

**Agata Mannino<sup>1</sup>**

# **Sensemaking and Institutional Transformation in European University Alliances**

## **Abstract**

This article examines how sensemaking shapes institutional transformation in the *European Universities Initiative* (EUI). Drawing on qualitative doctoral research on EUI implementation, the paper reinterprets selected findings through a theoretical-conceptual lens. Focusing on the intersection between individual belief in the initiative and institutional context, the analysis shows how internal stakeholder engagement is enabled or constrained through meaning-building processes. The paper contributes to a nuanced, power-aware understanding of European higher education, highlighting how governance emerges through negotiated and relational and discursive practices.

## **Keywords**

internationalisation of HE, sensemaking, internal stakeholder engagement, european universities initiative as change process, european alliances

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding Author, Technische Universität Chemnitz, [agata.mannino@iuz.tu-chemnitz.de](mailto:agata.mannino@iuz.tu-chemnitz.de), ORCID 0009-0005-8046-7704

# **Sensemaking und institutionelle Transformation in Europäischen Hochschulallianzen**

## **Zusammenfassung**

Dieser Artikel untersucht, wie Sensemaking institutionelle Transformationsprozesse im Rahmen der *European Universities Initiative* (EUI) prägt. Auf der Grundlage qualitativer Doktoratsforschung zur Implementierung der EUI, interpretiert der Beitrag ausgewählte Ergebnisse aus einer theoretisch-konzeptionellen Perspektive neu. Im Fokus steht das Zusammenspiel zwischen individuellem Glauben an die Initiative und dem institutionellen Kontext. Die Analyse zeigt, wie Stakeholder-Engagement durch relationale Sinnbildungsprozesse ermöglicht oder begrenzt wird. Dieser Artikel leistet somit einen Beitrag zu einem differenzierten und machtsensiblen Verständnis von Transformation in europäischen Hochschulen und zeigt wie Governance aus diesen diskursiven und relationalen Prozessen hervorgeht.

## **Schlüsselwörter**

Internationalisierung der Hochschulbildung, Sensemaking, internes Stakeholder-Engagement, European Universities Initiative als Veränderungsprozess, Europäische Hochschulallianzen

# 1 Introduction

Navigating change in complex organisations such as *Higher Education Institutions* (HEIs) often resembles a finely tuned act of coordination, demanding adaptability, balance, and a constant awareness of multiple moving parts.

The *European Universities Initiative* (EUI) represents one of the most ambitious and transformative policy instruments (European Commission Report, 2025) within the *Erasmus+* programme, aiming to strengthen the *European Education Area* (EEA) through deep institutional cooperation, shared governance, and long-term structural integration among participating universities. However, its implementation has proven complex and demanding at institutional level.

The institutional context constitutes the framework and playground where a deeper look has to be taken to understand those internal dynamics depending on institutional culture, organisational structures, leadership influence and the intersection of all these aspects with personal attitudes of those actors occupying a central position in the organisation, who play a pivotal role in translating messages, enacting strategies and involving stakeholders to overcome resistance naturally arising when implementing deep change processes in complex organisations such as HEIs.

## 2 Internationalisation, European University Alliances and Institutional Transformation situated in the literature

To situate this article within the existing scholarly discourse, it is useful to begin with the broader literature on higher education internationalisation, particularly its conceptualisation as a transformative process for HEIs (Schein, 2017). If transformation is understood as a deep and pervasive organisational change (Eckel et al., 2001), then internationalisation can only be considered transformative when it is im-

plemented transversally across all institutional structures and functions. This perspective aligns with Hudzik's (2015) notion of "comprehensive internationalisation," which emphasises the integration of internationalisation across institutional missions, including teaching, research, and organisational development. Rather than being confined to specialised units such as international offices, internationalisation is expected to become an embedded and strategic dimension of the institution as a whole.

Such an understanding implies that internationalisation is not merely a set of activities, but a process that reshapes institutional practices, relationships, and identities. It requires the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders and the continuous alignment of diverse perspectives and priorities. In increasingly complex and uncertain environments, however, organisations cannot rely solely on top-down communication to implement change. Instead, they must actively engage their members in processes of meaning-building, through which shared understandings are constructed and negotiated (Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012; Hultin & Mähring, 2017).

From this perspective, institutional transformation emerges not simply from structural adjustments, but from the relational processes through which actors interpret and respond to change. The new context created by internationalisation requires organisational actors to navigate multiple and sometimes competing expectations, taking into account the diversity of perspectives across the institution (Robson, 2011). Maintaining the transformative potential of internationalisation therefore depends on the capacity to sustain shared meanings and engagement over time.

In this context, Friesen (2013) highlights that many stakeholders remain unconvinced about the meaning and value of internationalisation, making its implementation more complex. While more recent studies have increasingly focused on faculty engagement (Calikoglu, 2022), other critical actors, particularly administrative staff, remain comparatively underexplored, despite their central role in operationalising internationalisation processes.

Taken together, these strands of literature suggest that, although internationalisation is widely recognised as a driver of institutional transformation, the ways in which

this transformation is enacted through meaning construction and negotiation within organisational contexts, and by different institutional actors, remain underexplored.

This article addresses this gap through the lens of sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995) and its critical extensions, by examining how relational sensemaking processes shape the negotiation of institutional transformation in *European University Alliances*. As a highly complex and transformative internationalisation initiative, the *European Universities Initiative* (EUI) provides a particularly relevant context for analysing these dynamics. By focusing on the intersection between individual belief in the initiative and institutional context, the article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how institutional transformation is negotiated within HEIs, and how such understanding can support the implementation of the EUI by addressing resistance to change through sensemaking.

Moreover, while sensemaking theory provides a valuable lens to understand how actors interpret and respond to ambiguity, it has been further developed through critical sensemaking perspectives, which emphasises the role of power, context, and organisational structures in shaping meaning-building processes (Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2009). From this perspective, sensemaking is not neutral: interpretations are embedded in organisational hierarchies and institutional conditions that influence which narratives become dominant and which remain marginal.

This is particularly relevant in HEIs, characterised by both hierarchical governance structures and loosely coupled organisational arrangements. While hierarchy may constrain participation in decision-making processes, on the other end, loose coupling systems can lead to fragmented interpretations and uneven communication across institutional units. As a result, actors are often required to make sense of complex change processes, such as the implementation of *European University Alliances*, under conditions of ambiguity and partial information.

Relatedly, Alvesson and Jonsson (2022) describe such situations as forms of organisational “dischronisation”, where multiple, poorly articulated meanings coexist, leading to unrecognised confusion. This highlights the importance of examining not

only how meaning is constructed, but also how it is aligned, or remains misaligned, across organisational levels.

Building on this broader perspective, the EUI has attracted increasing scholarly attention as a novel form of transformational higher education cooperation. Existing research has primarily examined the initiative from a policy perspective (Craciun et al., 2023), as well as through the lens of governance structures, and senior leadership (Claeys-Kulik et al., 2022). However, less attention has been paid to how the institutional transformation is enacted through everyday relations, through the interpretive work by which actors negotiate what the alliance “is”, what it requires, and what is considered legitimate or feasible within their organisation.

This article draws on a qualitative research conducted for a doctoral study on sensemaking in the implementation of the EUI at institutional level (Mannino, 2026).

While the doctoral research foregrounds middle managers as key *sensemakers* operating between strategic aspirations and operational realities, the present contribution reinterprets selected findings to develop a theoretical–conceptual account of alliance formation as an expression of deeper organisational transformation in HE organisations, understood as discursive, relational, and power-laden.

The article is guided by the following research question:

*How do sensemaking processes shape institutional transformation in European University Alliances?*

The study is theoretically grounded in sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995) and its critical extensions, which emphasise the relational, contextual, and power-sensitive nature of meaning-building in organisations. Sensemaking is understood as a social process through which individuals interpret ambiguous situations, negotiate shared understandings (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014), and guide action when implementing change, in this case the EUI at the institutional level, where multiple priorities, identities, and institutional narratives intersect (Mannino, 2026).

### 3 From the doctoral study to this contribution

This paper is based on a doctoral study investigating how middle managers make sense of the EUI when implementing it at institutional level, and how their sense-making shapes internal stakeholder engagement and organisational change. The doctoral project was organised around an overarching question and four sub-questions focusing on (i) mediation roles, (ii) approaches to internal stakeholder engagement, (iii) the influence of institutional context, and (iv) types of change emerging from these processes.

For the purposes of this contribution, this article reinterprets the empirical material by shifting the analytical centre of gravity from the role of a specific actor group to the relational production of meaning through which alliance implementation is enacted and institutional transformation becomes possible, partial, or contested. Accordingly, the paper foregrounds the finding on how individual belief (or disbelief) in the EUI (captured through the interpretive labels believer-sceptic) intersects with the institutional context's capacity to enable or constrain implementation. This intersection is treated as a key site where meanings become consequential and depend on many combinations of these variables.

### 4 Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretive case study approach aligned with a constructivist epistemology. It examines one first-generation *European Universities Alliance* (first funded in 2019), selected for its relevance and maturity, diversity of member institutions, and accessibility, while avoiding alliances in which the researcher had direct professional involvement to minimise bias. Data were collected primarily through 23 (18+5) semi-structured interviews with middle managers across ten partner universities, including Heads/Directors of International Offices and Units, alliance coordinators, project managers, and other professionals directly involved in EUI implementation. Participants were selected based on their formal responsibility in implementing the initiative and engaging institutional stakeholders.

Each university was represented by at least one interviewee, with multiple participants in most cases. Interviews were conducted primarily online with a small number taking place in person. They followed a “guided conversations” approach (Rubin & Rubin in Gubrium, 2012) leaving freedom for storytelling that allowed for a rich dataset. The analysis followed an iterative thematic coding process, combining inductive and theory-informed approaches. In line with Braun & Clarke (2013), thematic analysis was conducted within a constructivist framework, aiming to capture how sociocultural contexts and structural conditions shape participants’ narratives. The substantial dataset enabled the identification of key themes linked to the theoretical framework of the study. Based on these themes, three case universities were selected for a second round of interviews, allowing deeper exploration of organisational and power dynamics. To enhance analytical robustness and transparency, a pilot phase and a reflective intercoder reliability exercise were conducted. The aim was to gain contextual sensitivity to explain how meanings are built and negotiated within the organisations’ realities of EUI implementation.

## 5 Results

Across the study, participants consistently described alliance implementation as a continuous balancing act between strategic ambition, institutional constraints, and stakeholder expectations.

The main findings identified in the study were:

- Adoption of advanced mediation skills.
- Need for tailored communication through storytelling.
- Cruciality of personal relationship- and trust-building.
- The decisive influence of institutional context and individual attitude on how the EUI is interpreted and enacted.

This article focuses on the last point, as it most directly captures how alliance implementation is shaped through the interplay between individual orientations and institutional conditions.

## **5.1 Individual Attitude and Institutional Conditions**

The findings of the doctoral study show that, alongside the individual attitudes of middle managers, understood here as those actors directly engaging internal stakeholders, institutional conditions play a decisive role in shaping how the alliance becomes meaningful and actionable within universities. Leadership commitment, organisational autonomy, degrees of decentralisation or centralisation, and institutional cultures influence whether the EUI is framed as a strategic institutional endeavour, a temporary externally driven project, or an additional administrative burden.

A key empirical pattern emerging from the data can be described as the intersection between individual attitudes of middle managers at institutional level and the favourability of institutional context for change (see Figure 1). In the doctoral analysis, interviewees' accounts clustered along a spectrum labelled "believers" to "sceptics". These are not fixed psychological types or formal categories, rather they are interpretive orientations derived from recurring discursive patterns, how participants framed feasibility, institutional priority, strategic relevance, and their own capacity to influence the process.

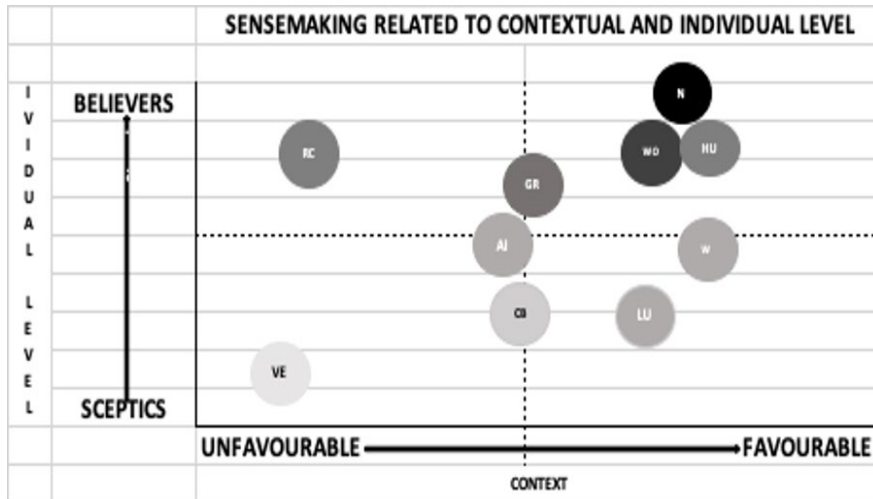


Fig. 1: Intersection of individual level and institutional context

One interviewee described their strong personal commitment to implementing the initiative and in doing so, the need to constantly adapt narratives to different audiences:

“I just had to tell sort of different stories to adapt the situation to what is going to be sort of what does this group need to know about this initiative to understand the contribution or understand their own role in this” [Interview\_11122023].

This illustrates how, in the data, individual belief translated into active narrative work aimed at embedding the initiative institutionally.

By contrast, other participants positioned themselves more cautiously, emphasising mandate and hierarchy. A representative from another university described how responsibility was shifted upward, framing their role as the executor of leadership decisions:

“...now what I do is like I first make sure I have my mandate to speak right, and I have my mandate from the Vice Chancellor. So, I’ll be like ‘right, don’t

ask me why, don't ask me how, [this university] has signed off to be a part of this" [Interview\_161023].

Here, the alliance is framed less as a shared institutional project and more as a formally authorised obligation.

In less favourable contexts, characterised by fragmented governance, limited leadership visibility, competing priorities, or ambiguous mandates, meaning remained contested and governance negotiations became more fragile. Even where individuals expressed strong commitment to the alliance, their interpretations struggled to gain institutional traction. As one participant explained:

“if we don't have the directors of the departments and the vice-rectors of the governance involved, it's quite impossible to reach also the others at the university. Universities are hierarchical places, so we have to start from the top and then try and reach the bottom” [Interview2\_091023].

This illustrates how institutional hierarchies condition whose interpretations gain visibility and legitimacy, reinforcing the importance of contextual factors in shaping how the alliance is enacted.

Conversely, sceptical interpretations could become self-reinforcing when they resonated with experienced organisational constraints, shaping collective expectations about what was “realistic” and what was “performative.” In such environments, sensemaking activities took the form of ongoing negotiation rather than stabilisation: actors repeatedly recalibrated how they communicated the alliance, which stakeholders they targeted, and what could be enacted without triggering resistance or fatigue.

The findings further indicate that this intersection between individual level and institutional context plays a central role in shaping how governance is enacted in practice. The data suggest that institutional transformation cannot be understood solely in terms of structural change but is closely linked to the discursive and relational processes through which new practices are legitimised (or delegitimised) within the organisation.

## 6 Discussion: Alliance Formation as Negotiated Institutional Transformation

Interpreting *European University Alliances* as expressions of deeper transformations in HEIs requires shifting attention from formal architecture to the relational production of governance. The findings suggest that institutional transformation in the EUI is best understood as an ongoing process in which actors continuously build, contest, and stabilise meanings of cooperation within specific organisational conditions.

### 6.1 Sensemaking and the Negotiation of Engagement

The intersection between individual belief in the EUI and the favourability of institutional context provides insight into why engagement strategies vary across stakeholder groups and institutional settings. Engagement emerges not as a neutral communication activity, but as a relational process through which alliance meanings are stabilised, or remained contested, within the organisation.

In institutional contexts where leadership visibly endorses the alliance and transversal coordination structures are in place, actors are better positioned to construct trust-based narratives around the initiative. In such settings, communication moves beyond information transmission and becomes a process of co-interpretation. Alliance discourse is aligned with stakeholder values, reframing the EUI not as an externally imposed obligation but as an opportunity for strategic renewal, academic collaboration, and institutional visibility. By embedding the alliance within recognised institutional priorities, ambiguity is reduced and broader involvement becomes possible.

This relational work highlights how engagement is differentiated across organisational groups. Administrative staff are engaged through detailed, process-oriented communication and sustained relational presence, while academic staff are addressed more selectively, through narratives linked to research collaboration, mobility opportunities, or innovative teaching formats. Engagement, thus, relies on continuous adjustment of meaning frames to resonate with different professional logics and expectations.

Conversely, in less favourable contexts, characterised by fragmented governance, competing priorities, or limited symbolic endorsement from senior leadership, sense-making operates under greater constraint. Engagement becomes selective and episodic, often perceived with scepticism or fatigue. Under these conditions, meaning does not stabilise into shared understanding. Instead, engagement remains reactive and tactical, oriented towards compliance rather than ownership.

From an analytical perspective, the intersection between individual orientation and institutional context shows how governance is constituted through sensemaking processes. Institutional conditions shape not only the feasibility of implementation, but also the interpretive space in which alliance narratives can become legitimate. This helps explain why similar alliance frameworks produce divergent institutional trajectories: transformation depends on whether shared meaning can be established and embedded in organisational routines and coordination practices.

From a discursive perspective, alliance formation involves the emergence of new vocabularies and interpretive frames, such as integration, European identity, excellence, or innovation, that interact with, and sometimes challenge, existing institutional narratives. The “believer–sceptic” spectrum reflects not simply attitudes, but competing interpretations that influence what becomes prioritised, resourced, or dismissed. Institutional transformation is therefore also epistemic, as it reorganises what is considered meaningful internationalisation and which forms of cooperation are recognised as valuable.

A power-critical perspective further highlights that sensemaking is not neutral. Interpretations do not circulate on equal terms: leadership endorsement, organisational structures, and professional positioning influence whose meaning acquires authority. The same alliance initiative may therefore consolidate different forms of interpretive power, by privileging certain narratives (e.g., strategic integration) while marginalising others (e.g., concerns about overload, inequity, or misalignment). Recognising these dynamics is crucial for understanding European higher education governance “in the making”: governance, in this sense, is enacted through the relational processes that legitimise some understandings of cooperation over others.

Overall, this perspective broadens the discourse on European higher education cooperation by showing that alliance governance is sustained not only through formal design, but through context-sensitive sensemaking processes. Institutional transformation thus remains contingent, negotiated, and uneven.

The empirical findings has been synthesised through the metaphor of the “juggler” (Figure 2), representing the complex and multidimensional role of middle managers in navigating alliance implementation. Positioned within organisational environments characterised by competing demands, shifting priorities and evolving governance expectations, these actors continuously balance strategic objectives, institutional constraints, and stakeholder engagement. The metaphor captures not only the multiplicity of tasks, but also the relational and interpretive work required to sustain coordination across organisational levels. In this sense the “juggler” illustrates how institutional transformation is enacted in practice: not as a linear process, but as an ongoing balancing act shaped by context, power relations, and the need to continuously negotiate meaning.

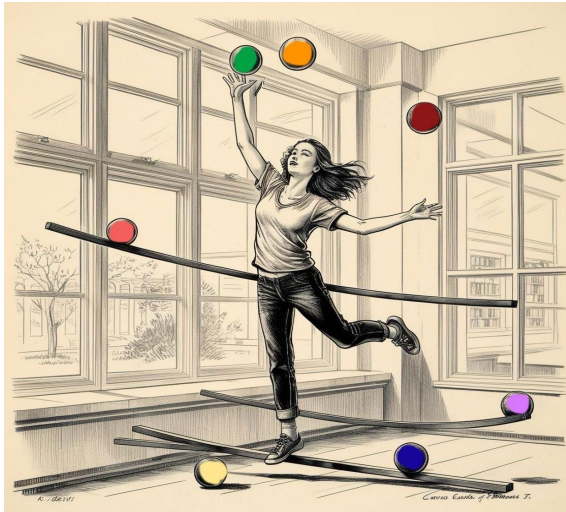


Fig. 2: The Juggler [generated with Canva AI tool]

## 7 Conclusion

This article examined how sensemaking processes shape institutional transformation in *European University Alliances*. Drawing on qualitative doctoral research on sensemaking in EUI implementation, it showed that transformation depends on the intersection between individual interpretive orientations and institutional context. Where organisational conditions support transversal cooperation, sensemaking can stabilise shared meaning and enable deeper embedding of alliance practices. Where such conditions are less favourable, governance remains continuously negotiated and institutionalisation partial.

By foregrounding discursive contestation and interpretive power, the article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of European higher education governance, conceptualising alliance formation as a deeper organisational transformation enacted through relations and meaning-building rather than exclusively through policies and strategies.

At the same time, the study is subject to several limitations. The analysis is based on a single alliance case, which enabled an in-depth exploration of sensemaking processes but limits the generalisability of the findings. In addition, the focus on middle managers foregrounds a key group of actors in implementation, the middle managers, but does not capture the perspective of other stakeholders, such as academic staff, students, or external partners whose interpretations also influence institutional transformation. Furthermore, the cross-sectional design does not fully account for how sensemaking processes evolve over time.

These limitations point to directions for future research. Comparative and longitudinal studies across alliances could provide a more differentiated understanding of how institutional contexts shape change in HEIs and their governance over time. Expanding the range of stakeholders considered would further illuminate how meaning is negotiated across organisational levels and professional groups.

From a practical and policy perspective, the findings suggest that institutional transformation cannot be achieved through structural design alone but depends on organisations' capacity to support relational processes of meaning-building. This highlights the importance of recognising middle managers not merely as implementers, but as key change agents in negotiating and stabilising institutional change. It also invites understanding the EUI as an evolving organisational process shaped through interpretation, negotiation, and power relations.

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