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European University Alliances in Action

1 Introduction

Since 2019, the *European Universities Initiative* (EUI) has aimed to build transnational university alliances as a model for the future of higher education. These alliances seek to strengthen collaboration among European institutions in teaching, research, and innovation. They also support student and staff mobility and encourage the development of joint, student-centred curricula and research strategies. At the same time, the initiative reflects a broader ambition to reinforce European values and improve the competitiveness of higher education in Europe, contributing to the integration of the European Higher Education Area (European Commission, 2023). The pace of this development has been striking. By early 2025, 65 alliances had been established, bringing together more than 570 higher education institutions across 35 countries and with around eleven million students (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2025). These alliances mark not only a new phase in European higher education policy but also a complex process of institutional change that is attracting growing academic attention.

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In the literature, European University Alliances are often described as new forms of organisational cooperation that sit between traditional university structures and emerging types of transnational governance (Pinheiro et al., 2024). Maassen et al. (2023), for example, describe them as meta-organisations: groups of autonomous institutions working together within coordinated but only partly integrated structures. As a result, new forms of governance emerge in which European, national, and institutional logics intersect and at times compete (de Boer & Huisman, 2020; Pinheiro et al., 2024).

These developments raise fundamental questions. How do governance structures, organisational cultures, and epistemic orders change when universities become embedded within transnational networks? What tensions emerge between European governance frameworks and national claims to institutional autonomy? And how does our understanding of scholarship, education, and institutional identity shape this evolving landscape? While the European Commission emphasises integration, coherence, and efficiency, research points to a more mixed picture. On the one hand, alliances create opportunities for cooperation, strategic development, and organisational learning. On the other, processes of standardisation and hierarchisation can introduce new inequalities and may disadvantage smaller institutions or non-university higher education providers (Vukasovic & Stensaker, 2018). European University Alliances are both a testing ground and a contested space, where questions of power, governance, and cultural identity within the European Higher Education Area are continuously renegotiated.

2 Aims of This Issue

This issue of the *Zeitschrift für Hochschulentwicklung (ZFHE)* looks at European University Alliances not mainly through a policy lens, but regards them as institutional, social, and cultural phenomena. It brings together contributions that examine the dynamics of alliance formation between integration and difference, offering both empirical insights and theoretical perspectives.

The issue builds on a growing body of research that sees these alliances not just as governance instruments but as complex organisational and epistemic constellations (Maassen et al., 2023; Pinheiro et al., 2024). Alongside legal and organisational questions, the contributions address epistemic, normative, and symbolic dimensions of these emerging forms of cooperation, including questions of belonging, identity formation, and knowledge production (de Boer & Huisman, 2020). The aim is to enrich current discussions on European higher education cooperation through analytical and critical perspectives and to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of higher education governance in the twenty-first century. Particular attention is given to multilateral forms of governance, processes of organisational transformation, and questions of institutional diversity and difference.

The issue also highlights the perspectives of individual institutions: their strategies, responsibilities, and the tensions they face within European alliances. This includes how institutional profiles and room for manoeuvre evolve within a multi-level governance system. The contributions cover governance, identity, and institutional embedding; implementation and coordination; and pedagogical and societal transformation. They also draw on cultural, educational, and social theory to explore broader questions of diversity, integration, and difference in European higher education.

3 Contributions

After a rigorous peer-review process, nine contributions were selected. Together, they can be grouped into three analytical lenses that illuminate different dimensions of European University Alliances: questions of governance and institutional embedding, challenges associated with implementation and operational practice, and broader pedagogical and societal transformation potentials.

3.1 Governance, Identity, and Institutional Embedding

The first thematic cluster looks at how European University Alliances develop as organisational entities, how they stabilise over time, and how they become embedded within institutional structures.

In “*We need a certain mindset*”, **Alexandra Ashem-Wangler and Annika Maschitz** demonstrate that the identity of European University Alliances is shaped less by formal structures and more by everyday practices and interactions. Shared practices, trust, and collective narratives — such as a common understanding of *being part of Europe* — play a central role in alliance formation. At the same time, the authors show that sustainable institutional embedding requires clearly defined strategic goals, appropriate incentive structures, and effective integration into existing institutional arrangements.

Florence Balthasar, Laurin Reding, and Laurent Dutoit analyse in “*Swiss Higher Education Institutions within European University Alliances: Strategies, Challenges and Impact*” the role of Swiss higher education institutions within these alliances. Despite Switzerland’s specific institutional position within Europe, more than half of Swiss higher education institutions actively participate in European alliances. Their analysis demonstrates that participation is driven by strategic goals, especially international visibility, research collaboration, and access to European networks.

Felix Poschinger, Barbara Sutter, and Robert Coon investigate European University Alliances as meta-organisations and collective actors in their contribution “*Participatory Governance and Institutional Legitimacy in European University Alliances*.” They argue that participatory governance, particularly the structural inclusion of students, extends far beyond symbolic involvement and is key to building legitimacy and internal cohesion.

In “*Sensemaking and Institutional Transformation in European University Alliances*,” **Agata Mannino** examines processes of institutional embedding from an organisational sociology perspective. Her contribution illustrates that alliances emerge not simply through formal governance arrangements but depend fundamentally on how actors interpret, mediate, and translate these structures within their own institutions.

3.2 Implementation, Coordination, and Operational Practice

The second thematic cluster focuses on the practical implementation of European University Alliances and the challenges arising within the everyday realities of teaching, organisation, and infrastructure.

In “*Bridging EU Ambitions and Local Practice in ECIU’s Challenge-Based Learning*,” **Gesa Mayer, Siska Simon, and Dorothea Ellinger** examine the implementation of challenge-based learning within a European alliance context. While this approach supports key competencies, it also faces structural limits such as workload pressures and weak incentives. This creates a constant tension between European ambitions and local realities.

Martin Ebner and colleagues highlight the importance of technical and operational integration through their study of the Unite! alliance. They show that successful cooperation depends not only on strategy but also on technical alignment, interoperability, and new forms of shared decision-making.

Deborah Sielert explores open licences and Open Educational Resources (OER) as a way to balance standardisation and academic autonomy. Three central findings emerge from the analysis. First, successful collaboration requires both openness and standardisation: open educational materials provide flexibility, while standardised metadata ensure interoperability. Second, opening courses for collaborative use requires substantial coordination across institutional boundaries, as academic staff encounter legal, technical, and organisational barriers. Third, bottom-up approaches

prove essential because alliances can only succeed if teaching-related work receives institutional recognition and support.

Taken together, the contributions within this cluster demonstrate that the effectiveness of European University Alliances depends substantially on whether ambitious objectives are translated into functioning organisational and technical practices.

3.3 Pedagogical and Societal Transformation Potentials

The third thematic cluster approaches *European University Alliances* as spaces of broader transformation, both with regard to emerging forms of learning and to the evolving societal role of higher education institutions.

Raul Gschrey shifts attention away from administrative structures and towards the pedagogical possibilities opened up by European University Alliances. Drawing on the example of the U!REKA Lab, he illustrates how transnational collaboration can function as an experimental learning environment in which students develop new forms of knowledge and cooperation through co-creation, urban practice, and commons-oriented governance. In this perspective, alliances become sites in which new epistemic and didactic cultures are not only developed but actively co-created.

Nina Walker and Petra Moog examine the example of the EELISA alliance and the role of European University Alliances in relation to the third mission of higher education institutions. Their study demonstrates that the development of transnational innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystems is shaped by tensions between central alliance governance, institutional structures, and regionally embedded innovation logics. At present, alliances primarily operate as platforms for mutual learning, whereas more integrated and complementary structures are only beginning to emerge.

Taken together, the contributions in this cluster suggest that European University Alliances have the potential to go beyond extending existing structures and instead support new forms of education, knowledge production, and societal engagement.

3.4 Open Contributions

The Editorial Board is pleased to note that questions of cooperation, partnership, and participation (central themes in discussions surrounding university alliances) also emerge within the Open Contributions section, thereby extending and enriching the thematic focus of this issue.

Mareike Oesterle and Götz Schwab seek to “*shape transience*” and conceptualise teaching development as an interactional practice. Their contribution investigates Transient Transnational Communities (TTCs) of teacher educators as a comparatively underexplored form of international collaboration. Drawing on a qualitative longitudinal study conducted within an Erasmus+ project, their study shows that collaboration often develops through interaction and language rather than formal structures.

Annabell Daniel and Marisa Neher focus on “*Promoting Early-Career Researchers through Science–Practice Partnerships in Educational Research*” and provide a detailed introduction to the EQUAL-NET project. Their contribution highlights both the opportunities and challenges associated with science–practice partnerships (SPPs) for researchers at early career stages. They show that these partnerships help build science communication skills and support more practice-oriented research.

Dagmar Linnartz and Lavinia Kamphausen similarly seek to “*enable transdisciplinary doctoral projects*” and discuss tensions emerging within the PLaN_CV project at TH Köln. Drawing upon qualitative empirical findings and selected literature, their contribution examines the specific institutional context of the tandem employment model used within the project, which is characterised by close cooperation between practice partners and the university, as well as by a strong commitment to conducting research in dialogue with practitioners.

Tanja Nebel concludes the issue by focusing on “*student participation through Serious Slow Game Jams*” Rather than being positioned as passive consumers, students are understood as active co-creators of their learning environments and as important contributors to democratic processes in higher education development.

4 Summary

European University Alliances are far more than instruments of higher education policy. They represent a central element in the future development of the European Higher Education Area and, more broadly, in the societal, economic, and cultural development of Europe. The contributions in this issue show that alliances are not stable or fully controllable organisational forms. Instead, they are evolving and often tension-filled constellations in which different « logics » - political governance, institutional autonomy, pedagogical innovation, and societal impact - intersect and are renegotiated.

This is precisely where both their potential and their challenge lie. European University Alliances are not finished institutions but evolving and incomplete formations in which the future of European higher education is still taking shape. This issue aims to support a clearer and more balanced understanding of these developments. It maps current debates, highlights central challenges, and opens up perspectives for the future development of European higher education cooperation while also inviting readers to see these alliances as evolving institutional experiments rather than fixed models.

On behalf of the Editorial Board of the *Zeitschrift für Hochschulentwicklung (ZFHE)*

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