data and methods

This article presents findings from the accompanying research study of a four-year EUI alliance project, in which various groups from nine *Higher Education Institutions* (HEIs) participating in the alliance are regularly interviewed. The here presented data were collected through qualitative interviews in 2025 with two different alliance actor groups: First, operational academic staff (RL1–8) were interviewed within their respective work package groups during their annual work session meetings. In total, eight group interviews – each consisting of 7 to 15 participants and including representatives from various faculties and internal institutions of each partner university – were conducted. These participants were chosen because the operational groups represent the executive level of the alliance project. In the research

study, interviews with the work package groups are conducted annually during regular project meetings. The interviews presented here stem from the second wave in 2025; however, during the first wave in 2024 (R1–8), participants often described a notable “mindshift” within their groups – a theme absent in the second wave. To account for this development and better capture identity formation, we included this aspect in chapter 4.2. As a second actor group, nine university rectors (RR1-9) were interviewed in single semi-structured expert interviews during their annual project meeting in 2025. Including this group allows for a comparison of top-down and bottom-up identity processes.

These two groups were selected for comparison to examine their perceptions of the alliance and the negotiation of identity in their daily work. The group interview questions addressed changes since the project’s start, drivers of successful implementation, barriers, and next steps. Rectors were interviewed about their understanding of the EUI alliance, governance and strategy, as well as related challenges and future needs. Due to the methodological framework, they have not been directly asked about identity, but about their understanding and the meaning of the alliance for their work and institution, in order to grasp their sense-making (Weick, 1995).

Based on the Grounded Theory methodology, we relied on the axial coding approach presented by Strauss & Corbin (1996), where 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 six systematic categories: work structure, project structure, university structure, achievements/changes, future steps and alliance identity. All these categories entail further subcategories. For instance, ‘alliance identity’ includes sub-themes like benefits, family-like, necessity of alliance, we-Europe, long-term perspective. This step of the data analysis allowed us to identify relationships among them and to recognise how identity played out in their transformation process.

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.

4 Results: Coordination across diversity

What is special about working in work packages of an EUI alliance project is the requirement to manage collaboration independently, on a horizontal level. This autonomy demands a high degree of sense-making, which in turn shapes an identity. As will be shown in this chapter, the group interviews with academic staff reveal how identity formation takes place on the operative level, largely independent from a top-down implementation.

Within this highly independent structure, operational staff face workload conflicts and challenges integrating the alliance into daily tasks. Their role extends beyond delivering outputs to maximising institutional value. Two levels of identity formation can be identified from the interviews: Inward processes regarding the operational group itself (chapter 4.1) and outward processes that focus on the inclusion of others and concern the external perception and functionality of the alliance (chapter 4.2). Starting from the research question initially presented, these two chapters answer the questions of how individual actors and meta-organizational structures contribute to identity formation within an EUI alliance and how this can be further supported as a driver for transformation, institutionalization and sustainability. These are then contrasted with the results from the expert interviews with university rectors from nine universities (chapter 4.3).

4.1 Inward processes: Community building

For the operational academic staff, the basic level of identity formation are the meetings within the work packages, both online and on site. It is here where identity formation and sense-making happen. When participants get to know each other, they create a common basis of possibilities and trust. *Knowing each other* as well as the diverse structural conditions of each partner university help to understand and to classify work flows and engagement:

“I would say that it’s better because we know each other and the regulations at our universities are different. So, we can accept that the situation at our university is different in comparison to other universities” (RL3: 14).

Also, practical exchange is more efficient when knowing each other:

“We know each other much more, so the cooperation and communication, it’s much more efficient. We know that we are reliable, and we can rely on each other” (RL5: 2).

Besides familiarity, narratives about *motivation* stand out as means of how the interviewees understand the meta-organization. Their motivation centers on emphasizing the alliance’s benefits, reflecting how they define it for themselves – primarily as a necessary European strategy. “It’s a vision. It’s a strategy. We want to be European” (RL1: 37) where “our university is part of a bigger and larger structure” (RL7: 17) and “our universities as a gateway to the rest of Europe” (RL8: 6).

The internationalisation of the universities on European level is closely linked to the strive for efficiency and change where “we can prepare the future” (RL7: 47) by putting “the European values into practice” (RL8: 43) because “it gives also added value to what is made globally” (RL6: 37). Furthermore, belonging to a EU alliance is seen as something necessary in light of the escalating geopolitical situation:

“European universities have to work together because there’s China, there’s the US. If we stay alone, we won’t survive. [...] So, my big motivation is to be part of the European university with you guys” (RL1: 44).

At the institutional level, benefits include attracting talent, accessing funding, and collaborating in EU projects. Being part of a shared learning community – “richer, smarter, stronger” – also shapes a meta-organisational identity. Realising these benefits requires efficiency through clear roles, streamlined decision-making, and a “more positive, pragmatic attitude” (RL3: 8) among members.

Sustained motivation, key to organizational identity, depends on clear long-term goals and structures, continually reinforced through inter-work package communication and regular meetings. Participants emphasize the need for sustainability and to “realise what is the project and what is the alliance” (RL7: 20).

In this process of sense-making – and without being asked about it in the interviews –, respondents from the work package groups refer remarkably unanimous to a *change of mindset* that each member must actively promote with regard to the upcoming transformation. Interestingly, this mindshift within the operative group is mentioned only in the first wave of the panel study. In the second wave, this aspect is obviously no longer relevant to their identity process. For instance, internationalisation is described as “a way of thinking”, which means to understand it in a broader sense, like actively adapt to the idea of close networking, embracing the possibilities that it offers, becoming aware of the extent of the project. Similarly, a common mindset with regard to mobility and research is put forward, requiring to be more flexible: “We need some kind of mindset [...] not just keep thinking in my institution” (R3: 31) but to build on common aspects, understandings/definitions and aims. The European idea of *sharing* is put forward, instead of competing. Research should be understood not merely as knowledge creation but rather as transmission. It is particularly here where trust and a sense of community is put forward as an important step to make the exchange of research possible, to “identify these people are almost members of my university without losing the identity of each university [...] I am a member of a great group” (R4: 26). This aspect is again mentioned in the second wave of the study:

“I think there’s more understanding for the opportunities. [...] It’s really something that we’re trying to promote, [...] ‘the alliance is (university name), but (university name) is the alliance’, kind of as well. So, both ways” (RL5: 18).

All these experiences of negotiation and inward progress strengthen group identity, the sense of belonging, and the feeling of being efficient. However, the focus is no longer solely on internal structures. It is now much more important for the teams to make the alliance visible externally through outward processes – in order to fulfill its primary purpose.

4.2 Outward processes: Enabling transformation

The EUI seeks systemic change in European higher education. Accordingly, interviewees discuss outward processes, like integrating faculties, staff, and students, as crucial to the alliance's success. They emphasise improving the alliance's visibility and clearly communicating its benefits to strengthen legitimacy, noting that stakeholders must undergo a similar mind shift as the operational work package teams. Several structural adjustments were proposed to support these aims. First, the alliance must be integrated as part of the university. In order to align alliance goals with institutional identities, making transformation feel integral rather than imposed, the respondents emphasise the importance of hiring more staff, perpetuate well-defined roles, responsibilities and simplified decision-making because "if we are to be a true alliance and be integrated into everything that we do, it needs to be done without that someone specific needs to be involved" (RL4: 18). These processes can be further promoted if the alliance is integrated into the universities' strategic plan, because "this is like the strategic visibility of (alliance name)" (RL5: 26) and puts the alliance on "great priority" (RL1: 37).

For this purpose, and secondly, leadership needs to be involved. This goes beyond the formal strategy plan. "You need a strong leader that is completely dedicated" (RL2: 13), "it's up to the leaders. [...] they are the wheels of change and everything" (RL2: 15):

"People must perceive that the alliance is supported from the top management of the university [...] If they hear from rectors, vice rectors, deans, head of the departments that (alliance name) is a natural part of university activities, they will accept this and behave accordingly" (RL5: 33).

Respondents note that university leadership involvement has improved over time. Initially, some EUI alliances were led entirely bottom-up without leadership support, but rectors are now paying attention to the alliance's first visible results:

"The authorities finally realised how much work has been done so far. Because I think they don't know; like this is every day small steps, each task

doing something. [...] Our rector, I think he wasn't aware of how much work was already done. So, he was really very surprised when he saw the outcomes" (RL6: 29).

Taking up this aspect, the next chapter presents the perspective of the rectors.

4.3 Leadership: A strategic perspective

Leadership is crucial in an alliance, as university leaders' motivations signal the organization's core values. To capture this, group interviews were complemented by expert interviews with nine rectors, where they highlighted strategic, societal, and political reasons for EUI membership. Being asked about the meaning of the alliance for their university, they unanimously relate to "improved visibility" (RR1: 3) and mostly to the opportunity of internationalisation. The alliance is considered as "a new kind of internationalisation beyond mobility" (RR8: 3), or as "an important strategy [...] for the construction of the European education area" (RR5:3). Formerly associated with validation, international degree programmes and mobility, internationalisation is now related to networking, short-term mobility and new dynamics:

"We have, also in terms of research, concern about having international impact and have international connections, participating in research networks. So, internationalisation for us is important. [...] We have a chance of finding very good partners" (RR5: 3).

In this context, academic growth and the development of education, research and innovation play an important role for the rectors, "to leverage the capacity and the quality in our education" (RR3: 3).

The rectors' narratives extend from the meta to the macro level, linking the alliance – and European alliances more broadly – to the current geopolitical context and the need for greater European cohesion. They agree that alliances are a "strategy for the construction of the European education area [...] that goes in the sense of more integration and more cohesion inside Europe" (RR5: 3), also referred to as "a sovereign

European university space through European alliances” (RR9: 11) helping students to form an understanding of the European values and strengthen social cohesion.

Belonging to a European alliance is also depicted as moving beyond national political discourses to concrete, long-term aligned developments on European policy level, where “clear policies” (RR5: 13) set the stage for efficiency in the face of global changes. Efficient educational policy and research policy require a long-term vision, which is not coming from the national state anymore – with some respondents referring to the US government or the French government as well as the increasing rise of right-wing parties. Brussels, on the other hand, has a “long-term vision” (RR4: 3) and “if the EC continues to support these alliances, we can go far” (RR9: 11).

Including all faculties and implementing the strategy of the alliance in the universities means that targeted communication structures are needed, which above all ensure the commitment and also team identity. Information must be spread

“not in a hierarchical way, but more in a triad, more in networks and more in flat structures instead of hierarchical one. This is what we need to change to get to this team approach” (RR2: 17).

The rectors are faced with existing solid structures as an obstacle. In order to transform these structures, “people have to understand that ‘what was, is history’, and we are heading to a different direction” (RR2: 21). Just like the operational staff, the rectors also describe this as a *mindshift* already underway but requiring broader promotion. They stress the need to clearly communicate the alliance’s added value, especially the benefits of cooperation, as multidisciplinary and internationalization are new to most participating universities. Fostering this mindshift requires “incentives, which is a key question” (RR6: 20) for university staff – including travel funds, reducing teaching load, and financing teaching assignments for committed people.

In this regard, the rectors reflect on their own role and possibilities, which they regard as rather low impact since “it’s relatively difficult to implement and enforce things immediately, because I can only motivate the professors. I can’t force them to do anything” (RR8: 14). However, they “model the way to inspire other people”

(RR2: 17) or motivate them as a “moderator” (RR8: 14), while the striking role of implementation is done on the work package level or “in the flat structures instead of hierarchical structures” (RR2: 17). Here, involving “the right people” (RR2: 17) is part of transforming the university systems, “to achieve greater dynamism. This is what you create through a network like this” (RR8: 3). Moreover,

“it means to provide them a possibility to speak up, [...] to participate, the team groups [...] letting them emerge not only in top-down system, but bottom-up system and meet somewhere in the middle” (RR2: 19).

5 Discussion

Organisational identity within an EUI alliance is shaped in particular ways by both the operational academic staff and university rectors from nine HEIs. First of all, both groups make sense of the alliance as they put forward the goals and benefits to be achieved. As a precondition for transformation, they stress that in all participating universities academic staff must undergo a change of mindset in all sectors, suggesting that a *conscious awareness* of the benefits of internationalisation within an alliance precedes its implementation. As internationalisation theories on institutional level put forward, values, priorities and actions guide the implementation of internationalisation (Kokkonen et al., 2025). It can be effective if it is viewed – and lived – as “the cultivation of an ethos or culture within the university that appreciates and nurtures intercultural and international perspectives and endeavours” (ibid., p. 50).

However, rather than being imposed top-down, the findings show how organisational identity is negotiated horizontally at the operative level by motivated actors acting as institutional entrepreneurs. Although rectors recognize the alliance’s values and benefits and act as ‘moderators’ or representatives within the alliance, they are less aware of their role in shaping the meta-organizational identity at the time of the interviews. While organisational identity is formed *inwardly* through negotiations and actions among the operational academic staff – through regular meetings and shared narratives emphasizing membership benefits – and *outwardly*, by engaging

staff, students, and stakeholders through strategically increased visibility and legitimacy, the rectors' involvement in these processes is not proactive, but rather symbolic.

Accordingly, our data show what actors consider as necessary for sustainable system-level transformation – understood as lasting structural and behavioural change beyond the project level (Stockmann, 2022, p. 67) – and for strengthening organisational identity within an EUI alliance. Operational actors link their organisational identity to achieving alliance goals and generating lasting positive impact for their institutions and society. By emphasising full leadership involvement as crucial for sustainability – particularly within outward processes for institutionalising the alliance in organisational structures –, the findings are consistent with Badewi (2015, p. 2) who indicates that communication, cooperation, and leadership are more decisive for success than task-oriented factors. In accordance with this benefits management perspective, actors connect alliance goals with recognising and negotiating value for staff, students, stakeholders, and society – extending their role beyond delivering outputs – in order to achieve a change in behaviour and habits because “only then the benefits are secured [...] and will flow into the future” (ibid). Maximising institutional value through targeted benefits management thus appears central to transformation in EUI alliances.

6 Conclusion

This article contributes to the literature on organizational identity in meta-organizations in three ways. First, it highlights how project-level actors shape identity by navigating complexity and organizational structures. While participation is initiated by leadership, the alliance's identity is primarily formed at the operative level by staff such as researchers, professors, and curriculum managers through sense-making and engagement.

Yet, and second, these processes require more *active* input from leadership and management in order to fully comprise the organisational structures of the participating

HEI. While they see themselves as responsible for their respective university, they neglect the formative activity *at the meta-level* of the meta-organisation. In this regard, our study extends the discussion on organisational identity to the context of sustainability, focussing on bridging the gap between institution and meta-organisation.

Further research could investigate the role of leadership in implementing EUI alliances by referring to constraints that institutions impose on human behaviour, as focused by the institutional logics approach (Cai, 2025). Also, since strategic plans have an important accountability function for implementing alliances in organisational structures (Fumasoli et al., 2015), further studies could investigate their role in implementing alliances as meta-organisations.

Third, this paper contributes to the debate on effectively embedding organisational identity within EUI alliances. While the alliances' goals are widely valued, their long-term and sustainable implementation remains a key challenge. Our findings highlight how the benefits management approach (Badewi, 2015) can inform future research and evaluation of EUI alliances – for instance, by investigating how project leaders can enhance stakeholder engagement and collaboration through the benefits management process or how meta-organisations can develop an organisational culture focused on project value creation.

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