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# Implementing a Technical Commission in a European University Alliance

## Abstract

European University Alliances seek to integrate teaching, research, and administration across borders by aligning digital and internationalisation strategies. This paper first outlines the alliances' common objectives and governance models. It then highlights the pivotal role of a federated IT infrastructure—providing identity management or interoperable learning systems—and explains why ongoing technical decisions are necessary to meet evolving regulations and the need for scaling and interoperability, as described, for example, in the *Higher Education Interoperability Framework* (HEIF). Using the *Technical Commission* (TC) of *Unite!* as a case study, the article maps its mandate, composition, and end-to-end workflow. The final sections reflect on lessons learned, noting success factors and future directions (e.g. the implementation of the TC within the core organisation of the alliance) to sustain transnational collaboration.

## Keywords

european university, european university alliance, university cooperation, governance, unite!

# Implementierung einer Technischen Kommission in einer europäischen Universitätsallianz

## Zusammenfassung

Europäische Universitätsallianzen streben danach, Lehre, Forschung und Verwaltung grenzüberschreitend zu integrieren, indem sie digitale und Internationalisierungsstrategien aufeinander abstimmen. Dieser Beitrag skizziert zunächst die gemeinsamen Zielsetzungen und Governance-Modelle der Allianzen. Anschließend wird die zentrale Bedeutung einer föderierten IT-Infrastruktur hervorgehoben – sie liefert Identitätsmanagement und interoperable Lernmanagementsysteme – und erläutert, warum fortlaufende technische Entscheidungen erforderlich sind, um sich wandelnden Regulierungen und Skalierungs- und Interoperabilitätsanforderungen gerecht zu werden, wie beispielsweise im *Higher Education Interoperability Framework* (HEIF) beschrieben. Als Fallstudie wird die Technische Kommission von *Unite!* vorgestellt, wobei deren Rolle, Zusammensetzung und Prozesse beschrieben werden. Die abschließenden Abschnitte reflektieren die gewonnenen Erkenntnisse, benennen Erfolgsfaktoren und zukünftige Richtungen (z. B. die Implementierung der Technischen Kommission in die Kernorganisation der Allianz), um die transnationale Zusammenarbeit nachhaltig zu sichern.

## Schlüsselwörter

Europäische Universität, Europäische Universitätsallianz, Universitätskooperation, Verwaltungsstruktur, Unite!

# 1 Introduction: Governance structures of European university alliances

In our rapidly evolving digital age, the significance of education and collaboration has grown immensely. The concept of “European Universities”—transnational alliances working towards shaping the future of tertiary education within the European Union—aims to bolster European values and identity and elevate the quality and competitiveness of higher education in Europe, incorporating aspects like the inter-university campus (European Commission, 2023).

According to the *European Commission – European Education Area* (2026) webpage, 73 European alliances are currently established within the EU. From an organisational perspective, university alliances are meta-organisations (Maassen, Stensaker & Rosso, 2023): their members are institutions rather than individuals, and they serve as drivers of ideas, interests, and identities that reshape the institutional environment by converting parts of it into an organisational form. In doing so, they link macro- and micro-level dynamics in European higher education, thereby facilitating systemic transformation—a process that is far from simple. So, policies on governance of European university alliances have attracted scholarly attention (e.g. Vukasovic & Stensaker, 2018; De Boer & Huisman, 2020; Pinheiro et al., 2024). Estermann, Bennetot Pruvot & Stoyanova (2021) examined and presented the typical governance structures of alliances, identifying four core sets of bodies. Strategic development and oversight are provided by a governing board and a general assembly, which define the overall direction and approve major decisions. Steering and coordination are handled by a steering committee that aligns activities across the alliance. Management and implementation are carried out by a project-management team, a secretary-general, and a work-package structure that translate strategic choices into concrete actions and supervise day-to-day execution. Finally, other bodies such as a student council, an advisory board, and local groups contribute additional stakeholder input and grassroots support. Notably, in the examples analysed there is no indication of any IT-related bodies—advisory boards, for instance, do not include

dedicated IT or technology committee: As Maassen, Stensaker & Rosso (2023) outline, alliance governance typically rests with Rectors (strategic direction), Vice-Rectors (academic domains like teaching and research), and Secretariats (administrative coordination). However, IT infrastructure decisions are inherently cross-cutting, spanning all work packages and requiring technical expertise that these bodies may not possess. While Maassen, Stensaker & Rosso (2023) provide valuable insights into alliance governance structures, their article does not explicitly address how technical decisions are coordinated across partners. Based on our searches using the terms “IT governance” and “European University Alliance” in Google Scholar, we identified three hits as of February 2026, none of which provided concrete examples of European alliances that explicitly mention IT-related governance structures.

Yet the absence of dedicated IT governance structures represents a critical vulnerability. As alliances increasingly rely on shared digital infrastructures for collaboration, learning, and administration, technical decisions carry strategic weight. Without formal mechanisms to align technology choices with the collective interests of all partner institutions, alliances risk fragmented implementations, duplicated efforts, and unclear accountability for maintenance and support. In *Unite!* a dedicated technical commission addresses this gap by ensuring that technical decisions are aligned with the strategic interests of all partners and that responsibilities for implementation, maintenance, and support are clearly defined and distributed.

Consequently, this paper will present the development and processes of the Technical Commission of the European University alliance *Unite!* and will describe it as a case study for embedding IT-related competence and knowledge into alliance governance. We will also examine the practical implementation aspects that enable effective cross-university collaboration.

## 2 Unite! and the role of the IT infrastructure and ongoing decision-making

### 2.1 The European university alliance Unite! and its IT infrastructure related to teaching and learning

The European alliance *Unite!* (see <https://www.unite-university.eu/>) brings together nine universities from nine different countries: Technische Universität Darmstadt, Aalto University, Graz University of Technology (TU Graz), Grenoble INP Graduate School of Engineering and Management, Université Grenoble Alpes (INP-UGA Grenoble), KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Politecnico di Torino, Universidade de Lisboa, Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya BarcelonaTech, and Wrocław University of Science and Technology. *Unite!* was among the first 17 alliances funded by the European Union and entered a second Erasmus+ funding phase (November 2022 – June 2026) that added the Austrian and Polish universities as new partners.

During the initial Erasmus+ phase, three core digital platforms were created:

- the *Unite!* website, serving as a central communication hub;
- *uShare*, a shared data repository for alliance members; and
- the *Metacampus*, a Moodle-based, federated learning environment intended to enable interoperable teaching and learning across the partner institutions. The evolution and continuous enhancement of these platforms are documented by Alcober and Mohammadali (2023).

In November 2022, TU Graz took over the “Digital Campus” work package under the second *Erasmus+* line, joining the alliance as a new partner. While the original *Erasmus+* proposal outlined a detailed focus and a concrete set of tasks for developing a federated learning-management ecosystem, the precise scope of many tasks remained ambiguous as the project progressed. So, it was no longer the case that fundamental discussions about numerous options could take place (see Linse et al., 2024). Many decisions had already been made, for example the adoption of the federated learning-management system *Metacampus*. The two other main systems are the shared data service *uShare* and the *Unite!* Website.

Concurrently, the *Agora platform* arose (2023). Built on the *Odoo* business management system, it was necessitated by the fact that several partners secured participation in the EU-funded *aUPaEU* project, creating an immediate need for a robust content management solution with *Unite!* as a core pilot partner.

A clear overview about the differences or similarities of partners' infrastructure was not yet explored in autumn 2022. So, to reconcile the heterogeneous IT backgrounds of the partner institutions, an initiative was launched in November 2022 to capture comprehensive infrastructure representations. This effort aimed to produce a systematic description of each partner's landscape, thereby facilitating knowledge sharing and the identification of common building blocks and processes across all institutions (Ebner et al., 2024). For the *Unite!* alliance, producing concise and insightful IT representations was essential; the descriptions needed to be understandable to external stakeholders and standardised for comparative purposes (see Figure 1).

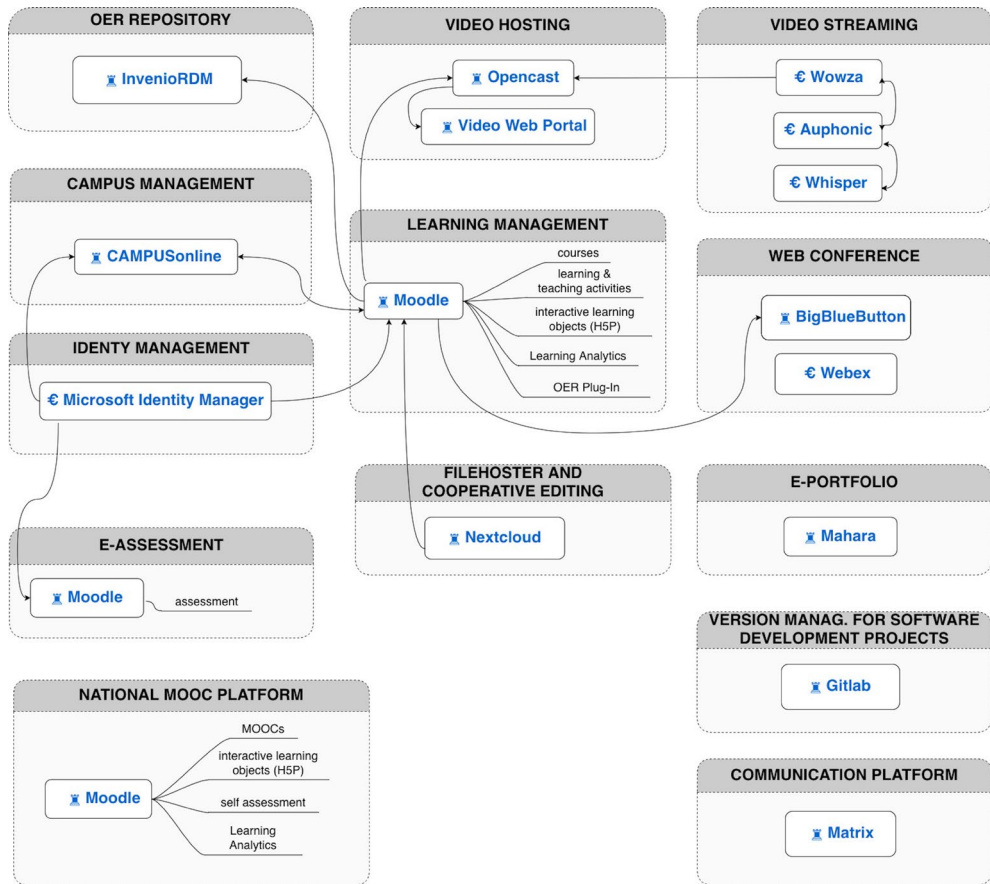


Fig. 1: All *Unite!* partners described their IT infrastructure for learning and teaching. Source: Exemplary IT infrastructure descriptions of TU Graz, see Ebner et al. 2024, Fig. 17, p. 43. Note: € stands for non-premises tools and the tower sign for on-premises tools.

In the first phase of the new project, the primary goal was to integrate the two new partners and their affiliates into the existing infrastructures—specifically to ensure seamless access to the federated learning management system *Metacampus* via

*eduGAIN*. To improve support for *Metacampus*, a dedicated e-mail address was created and the partner project set up a ticket-handling system on *Agora*. Initially, the challenge was largely organisational: determining which partners worked on which work package tasks, establishing robust structures, and organising “teacher support for *Metacampus*” so that faculty inquiries could be handled efficiently. Early support activities focused on mapping existing support structures at each partner university and clarifying each institution’s role and capabilities regarding *Metacampus* support. Regular meetings were scheduled and held to coordinate these efforts.

In a series of publications, we have described developments related to digital infrastructure in order to share our experiences with others and foster scholarly exchange. For example, we integrated partner *learning management systems* (LMS) with the *Metacampus LMS* via LTI (Ebner, Schön, Gasplmayr, Taraghi, 2025; Schön, Ebner & Gasplmayr, 2024). We also provided an overview of metadata standards and procedures that could prove useful in the development of a joint course catalogue (Kubik et al., 2025). Additionally, we published a review of the ESCI implementation within the Alliance consortium (Bertonasco et al., 2025). Our work on *Metacampus* has been mentioned in an international study (Berger, Galati & Witelner 2023, pp. 10, 32–33), and our work on open educational resources has been featured in the *Higher Education Interoperability Framework* (HEIF) Synthesis Report (European Commission et al. 2025, p. 23), thereby reaching a broader European audience.

## **2.2 Coordinating IT development amongst nine universities**

An analysis of the Description of Action documents and stakeholder-event records (e.g. the systematic collection of goals from other work packages) allowed the alliance to identify technical needs early on and recognise that not every request could be implemented straightforwardly. For instance, a partner may request a specific Moodle plug-in for *Metacampus* that is already available at its home university. While technically feasible, such additions generate extra maintenance work when-

ever the LMS is updated, requiring additional testing and configuration. Some technically possible solutions raised non-technical questions, such as whether external resources should be allowed to access *Metacampus*.

During work package meetings, developers from different institutions realised that certain decisions needed to be made jointly by representatives with decision-making authority at their respective universities. Moreover, it became evident that some outcomes of the work package would have to be handed over to other alliance stakeholders, such as other work packages or emerging groups that had not yet been formally established. Therefore, it was crucial that any such handover be formulated not only by the work package leader, but by all university partners collectively.

These reflections led to the establishment of a Technical Commission, a governance body that was not originally foreseen in the project description or the alliance charter. The commission provides a formal venue for joint decision-making on IT-related matters, ensuring that technical choices are aligned with the strategic interests of all nine partners and that responsibilities for implementation, maintenance, and support are clearly distributed.

### **3 Operational flow of the technical commission within Unite! (case study)**

#### **3.1 Description of technical commission and its organisation**

To ensure that the growing list of requirements, integrations and technical constraints remains visible to all partners, a formal process and a “Technical Commission” were established in mid-2023 and are described in the following paragraphs.

Whenever a request cannot be resolved by the first-line support team or demands substantial technical or financial effort, it is escalated to the Technical Commission. This body, composed of representatives from each university, evaluates the feasibility of the proposal, reaches consensus on the decision, and forwards any broader

implications to the alliance management. An illustrative case was the request to admit external users to the federated LMS – a decision that required careful assessment of security, licensing and budgetary impact before being approved.

If necessary, other stakeholders such as working groups, Communities or the Secretariat are included, especially if strategic decisions are required and if there are broader implications to the alliance management.

Monthly meetings of the Technical Commission are held to support the decision-making process and ensure a fast process for those who request it.

In order to illustrate the complexity of the entire process, a flow chart was first developed showing the individual steps and defining the procedure (latest version see Figure 2). This was initially developed in several iterations and then coordinated within the alliance with several stakeholders. The following graphic shows the process representation and thus also describes how the Technical Commission works:

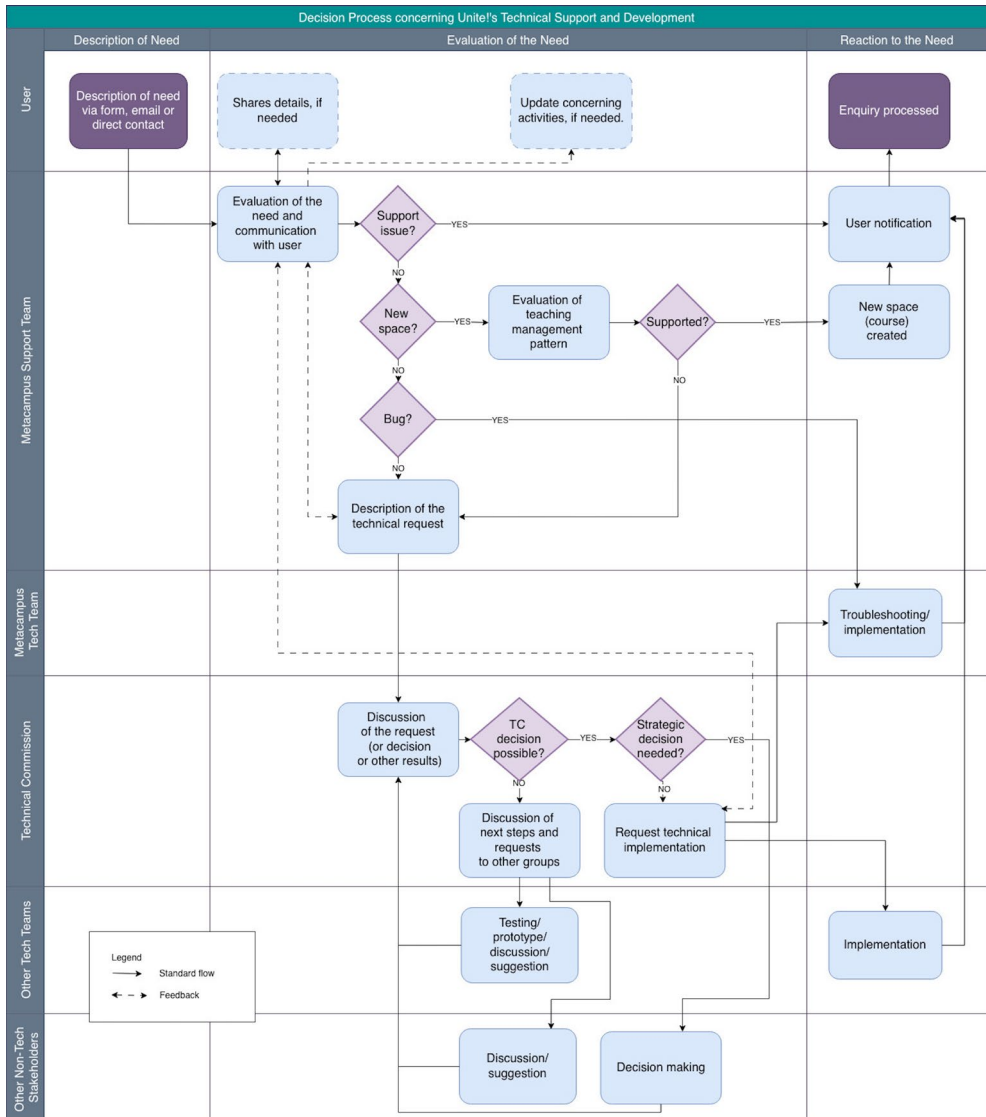


Fig. 2: Processes concerning the Technical Commission

### 3.2 Central form and business processes

To support a fluent reaction and administrative support to all issues related to IT within *Unite!*, a request submission system has been implemented. This allows users, groups and projects to submit questions, feature requests, and problem reports in one place, ensuring efficient and well-documented support processes.

For requests that are not regular support issues, the implemented Technical Commission plays a central role in ensuring the stability, interoperability, and continuous improvement of the Metacampus and digital campus infrastructure (see Ebner et al., 2024b).

It is responsible for evaluating technical developments, overseeing system integrations, and addressing challenges related to platform compatibility across *Unite!* partner institutions. Regular meetings facilitate collaboration between IT teams, ensuring that technical decisions align with the strategic goals of the alliance while maintaining a user-friendly and scalable digital learning environment.

In total, 21 meetings were held, and 26 feature requests were discussed, of which 17 have been implemented (as of September 2025). Requests include, for example, configuring open badges on *Metacampus*, connecting *Metacampus* to other partners' LMS via LTI, or adding new features, such as an accessibility toolkit or a plugin for grading. In addition to the feature requests, other current issues that arise during daily business and pertain to the *Unite!* digital infrastructure are discussed in the regular meetings.

## 4 Reflection and recommendations

### 4.1 Reflection

An important lesson learned is described by Ebner & Schön (2025), who authored a post on a German university blog about the management of the digital campus work package in *Unite!*. In their contribution, they stress the importance of avoiding premature conclusions and instead systematically mapping differences and similarities across partner institutions. Their key recommendation is as follows: “Do not make any hasty assumptions – systematically work out differences and similarities.” The authors note that the challenges they face within the *Unite!* alliance are mirrored in over sixty other university alliances. They emphasise the need for an open exchange of ideas and experiences, observing that even when formal standards or European regulations (e.g. data protection rules) are in place, each university interprets and implements them in its own way,—a reality that extends beyond purely technical matters. Consequently, they have adopted a routine of first taking stock of each partner’s practices, often beginning with clarifying terminology (“What exactly do you mean by that?”). Although this systematic approach can be labour intensive, it frequently uncovers unexpected insights and reveals the unique characteristics of their own alliance (see Ebner & Schön, 2025).

Additionally, providing services without a clearly defined need or usage scenario is tricky and often leads to inefficiencies. This problem is especially apparent for the *Metacampus*, where a sizeable support infrastructure was established despite the expected high demand not materialising so far. This situation arises partly because there are no formal business process descriptions that tie the required technical systems to concrete functional objectives, making it difficult to justify the deployed resources. The cross-university collaboration, which involves participants speaking different languages, frequently cause ambiguous interpretations of requirements, so conceptual misunderstandings only become evident later. To address these challenges, we recommend developing comprehensive, standardised business process documentation for each (future) service, and instituting an iterative review cycle to

regularly compare actual utilisation against forecasts. By adopting these measures, future deployments can better align resources with genuine user needs, reduce unnecessary overhead, and minimise the risk of hidden conceptual mismatches.

## 4.2 Recommendations

There are several recommendations we would like to share with other European alliances. The recommendations are:

- The establishment of a technical commission may be advisable in any case, as the discussion of possible technical solutions is very complex. This is due to various technical possibilities but also to other approaches or organisational and legal framework conditions.
- Regular meetings are also recommended because all processes that arise in the alliance usually require digital support.
- The use of a technical commission also allows quick access to local experts, as the issues can quickly go beyond the expertise of the commission and require specialised knowledge.
- It has also become apparent that many questions are not of a technical nature but require other expertise (e.g. data protection), so it is recommended that additional commissions be set up to enable rapid responses.
- In any case, the technical commission can also jointly work on general development trends that are central to European educational institutions and to make recommendations (examples include digital sovereignty or the use of open-source systems from a sustainability perspective).

Table 1 summarises the challenges and mitigation issues that were collected for the “lessons learned” report (D2.2, due April 2026) by the participants of the work package.

<b>Aspect</b>	<b>Challenges</b>	<b>Mitigation Issues (if)</b>
Technical	Many requirements of varying complexity	Technical Commission can quickly assess these, respond accordingly, or take action (e.g., forwarding to other expert groups)
	Differences in IT infrastructures at partner universities	Overview of IT infrastructure of all partners enhances understanding (see Ebner et al., 2024)
Legal	Different regulations on e.g. GDPR, depending on the country	Forwarding to relevant experts as counterpart within the alliance (if available)
Organisational	Quick and clear coordination between partners concerning technical decisions	Establishment of a technical commission
	Communication issues; technical issues and decisions are not always easy to communicate, specifically to other alliance stakeholders and boards	Regular meetings
	Implementing a technical communication as a single way for new technical developments and adaptations across several European projects	Communication, potentially a formal agreement

Table 1: Challenges and mitigation issues concerning the coordination of IT-related groups in a European university alliance with the help of a Technical Commission (See Table 17, D.2.2).

## 5 Conclusion and future development

To the best of our knowledge, no comparable governance structure exists for equal IT-related decision-making besides the Technical Commission introduced in the *Unite!* alliance. This novelty may explain why the commission has attracted attention from the *HEIF Working Group*; the Technical Commission was incorporated into the workshop materials of the *EDEH European Good Practices event* (EDEH Training Module 4, email from Channa van der Brug, January 2026).

From an alliance-management perspective, the Technical Commission also plays a pivotal role. In current practice, it only addresses technical decisions that do not carry strategic implications. To clarify this, discussions are underway about emphasising its advisory nature—potentially by adopting a different designation that better reflects its consultative function.

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