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Participatory Governance and Institutional Legitimacy in European University Alliances

Abstract

European University Alliances (EUAs) are increasingly emerging as collective actors within the European higher-education policy landscape. Drawing on meta-organization theory, this article conceptualizes EUAs as sectoral interest groups whose legitimacy depends not only on institutional coordination but also on participatory governance. Focusing on student co-creation practices, the study argues that structured participation functions as a strategic governance resource that enhances internal cohesion and external representational credibility. Empirical illustrations from EUGLOH demonstrate how student-led initiatives institutionalize distributed authority and contribute to alliance-level legitimacy formation. The article concludes that the consolidation of EUAs as policy-relevant actors requires the systematic embedding of participatory co-governance within alliance structures.

Keywords

European university alliances (euas), meta-organizations, participatory governance, student co-creation

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Partizipative Governance und institutionelle Legitimität Europäischer Hochschulallianzen

Zusammenfassung

Europäische Hochschulallianzen (EUAs) entwickeln sich zunehmend zu kollektiven Akteuren innerhalb der europäischen Hochschulpolitik. Auf Grundlage der Meta-Organisationsforschung konzeptualisiert dieser Beitrag EUAs als sektorale Interessengruppen, deren Legitimität nicht allein aus institutioneller Koordination, sondern auch aus partizipativer Governance hervorgeht. Im Zentrum steht studentische Ko-Kreation als strategische Governance-Ressource, die sowohl interne Kohäsion als auch externe Repräsentationsfähigkeit stärkt. Empirische Beispiele aus EUGLOH zeigen, wie studentisch getragene Initiativen verteilte Autorität institutionalisieren und zur Legitimitätsbildung auf Allianzebene beitragen. Abschließend wird argumentiert, dass die politische Handlungsfähigkeit von EUAs eine strukturelle Verankerung partizipativer Ko-Governance voraussetzt.

Schlüsselwörter

Europäische Hochschulallianzen, Meta-Organisationen, Sektorale Interessensgruppen, Partizipative Governance, Studentische Ko-Kreation

1 Participation, Cohesion, and the Governance Challenge of EUAs

The *European University Initiative* (EUI), launched under the *Erasmus+* framework, represents one of the most ambitious supranational governance experiments in European higher education. By funding transnational alliances of *Higher Education Institutions* (HEIs), it aims to promote institutional integration, strengthen cross-border cooperation, and support the development of a globally competitive European university model. However, the emergence of *European University Alliances* (EUAs) as durable governance actors raises a central challenge: their capacity to function as unified actors in policy arenas remains uneven. Alliances must coordinate diverse members embedded in different regulatory environments while articulating coherent strategic positions capable of influencing European higher-education governance.

This structural complexity generates a dual governance problem. First, alliances may struggle to achieve sufficient internal alignment, limiting their capacity to secure sustained funding and exert coordinated policy influence to shape this new model. Second, their governance structures often provide limited opportunities for meaningful stakeholder participation, particularly for students, whose roles remain largely consultative. The *European Students' Union* (ESU) has cautioned that such symbolic participation risks reinforcing the governance paradigm in legitimizing managerial decision-making without redistributing institutional power.

While this constitutes a normative concern, this article argues that it also represents a strategic governance issue. Participatory governance, particularly student co-governance, offers a promising mechanism through which alliances can address their broader cohesion and legitimacy challenges. By introducing bottom-up participation as a counterbalance to predominantly top-down integration logics that characterize the EUI framework, student participation can contribute to strengthening internal coherence while enhancing external legitimacy as actors within the European higher-education policy landscape. Student participation should thus be understood not only

as a democratic principle but also as an institutional resource supporting the consolidation of alliances as collective governance actors.

2 Theoretical Framework: EUAs as Meta-Organizations and Sectoral Interest Groups

The EUI, inaugurated in 2019 after a pilot phase in 2018, constitutes a major supra-national policy effort to restructure European higher education. As of 2025, it encompasses 65 alliances comprising more than 500 universities across 35 countries, alongside numerous associated partners (cf. European Commission, 2025). The alliances aim to move beyond project-based collaboration toward long-term institutional integration through joint degrees, shared infrastructures, interoperable systems, and transnational governance.

Conceptually, EUAs can be understood as meta-organizations: organizational forms composed of autonomous members coordinating collective activities without hierarchical authority (cf. Vukasović & Stensaker, 2018). Their governance typically combines strategic steering bodies, executive coordination units, and project-based working groups. Within this architecture, alliances may evolve into cohesive sectoral actors capable of influencing higher-education policy (cf. Binderkrantz, 2009), provided they are able to represent collective interests and strategic priorities.

Achieving such recognition requires internal coherence. This entails aligning institutional strategies around policy-relevant dimensions such as internationalization and competitiveness as dominant narratives shaping higher-education strategy (cf. Cantwell & Kauppinen, 2014; Maringe & Foskett, 2012; Deiaco, Hughes & McKelvey, 2012). These narratives have fostered some convergence among European universities (cf. Gornitzka, Maasen & Stensaker, 2020), yet institutional diversity and thematic specialization deliberately embedded within alliance composition complicate unified strategic positioning.

Coherence-building involves a dual transformation: shifting from servicing the member needs to pursuing collective policy influence (cf. Schmitter & Streeck, 1999), while reconciling heterogeneity with strategic harmonization. However, the EUI explicitly mandates diversity in institutional typologies, geography, and disciplines, creating a structural paradox: convergence is pursued within a framework that promotes diversity. This constrains unified agendas and limits alliances' capacity to act cohesively.

Where formal strategic alignment proves insufficient, alternative cohesion mechanisms become critical. Participatory governance represents one such mechanism. While student-centered objectives are central to EUI rhetoric, reflected in mobility, inclusivity, and flexible learning pathways as key performance indicators (cf. European Commission, 2025), student agency remains weakly institutionalized. Although students are often represented in governance bodies, their roles are largely advisory within complex multi-level governance structures.

This limitation has been repeatedly criticized by the ESU, which notes that students are often framed as beneficiaries rather than as stakeholders with decision-making authority (cf. ESU, 2022a; ESU BM83, 2022). Similar concerns appear in broader scholarship on higher education. Ball (2012) argues that participatory rhetoric may reinforce managerial governance, while Field (2003) observes that market-oriented reforms tend to position students as consumers rather than actors or agents.

Within EUAs' multi-level governance systems, students face asymmetries of power not only vis-à-vis academic and administrative actors but also across nested governance systems. Decision-making authority is concentrated on higher organizational levels, leaving student involvement largely consultative. Although student-led initiatives contribute to alliance development, they rarely influence strategic or budgetary priorities.

Nevertheless, variation exists across alliances. Some maintain advisory structures, while others experiment with voting rights or co-creation formats. EUGLOH stands out in this regard. As an EUA explicitly structured around multi-disciplinary global health and subsequently strong and diverse student engagement, it embeds student-

centeredness not only in educational design but also in governance. Through mechanisms such as the *International Student Board* (ISB), which advises both governing and executive bodies, and structurally embedded and repeated student-led initiatives, participation extends beyond consultation toward co-governance, making it a fitting case for analyzing student-centric governance practices. Such practices point toward the broader potential of student co-governance as innovation capable of strengthening internal cohesion and institutional legitimacy within EUAs.

3 Co-Creation and Participatory Governance in Meta-Organizational Alliances

Where formal alignment and harmonization is insufficient to generate cohesion required for collective action, governance mechanisms that generate legitimacy and shared ownership become crucial. Co-creation and participatory governance institutionalize distributed agency, complementing top-down integration with bottom-up cohesion-building.

Co-creation has gained prominence as a collaborative governance approach in which stakeholders jointly define problems, design solutions, implement interventions, and evaluate outcomes. It emphasizes distributed agency, iterative experimentation, and reciprocal knowledge exchange (cf. Ansell & Torfing, 2021; Voorberg et al., 2015), enabling stakeholders to act as co-producers of institutional processes rather than consultees.

In networked governance environments, particularly those lacking centralized authority, co-creation enhances legitimacy, coordination, and institutional learning. Living labs exemplify such arrangements (cf. Schuurman et al., 2013). Here, co-creation typically involves distributed agency, iterative prototyping, deliberative dialogue, and contextual sensitivity (cf. Sanders & Stappers, 2008), making it particularly relevant for meta-organizational structures such as EUAs, whose governance relies on negotiated coordination rather than hierarchical authority. It can thus be

understood as participatory practice and institutional mechanism through which networked organizations generate legitimacy and cohesion in the absence of centralized command structures, which is especially salient for EUAs seeking to consolidate their role as collective actors capable of articulating common strategic positions within European higher-education policy arenas.

Within higher education, co-creation evolved from limited student involvement such as participation in assessment panels or quality assurance processes toward integrated partnership models. The “students as partners” framework introduced by Cook-Sather and Felten (2014) conceptualized co-creation as shared planning, implementation, evaluation, and reflection between students and academic staff. Subsequent research distinguished between curricular, pedagogical, and institutional co-creation involving broader governance processes (cf. Bovill et al., 2016); however, distribution remains uneven. Pedagogical partnerships such as co-designed modules is relatively widespread, while strategic governance participation is comparatively limited. Research consistently indicates that co-creation rhetoric coexists with persistent power asymmetries between students and managerial logics (cf. Bryson et al., 2015; Ball 2012; Field 2003).

This discrepancy is evident in EUAs. While the EUI through its Erasmus+ call texts strongly emphasizes multi-stakeholder participation and student-centered outcomes, the institutionalization of student agency within alliance governance varies significantly. Some alliances maintain advisory councils, others grant limited voting rights. Yet participation remains concentrated in project-based activities, with strategic decisions dominated by institutional leadership.

Methodologically, this article adopts a qualitative, illustrative case-study approach. EUGLOH is selected as a critical case due to its comparatively advanced student governance structures. The analysis focuses on two embedded participatory practices, examining their design, governance configuration, and outputs. Rather than aiming for statistical generalization, the approach provides analytical insights into how participatory governance may function within meta-organizational alliances and how it compares to more consultative models observed across EUAs.

Several structural factors explain limited participation: complex governance architectures of EUAs distributed across committees, governance, and regulatory frameworks, asymmetries in institutional capital, and the largely voluntary nature of student participation, often without dedicated financial support or formal institutional recognition. Consequently, many participatory arrangements risk remaining symbolic rather than constituting genuine co-governance structures.

From a strategic perspective, this is consequential. EUAs must generate legitimacy and cohesion to function as sectorial interest groups. Co-creation arrangements that extend beyond consultative participation toward institutionalized co-governance offer a mechanism for strengthening this legitimacy. By embedding distributed agency within alliance governance architectures, alliances can supplement top-down strategic coordination with bottom-up legitimacy-building processes that enhance stakeholder commitment, institutional learning, and collective identity formation.

Emerging alliance practices indicate that such transitions are possible. Several alliances have experimented with permanent student governance structures, co-creation workshops during alliance design phases, and transnational participation in which students contribute to drafting policies. Where these initiatives are coupled with formalized decision-making roles, training mechanisms, and institutional support structures, they begin to approximate models of distributed governance capable of legitimizing meta-organizational coordination (cf. van der Zouwen et al., 2025). In this sense, co-creation functions not only as an educational or participatory practice but also as a governance innovation that can support alliances in forging cohesion and legitimacy despite their structural heterogeneity.

4 From Symbolic Inclusion to Institutionalized Co-Governance: The Case of EUGLOH

If participatory governance constitutes a mechanism through which EUAs can generate internal cohesion and external legitimacy, empirical attention must focus on alliances where student participation moves beyond symbolic inclusion toward structurally embedded student co-governance. EUGLOH provides a particularly instructive case in this regard. Compared to many alliances where student participation remains primarily consultative, EUGLOH has institutionalized governance arrangements that integrate students across multiple decision-making layers while enabling student-led initiatives that extend into alliance-level organizational activity.

This positioning is closely linked to EUGLOH's broader orientation as a student-centered alliance. Its focus on global health is complemented by governance structures that actively incorporate student agency, most notably through the *International Student Board* (ISB), which maintains regular interaction with executive and strategic bodies. In contrast to more symbolic inclusion practices observed elsewhere, this creates repeated points of interaction between student representatives and alliance leadership, increasing the likelihood that student perspectives inform ongoing decision-making processes.

The following two cases: a student-led policy simulation workshop and the EUGLOH Science Slam are not isolated events but embedded governance practices. They demonstrate concretely how participation manifests itself in practice, what agency students exercise, and how such arrangements differ from more limited formats across EUAs.

The EUGLOH policy simulation workshop, titled “Health Innovation: Research, Industry – or Politics?!”, emerged from cross-work-package collaboration, particularly between thematic areas focused on campus life and societal engagement. While not formally mandated, the initiative was institutionally supported through funding, infrastructure and access to alliance networks. Participation manifested at multiple levels: students conceptualized the thematic focus, designed the simulation structure,

developed briefing documents, assigned stakeholder roles, and facilitated the negotiation.

The workshop was structured as a multi-day simulation of European-level decision-making in a hypothetical health crisis. Participants were divided into stakeholder groups representing European institutions, researchers, industry actors, and media. Each group operated under distinct incentive structures and normative constraints, mirroring the differentiated logics that characterize real-world governance processes. Students not only participated within these roles but exercised procedural authority: they moderated sessions, enforced timelines, adapted rules in response to emerging dynamics, and synthesized outputs.

The resulting outputs were notably concrete. They included draft regulatory proposals, stakeholder position papers, lobbying strategies, and policy briefs, which were collectively presented and debated at the conclusion of the workshop. Compared to more typical alliance activities, such as student consultations on mobility formats or feedback surveys, this case demonstrates a qualitatively different level of engagement. Students were not reacting to predefined structures but actively shaping both process and outcomes.

From an analytical perspective, the simulation reproduces core features of meta-organizational governance: the need to reconcile divergent interests, operate without hierarchical authority, and produce collectively binding outputs under conditions of complexity. The tangible nature of participation, agenda-setting, rule design, moderation, and outputs, distinguishes it from consultative formats.

A comparison with initiatives such as *EUC Voices* further illustrates this distinction. As a transnational student-led project, it aims to amplify student perspectives across alliances and contribute to policy discussions at the European level. However, its primary mode of engagement lies in representation, consultation, and advocacy, aggregating student input and communicating it to governance actors. While this constitutes an important participatory function, it operates largely at the level of voice articulation rather than procedural control. In contrast, the EUGLOH simulation em-

beds students directly within governance processes, allowing them to exercise decision-shaping authority rather than solely contributing perspectives. This difference highlights a broader variation.

Complementing the simulation, the EUGLOH Science Slam, organized independently by the *Local Student Board* at the *University of Hamburg*, demonstrates a second, analytically distinct mode of participatory governance. Whereas the simulation involved collaborative design between students and staff, the Science Slam represents a case of autonomous student governance operating within the alliance framework. The event was conceived, organized, and executed entirely by students, with minimal direct intervention from alliance-level executive structures. Students were responsible for defining the format, selecting and coordinating speakers, managing logistics, securing resources and conducting outreach.

The event brought together participants from multiple partner institutions and focused on communicating global health topics in accessible formats to a broader audience. While less procedurally complex than the policy simulation, its significance lies in the degree of operational autonomy it represents. In many alliances, student involvement in events remains embedded within staff-led structures, with students contributing to predefined formats. In this case, however, students exercised full control over the initiative, aligning it with alliance objectives, particularly societal engagement and science communication, without needing direct managerial oversight.

This form of self-governance is particularly relevant from a meta-organizational perspective. By enabling student bodies to initiate and manage transnational activities, the alliance distributes authority beyond formal governance bodies. This not only enhances internal legitimacy but also demonstrates that alliance governance is enacted across multiple levels rather than concentrated within executive structures.

Taken together, the two cases illustrate complementary dimensions of institutionalized co-governance: structured co-creation within alliance-supported frameworks and autonomous student-led governance aligned with strategic objectives. In both

instances, student participation transcends symbolic inclusion. Students act as designers, facilitators, and organizers of alliance-level initiatives, thereby exercising forms of authority that contribute to the operational life of the alliance.

These practices have implications that extend beyond individual events. First, they contribute to internal cohesion by fostering shared experiences, transnational collaboration, and procedural familiarity across member institutions. Second, they enhance external legitimacy by demonstrating that the alliance embodies participatory governance in practice rather than merely in rhetoric. Third, they strengthen the alliance's capacity to function as a credible sectoral actor by grounding its strategic ambitions in stakeholder-inclusive governance arrangements.

In this sense, the EUGLOH case substantiates the central claim of this article: participatory governance, when institutionalized rather than symbolic, functions as an organizational resource that enables EUAs to consolidate as cohesive and legitimate collective actors. Student co-governance does not replace strategic alignment or administrative harmonization; rather, it complements these mechanisms by generating bottom-up legitimacy within structurally heterogeneous meta-organizations. Through such arrangements, alliances enhance not only their democratic credentials but also their capacity to articulate coherent positions within the European higher-education policy landscape.

The experiential dimension of such participatory formats is further illustrated by qualitative accounts from participants. Reflections from the EUGLOH simulation workshop emphasize how students experienced decision-making not as an abstract institutional process but as a situated and contested practice. Participants reported engaging in activities such as defending policy amendments in simulated press conferences, negotiating under conflicting stakeholder interests, and translating scientific evidence into politically viable positions. These experiences highlighted the complexity of balancing “political urgency and scientific caution” and exposed students to the procedural and strategic dimensions of European-level governance (EUGLOH, 2025). Importantly, participation extended beyond role-play: students as-

sumed responsibility for navigating conflict, managing divergent interests, and producing collectively negotiated outputs, thereby approximating real-world governance dynamics.

Such reflections reinforce the analytical claim that participatory governance within EUAs can generate not only procedural involvement but also cognitive and normative shifts among participants. Exposure to transnational collaboration and structured negotiation processes contributes to a deeper understanding of governance complexity, while fostering a sense of ownership and agency within the alliance context. As participants themselves note, these formats create spaces “where students are not just included, but empowered to engage, grow, and shape” governance processes (EUGLOH, 2025). This experiential dimension strengthens both internal cohesion and the perceived legitimacy of participatory arrangements, supporting the argument that co-governance practices can function as a substantive, rather than symbolic, component of alliance governance

5 Discussion: Legitimacy, Incentivization, and the Institutionalization of Participation

The two case studies illustrate, in empirical form, the central argument of this article: EUAs, understood as meta-organizations (cf. Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005), consolidate their capacity to act as sectoral interest groups not merely through strategic alignment or policy compliance, but through the internal production of legitimacy. As voluntary associations of autonomous institutions, their collective agency depends on the extent to which member constituencies, particularly students, recognize alliance structures as meaningful arenas of participation.

From this perspective, student-led initiatives such as the *EUGLOH Simulation Workshop* and the *Science Slam* should not be interpreted primarily as pedagogical enrichment. Rather, they function as governance technologies within a meta-organizational setting. By distributing agenda-setting authority, procedural responsibility,

and communicative visibility to students, the alliance supplements formal coordination mechanisms with participatory legitimacy. This aligns with insights from democratic experimentalism (cf. Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008), according to which learning-oriented, iterative participation strengthens the robustness of complex governance arrangements. Incentivization in this context is largely symbolic and reputational: visibility, authorship, leadership experience. Yet, such incentives are consequential insofar as they signal institutional trust and confer status within the alliance ecology.

At the same time, the cases expose structural tensions characteristic of meta-organizations. First, sustainability remains precarious: student agency is temporally limited, and without institutional embedding, participatory formats risk remaining episodic. Second, scale introduces coordination asymmetries and resource disparities that can undermine perceptions of fairness and shared ownership. Third, and most importantly, legitimacy remains fragile if participatory practices are not structurally connected to alliance-level decision-making. Symbolic inclusion alone cannot generate the durable cohesion required for collective interest representation.

These tensions point toward a strategic imperative. If EUAs seek to consolidate their role as actors within the EHEA, student co-governance must move from project-based experimentation to institutionalized practice. Embedding participatory formats within work-package mandates, codifying student roles in governance charters, and developing continuity mechanisms would transform co-creation from an expressive gesture into a structural resource. The authority of EUAs as sectoral interest groups does not derive solely from their alignment with European policy agendas, but from their ability to cultivate internally legitimized governance. Participatory co-creation thus emerges not as a normative supplement, but as a strategic condition for alliance cohesion and credible collective action.

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