



The European universities initiative through the lens of organisational actorhood: key transformations, challenges, and opportunities for universities of applied sciences and traditional research universities

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Abstract

The European Universities Initiative (EUI) seeks to drive the transformation of participating institutions by promoting shared governance, challenge-based learning, socially impactful research, and stakeholder engagement. These aspects reflect broader trends in the transformation of higher education institutions, as discussed in the literature on organisational actorhood. From this perspective, we theoretically identify five key transformations implied by the EUI. Using an exploratory qualitative approach, we conducted expert interviews at four traditional research universities and four universities of applied sciences (UAS) to examine how alliance members navigate these key transformations. Our findings indicate that the EUI, through its impact agenda, is not the primary driver of organisational change in higher education institutions but rather acts as a facilitator of institutional reorganisation processes already underway—particularly in the case of UAS. Furthermore, we find that the EUI exerts its most transformative influence in two core areas: the emphasis on the European dimension of university alliances and the implementation of shared governance structures. These aspects are not captured by general transformational trends in higher education, thereby highlighting the EUI's distinctive contribution to institutional development.

Keywords European Universities Initiative · Organisational actorhood · University alliances · Societal impact.

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Introduction

The European Universities Initiative (EUI) has recently attracted increasing academic attention, resulting in a growing number of publications (Kanninen & Pekkola, 2023; Pinheiro et al., 2024). These studies explore important aspects of university alliances, including their societal role (Fuchs et al., 2023), the formation and activation of partnerships (Gunn, 2020; Lambrechts et al., 2024; Stensaker et al., 2023), and mission development (Hartzell et al., 2023). Despite this growing interest, the literature on the EUI remains limited, largely descriptive, and based on fragmented empirical data.

Existing research frequently conceptualises the EUI as a variety of traditional strategic alliances of higher education institutions (HEIs) (Pinheiro et al., 2024). While this perspective provides useful insights, it overlooks two critical distinctions. First, unlike traditional alliances that are typically initiated by HEIs themselves, the EUI was introduced by an external actor—the European Commission—which also provides substantial funding to the selected alliances (Stensaker et al., 2023). Second, the expected depth of collaboration and the ambition of EUI go far beyond traditional forms of academic cooperation (Fuchs et al., 2023). Contrary to the existing research's conceptualisation of EUI, the EUI positions HEIs as key agents in addressing major societal challenges, a role considerably more ambitious than that associated with traditional institutional partnerships (European Commission, 2025).

As a consequence of this shortcoming, this paper draws on a different theoretical foundation: the literature on organisational transformation in higher education, specifically the concept of organisational actorhood. This body of research documents how universities are evolving from loosely coupled systems with collegial governance to more integrated, actor-like organisations embedded in broader societal contexts (Broström et al., 2020; Krücken, 2020). According to this perspective, in the last two decades or so, universities have undergone profound shifts in their missions, strategic positioning, and internal structures, influenced by growing external expectations and increased engagement with stakeholders (Krücken, 2024; Huisman & Burgoa, 2024).

Building on this literature, we identify five key transformative elements implied by the EUI: (1) the redefinition of HEIs' societal roles, (2) HEIs strategic adaptation to external funding mechanisms, (3) an increased pressure for institutional differentiation, (4) heightened accountability demands, and (5) growing professionalisation of HEIs' staff and governance structures.

Two questions arise: how do these transformations manifest in practice? And how do alliance members experience and manage the transformation processes associated with the EUI? Our paper addresses these questions by focusing on one European university alliance comprising both universities of applied sciences (UAS) and traditional research universities. This alliance was selected for its strong commitment to societal impact and its balanced representation of institutional types, enabling comparative analysis.

Turning to the empirical analysis, we conduct semi-structured expert interviews. They reveal that while the EUI often aligns with pre-existing institutional developments—particularly within UAS—it also exerts a distinct influence on advancing Europeanisation and shared governance structures. Moreover, notable differences emerge in how UAS and traditional universities approach the EUI's transformative agenda, particularly in their orientation towards societal impact and competitive positioning. Taken together, these findings

suggest that the EUI functions less as a disruptive force than as an enabling framework, supporting and amplifying ongoing institutional strategies.

This paper is structured as follows: Sect. 2 presents the theoretical framework based on organisational actorhood; Sect. 3 outlines the research design and methodology; Sect. 4 presents the empirical findings; Sect. 5 discusses the results in relation to the theoretical framework; and Sect. 6 concludes with implications and avenues for further research.

Theoretical analysis and research questions

As stated before, we analyse the EUI from the perspective of the literature on organisational actorhood in higher education (Broström et al., 2020; Krücken, 2020, 2024; Krücken & Meier, 2006; Huisman and Burgoa 2024). In this regard, we identify three aspects of the university in which the transformations driven by the EUI are taking place: firstly, the HEI's mission; secondly, transformations of its strategy; and finally, transformations at the organisational level.

Changes in the university's missions: the societal role of European alliances

A first significant change concerns the missions of HEIs, which have increasingly adopted what is termed the 'third mission', alongside education and research as the first and second. The 'third mission' refers to a contribution to regional development (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000). More concretely, there are different conceptions of this 'third mission' (Compagnucci & Spignarelli 2020). On the one hand, there is a narrower view that focuses on the economic impact of HEIs in society through the transfer of knowledge to industry and the commercialisation of research (Zomer & Benneworth, 2011), sometimes identified with the concept of the "entrepreneurial university" (Compagnucci & Spignarelli 2020). On the other hand, there is a broader conception of societal value, in which HEIs have recently been recognised as actors that can contribute to addressing current societal problems. Accordingly, they are increasingly described as 'change agents' for societal challenges, namely the transitions related to digitalisation and sustainability (Pflitsch & Radinger-Peer, 2018; Purcell et al., 2019). Arguably, this is due to the interdisciplinary structure of HEIs, which allows them to bridge different types of knowledge by drawing on diverse expertise from academia and practitioners. This bridging of knowledge is considered particularly important for addressing complex sustainability challenges. Furthermore, the authors point out that HEIs can play this role due to their long-term perspective and societal mission, which allows them to address sustainability-related issues (Pflitsch & Radinger-Peer, 2018). Therefore, in its broadest sense, the third mission — often described in the literature as the 'Engaged University Model' (Tripl et al., 2015) — sees the university assuming a far more complex role than simply producing and sharing knowledge. The university becomes an orchestrator of the process (Autio, 2021), a change agent for sustainability transition at the regional level (Pflitsch & Radinger-Peer, 2018).

In certain European countries, the higher education system is binary, that is, traditional research universities coexist with universities of applied sciences. The latter emerged around 1960 and originally focused exclusively on teaching, while traditional universities are characterised as offering a wide range of subjects and maintaining a link between teaching and

basic research (Leifgen & Burkhart, 2019). Nevertheless, UAS have progressively acquired a research mandate, which has been associated in the literature with the term research drift (Kyvik & Lepori, 2010), referring to the expansion of UAS research activities (Cavallaro, 2023). In this sense, it has been pointed out that the Bologna Process blurred the boundaries between university and non-university higher education in some countries (Witte et al., 2008), although most countries with UAS officially retained their binary systems.

According to their legal mandate, UAS are mandated to play a decisive role in regional development, and empirical evidence shows that they are key actors (Pfister et al., 2021). UAS focus their research and teaching on applied research and establish collaborations with local and regional firms as well as other research-oriented institutions, including academic universities and other UAS. Thus, the adoption of the third mission is inherent for UAS.

The third mission has also been adopted by the EUI through its explicit emphasis on societal impact in the core mission of the EUI. Concepts such as service to society, innovation, responses to digital and green transitions, and major socio-economic challenges are highlighted as EUI objectives (European Universities call 2023, p. 6). According to Fuchs et al. (2023), the societal impact expected from higher education institutions (HEIs) participating in European university alliances encompasses several key dimensions. These institutions are encouraged to tackle major societal challenges—such as climate change and digital transformation—through innovative approaches to teaching and research. This also includes the promotion of interdisciplinarity and lifelong learning. In parallel, the creation of these alliances supports the development of the so-called “entrepreneurial university”, aimed at enhancing the valorisation of research and fostering academic entrepreneurship. Within this context, a central objective of the initiative is to reform European innovation ecosystems, thereby addressing the gap between Europe and the United States in the commercialisation of university-based research. In addition, the alliances are expected to advance European integration, building on the success of the Erasmus student exchange programme.

By contrast, other strands of research highlight the role of the mission statements of university alliances in identity building and the creation of legitimacy with internal and external stakeholders (Hartzell et al., 2023). Mission statements are used by individual institutions to satisfy stakeholder expectations, including those of funding institutions, and to differentiate themselves from their competitors (Seeber et al., 2017). Hartzell et al. (2023, 252–255) show that the mission statements of 31 alliances are homogeneous regarding societal impact and differentiated in terms of institutional competition within the region and European identity. Consequently, the study confirms the tendency described in the literature on HEI to seek legitimacy from funding agencies, which leads to a greater homogenisation of their missions in aspects related to the requirements of the EUI.

However, differentiation between university types is not addressed. As UAS have traditionally been responsible for providing qualified professionals for industry and business, and as their research is practice-oriented, they may approach the EUI's requirement to create societal impact differently than traditional research universities. Consequently, we ask whether UAS as members of alliances approach societal impact differently from traditional research universities, thereby working against the homogenising effect of funding institutions.

Changes at the strategic level

EUI as a top-down strategy to implement changes in research policy

Another major institutional transformation within the higher education landscape concerns the funding schemes and funding conditions for HEIs. This change is linked to top-down policy agendas such as the EUI requirement for societal impact. The shift from a system of self-governance to one where policymakers tie funding to output criteria and substantial thematic requirements has led to a top-down, mission-oriented, policy-driven funding system for HEIs (Broström et al., 2020). Policymakers intend to increase the cost-effectiveness of HEIs while simultaneously instrumentalising them to serve their policy agenda (Zomer & Benneworth, 2011; Broström et al., 2020). Therefore, traditional academic self-governing mechanisms for funding allocation, such as peer review and competition for academic prestige and recognition, have been challenged in recent decades (Broström et al., 2020). In some cases, policy priorities are aligned with the societal challenges mentioned earlier, such as digital or green transitions, requiring HEIs and scientists to engage in interdisciplinary collaborations to address these societal problems (Kienast, 2023).

The implications of these changes are complex. On the one hand, the setting of research priorities for funding may lead to a reduction in the independence of researchers, as the design of their research may be strongly influenced by the availability of funding. It may therefore shift the ability to shape the research agenda away from the university system (Musselin, 2013). In this context, several studies criticise this promotion of the university's involvement in society, arguing that it encourages academics too strongly towards academic entrepreneurship, potentially at the expense of the public good (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020). Nevertheless, Broström et al. (2020) argue that reduced autonomy can be compensated for by increased funding, at least if targeted funding schemes provide new and well-funded opportunities for researchers and HEIs.

As mentioned above, the EUI has clearly stated the need for societal impact with regard to green and digital transformations. The funding associated with the alliances is considerably higher (up to €14.4 million per alliance) than in other European calls. To receive funding, the alliance proposal must demonstrate its ability to deliver societal impact. From a governance perspective, European alliances have been described as a policy tool that can foster transformations in higher education while linking macro and micro levels in the European higher education area (Pinheiro et al., 2024).

EUI as a strategy to compete with other institutions

The ongoing and comprehensive transformation of HEIs has promoted an unprecedented level of competition between them (Broström et al., 2020; Kettunen et al., 2023). The changes in science policy described above have been the main driver of this process, as HEIs have become increasingly more competitive in attracting resources and enhance their reputation. As a result, HEIs are trying to differentiate themselves in response to increased competitive pressure by engaging in a process of 'singularisation', i.e. the attempt to present a unique institutional identity (Krücken, 2024). According to Broström et al. (2020), the differentiation strategies that HEIs develop to compete with others can be divided into two groups, horizontal and vertical strategies. On the one hand, horizontal differentiation

strategies seek to make HEIs more recognisable by associating them with specific fields of knowledge, seeking to position themselves as a leading institution in this field for research or teaching. On the other hand, vertical differentiation strategies aim to increase quality differences between HEIs (Broström et al., 2020). Thus, these strategies allow them to label themselves as ‘top institutions’ belonging to the elite of universities. Global university rankings are the best example of this type of strategy.

We argue that the EUI is both a horizontal and a vertical strategy. On the one hand, it is a vertical strategy because it allows the participating institutions to consider themselves in a league or group of elite universities in Europe. In fact, the highly competitive process that the university consortia went through to apply for this initiative allows the winning HEIs to consider themselves a select group of top universities in Europe. In addition to receiving formal recognition as excellent institutions, they will also have access to funding (up to €14.4 million per alliance). Moreover, the European Commission has stated that a maximum of 60 alliances will be approved, reinforcing the idea that being part of this select group has implications for the future. In this sense, Fuchs et al. (2023) point out that a strong incentive for many HEIs to join the EUI has been the fear of being left out and the uncertainty about how this new programme will interact with existing EU higher education initiatives. On the other hand, we argue that the EUI is also a horizontal differentiation strategy, as alliances often specialise in one field of study. Recent evidence shows that pre-existing ties were especially important for those applying to the first EUI call, but that new types of partnerships are more often found in later EUI rounds of alliance selection (Lambrechts et al., 2024; Stensaker et al., 2023). It can be argued that this is due to the progressive focus on the alliance’s knowledge specialisation, which increased the importance of shared or complementary institutional characteristics among partners in later EUI phases.

In summary, the EUI represents a top-down strategy that shapes the organisations implementing the research agenda designed by European policymakers. However, HEIs engaged in the EUI may face challenges due to the external and top-down nature of research agendas, potentially leading to tensions regarding the autonomy of academic staff. Since the EUI is a competitive funding instrument aimed at strengthening the European higher education landscape, alliances must find ways to stand out from their competitors. This can be achieved through both vertical and horizontal differentiation.

Consequently, we ask how alliance members navigate top-down policy agendas to create societal impact and address the challenge of competitive differentiation? Do UAS approach this differently than traditional research universities?

Changes at the organisational level

The top-down and policy agendas imposed on HEIs increase the level and nature of accountability to their stakeholders and funders (Krücken & Meier, 2006). Concretely, accountability includes a distinct set of standardised indicators to measure university performance such as third-party funding, publications, patents, graduate numbers, diversity and internationalisation which differ from those used in the self-governed systems (Krücken, 2020). Indicators are also linked to measuring societal impact, serving as tools to assess the university’s impact in relation to the ‘third mission’ (Broström et al., 2020). As a result, there is a shift from traditional indicators such as peer review and citation rate, to new indicators like societal and online media impact (Bornmann, 2014).

The use of indicators is crucial in EUI, as HEIs – similarly to other European projects – are required to develop a wide range of indicators to evaluate the alliance and its achievements. Nevertheless, accountability is not a particularly novel phenomenon at HEIs. For instance, Elken and Røsdal (2017) show that university colleges in Norway have always been accountable to professional standards and society. Therefore, we argue that accountability has not been imposed by EUI. Instead, we propose that HEIs involved in EUI consider it relevant and find that EUI might support them in addressing it. In this sense, Fuchs et al. (2023) argue that university alliances may be an effective mechanism to hold themselves accountable to incorporate principles of responsibility. By adopting a similar framework, comparing and benchmarking their activities, HEIs can make themselves accountable to the other members of the alliance. In summary, we argue that accountability is relevant for HEIs involved in the EUI and that EUI is seen as a way to address this challenge.

Another organisational change identified in the literature is the growing specialisation of the workforce at HEIs. In other words, university management and other staff groups are becoming increasingly professionalised (Krücken, 2020), largely due to the expansion of managerial capacities in HEIs and the wider use of indicators and evaluation processes.

We argue that the EUI accelerates this trend, as HEIs in alliances need staff who can adapt to the growing demands of alliance management such as accountability expertise, language skills, management of internationalisation, and similar competences. At the same time, being part of an alliance can help HEIs to cope with these changes, since they can share staff, good practice and learn from others. In this sense, Fuchs et al. (2023) define EUI as learning networks where HEIs can share know-how, define strategies and pursue moral reflection. In summary, the EUI's requirement to generate societal impact as part of a top-down research and transformative policy agenda increases the need for accountability and professionalisation.

Consequently, we ask how the EUI's impact shapes institutional approaches to accountability and professionalisation and whether a distinction exists between UAS and traditional research universities?

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative exploratory case study approach to investigate how member institutions of a European university alliance experience and respond to organisational transformation. A case study design is particularly suitable when the research aims to explore a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context. The exploratory character of the study is grounded in the novelty of EUI as a policy instrument and in the limited existing research on its institutional impact. As Myers (2019) points out, qualitative case studies are especially useful for theory-informed exploration of complex organisational processes, where the goal is not statistical generalisation but analytical insight. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of institutional dynamics through detailed engagement with expert perspectives and contextual knowledge, making it a robust empirical strategy for addressing our research questions.

Sampling

The selection of eight institutions—four universities of applied sciences (UAS) and four traditional research universities—represents a purposeful and theoretically grounded case sampling strategy. All participating institutions are full members of the same European university alliance and together account for 8 of the alliance's 10 members, providing a comprehensive view of institutional diversity within the alliance' network. Each institution contributed two interviewees—one with a strategic role in alliance governance and one with operational responsibilities—resulting in a total of 16 expert interviews. This dual perspective ensures both vertical (strategic-operational) and horizontal (UAS–research university) coverage across the alliance.

This alliance was selected for its strong commitment to societal impact, as clearly expressed in its mission statement. Furthermore, the alliance boasts a balanced representation of the various types of higher education institutions (HEIs) and geographical areas of Europe. The organisation is comprised of 10 members, with three based in the South, four in Central Europe, two in the East and one in Northern Europe. In the interest of maintaining the integrity of the research, both the alliance and the higher education institutions (HEIs) involved are treated anonymously. This is due to the fact that the interviewees hold prominent positions within their respective universities, and their anonymity could be compromised if the name of their institution was disclosed.

Following Myers (2019), qualitative case study research prioritises depth over breadth and aims to capture rich, context-specific insights rather than statistical generalisability. Myers emphasises that in such research, the goal is “analytical generalisation,” whereby findings are transferable to theoretical propositions rather than populations. In this study, the high level of embeddedness of the interviewees in the alliance structure, combined with the broad institutional coverage, provided sufficient empirical richness to support thematic saturation across the main analytical dimensions. No substantially new themes emerged in the final interviews, suggesting that the sample size was adequate for the exploratory aim of this research.

Method

We conducted semi-structured expert interviews (questionnaire and codesystem available in Zenodo in Aceytuno & Kürsteiner, 2026), following the approach outlined by von dem Berge (2020). This interview format allows for the integration of existing empirical insights on institutional change in higher education, as well as the relatively underexplored domain of institutional transformation within European university alliances. Positioned between fully structured quantitative surveys and fully unstructured data collection for theory generation, the semi-structured interview offers both theoretical grounding and methodological flexibility (von dem Berge, 2020, p. 278).

A defining feature of this format is its combination of theory-informed question design with open-ended prompts that enable interviewees to respond in a self-directed and reflective manner. The expert interview represents a specific form of qualitative inquiry, whereby the interviewee is regarded as someone directly involved in the social phenomenon under investigation and thus a source of specialised, experience-based knowledge (von dem Berge, 2020, p. 280; see also Gläser & Laudel, 2010, p. 12).

For the purposes of this study, experts were defined as individuals playing an active strategic or operational role in their institution's engagement within a European university alliance. The interview guide was adapted to reflect the specific roles of the participants, distinguishing between strategic and operational responsibilities.

The structure of the interview guide was informed by the theoretical framework derived from the literature and organised into three thematic blocks, referred to as Transformations 1, 2, and 3. Questions within Transformation 1 (Missions and Expectations) and Transformation 2 (Organisational Structures) aimed to assess the current state of institutional transformation in light of trends identified in the literature. Transformation 3 focused on the specific challenges and opportunities related to alliance participation. This structure enabled us to explore how HEIs currently navigate broader transformation trends, while also identifying their perception of future developments in the context of their alliance membership. Furthermore, the design facilitates the formulation of analytical propositions on how general institutional transformation dynamics influence the ongoing development of the alliance itself.

Interviews were conducted virtually via Microsoft Teams between March and April 2024. Transcripts were produced using Read.ai, an automated transcription tool. To ensure intersubjective comprehensibility, transcripts were translated into English with the support of DeepL Translator. Standardisation of the interview process was ensured through a preparatory workshop on interview methodology held in March 2024. To increase reliability, we applied a double-checking process that involved collaborative segmentation, paraphrasing, and sub-coding. The interview guide was pre-tested with strategic and operational staff from alliance member institutions.

Data were analysed using qualitative content analysis in line with Mayring (2014). Given the literature-based structure of the interview guide, the coding process combined both deductive and inductive elements. A coding scheme was first developed deductively, based on an evidence-informed literature review of institutional transformation trends in higher education. Subsequently, Mayring's (2014, pp. 64 ff.) summarising technique was applied to reduce the data to a coherent system of contextual sub-codes (inductive). Where applicable, we also employed Mayring's (2014, pp. 66 ff.) steps of paraphrasing, generalising/abstracting, and reducing.

Results

Based on empirical data from eight higher education institutions in eight European countries, the nature of institutional transformation is strongly influenced by contextual factors. In several cases, the observed developments depart from established patterns described in the literature—particularly the shift from loosely coupled expert organisations to more hierarchical institutional structures. The following sections present our findings in detail.

Changes in university mission: creating societal impact – challenges and chances

The data show that the current strategies of individual institutions within the sample alliance are aligned with the EUI's requirement for societal impact. This alignment preceded alliance membership and did not emerge from it. Rather, these strategies helped institutional lead-

ers make sense of their alliance membership. This means that institutional strategies were already aligned with the EUI's mission prior to joining the alliance.

Since I have been at this university, the university's strategy has been very clearly orientated towards social meaningfulness and social benefit. As we have developed, we have perhaps developed more thematically, in the sense that we have learnt better how to fill this with life through certain topics, i.e. as university management, as faculties through certain topics, but also through incentives to promote interdisciplinary projects more strongly. (#1, strategic, pos. 88).

I think it was a great, for me personally, a great satisfaction in the process of Alliance education, which has been a multi-step process, firstly to increasingly realise, but secondly also to clarify and promote that the development of us universities towards transformative scientific practice has basically always been intuitively in our DNA. (#1, strategic, pos. 99).

As a consequence, the development and underlying rationale of these approaches to societal impact vary across member institutions, as they reflect the distinct institutional contexts and dynamics.

However, we can distinguish universities of applied sciences (UAS) from traditional research universities. The latter typically emphasise competition as well as internationalisation—particularly Europeanisation—as strategies to secure institutional funding and to justify a greater engagement in achieving societal impact. UAS, by contrast, have traditionally maintained close ties with their fields of practice since their inception. These institutions do not frame the societal impact as a mechanism for increasing funding or coping with intensified competition, as is often the case with research universities. Instead, they view the third mission as a means of institutional renewal: fostering interdisciplinary research, encouraging entrepreneurship, and engaging the academic community in shaping shared values within the university.

In one participating UAS, for example, the third mission is framed as a combination of social responsibility and entrepreneurial initiative. It is thus understood as a commitment to generating societal impact and is fully embedded in the university's strategic approach. This has led to the creation of new institutional structures and the development of an impact-oriented research strategy. In this context, both interdisciplinary collaboration and open science are actively promoted, and research goals are strategically aligned with societal needs.

The University of [...] has, for example, this model of external professorships with different institutions in the surrounding area that are generating many links with companies and institutions. [...] The university is expected to solve problems that [...] has, such as some problems like the phosphogypsum issue or problems derived from progress, for example, in agri-food issues. Right now [...] has a strong potential in everything related to green energies and especially hydrogen, so the university is also expected to be present there and to provide innovation, as I said, innovation and also leadership. (#19, strategic, pos. 19:07 and 21:09)

Importantly, the university recognises the inherent challenges of impact-oriented research, particularly the difficulties of attribution and causality in evaluating outcomes, as well as the risk of imposing top-down agendas on researchers. In response to this latter issue, various incentives—such as open calls and seed funding—have been introduced to foster genuinely socially engaged research careers and to strengthen collaborative academic networks.

Although some institutions regard the third mission as a ‘natural’ aspect of UAS, given that these institutions have long been involved in training the workforce for society since their inception, they nonetheless frame it as a challenge in light of growing expectations from policymakers, funding bodies, and society. Their primary concern is the demand for empirical and practical evidence of societal impact.

In contrast, research universities perceive societal impact as a byproduct of funding programmes aimed at compensating for budget cuts within the context of national and international competition, as well as a means of fulfilling innovation mandates.

Historical contextual factors are relevant in two of the research university examples, where the generation of societal impact is linked to long-standing challenges. Relationships with local stakeholders are important in these contexts. The fact that societal impact is highly relational and firmly rooted in the region increases the motivation for more international and European funding. As an example, at one of the research universities societal impact means forging strong links with the local community, responding to the needs of local stakeholders, and actively engaging in the socio-economic and cultural life of the surrounding area. It is therefore a very local understanding of societal impact and is strongly shaped by the university’s historical roots, as it was established in response to public demand. Interestingly, this focus on the local environment renders the university’s third mission highly dependent on it; factors such as the political orientation of the local institutions and the economic situation have been strong determinants of the success of the university’s third mission in recent years. At the same time, the university has established specific structures linking academic experts with institutions and companies in the surrounding area. Although these are formal structures, they also entail a significant reliance on personal relationships in the implementation of the third mission.

Changes in at the strategic level: dealing with top-down policy strategies and competition

Top-down research strategies present both challenges and opportunities for institutions. In our sample, the majority of institutions view such strategies positively in terms of their potential to increase external funding and to enhance the success of researchers and the institution. Moreover, the top-down strategies discussed here are thematically aligned with national and European research agendas. This alignment implies that they function as external research strategies, closely tied to corresponding funding programmes.

Top-down strategies are a problem for institutions with flat organisational structures. They face tensions between established and junior academic staff, and between the institution and the alliance’ governance structure. There is also uncertainty about the EU’s expectation for institutions to demonstrate measurable societal impact through teaching and research.

I belong, if you like, to the younger, up-and-coming generations of teachers and researchers, who are now actively tackling the topic of research, endeavouring to obtain third-party funding and wanting to be very active in this area. I notice that many of my old colleagues, who started out in the old university of applied sciences system and wanted to do so, are experiencing this with a mixture of scepticism and boah, now even more additional work on my shoulders.

That's why this generational change will first lead to more research at universities of applied sciences and that will take a few more years. That's professorial, so to speak. But it will also continue in the scientific and technical workforce.

[...] But because we have eleven faculties, six locations and are very, very fragmented, and because we don't have all this centralised management, it won't be so easy to gather people together and bring them close to the Alliance, so to speak. I think that will be the biggest problem. (#2, operational, pos. 12:28, 12:57, 17:25).

Internal top-down research strategies in more hierarchical institutions are perceived to support researchers and the institution in enhancing their position in the globally competitive academic landscape. The adoption of externally defined top-down research agendas is perceived as sufficiently broad to accommodate most researchers' current areas of specialisation and not conflicting with the normative principle of academic freedom. Top-down strategies are also considered to assist researchers in managing the complexity of societal change. Nevertheless, these top-down strategies are often implemented through institutional changes that occur without a democratic process of participation or reform and can be traced directly to top-down funding schemes at national and European level.

When examining how HEIs are dealing with top-down policy agendas such as those promoted by the EUI, our sample reveals a clear distinction between UAS and research universities. The latter strongly emphasize and justify the implementation of an external top-down agenda by referring to the need for increased European and international funding in response to growing competition, cuts in national funding, and the requirements of national assessments and rankings. In contrast, the UAS in our sample do not adopt a strict top-down approach. The 'natural' orientation of UAS towards creating societal impact does not require full adoption or fundamental changes to their institutional structures. Unlike research universities, they tend to pursue a balance between top-down and bottom-up approaches.

All of the UAS participants continue to operate as loose expert organisations, whereas research universities have adopted a relatively strict top-down organisational structure. Thus, UAS seek to define their top-down research policies broadly enough to encompass as many researchers and teaching staff as possible.

But on the other hand, if we ask people to work on very broad themes such as the city, almost all the disciplines get involved and play the game. So one of the challenges is to maintain the capacity to produce research independently of these issues, to have issues and incentives that are sufficiently broad for everyone to be involved, and then to try to support researchers as best we can in these balances that we need to continue to maintain, because otherwise we won't be producing good research or good training for our students. (#17, strategic, pos. 20:49)

For example, one UAS underwent transformation related to national funding requirements linking teaching and research. The transformation was implemented through a bottom-up strategic decision-making process in an institution with flat organisational structures. Another UAS has undergone a governance reform, resulting in greater institutional autonomy and academic freedom. In addition to enhanced governance autonomy, the institution exhibits characteristics of a loosely structured professional organisation at the academic

staff level, where researchers operate with considerable independence because of the limited development of hierarchical and strategic leadership structures. By contrast, the non-academic administrative structure is more hierarchically organised. Although this earlier transformation was successfully managed, tensions remain regarding societal impact and the structural dualism between the applied sciences higher education sector and traditional basic research institutions. While the institution's orientation towards societal impact is viewed as an inherent part of the UAS mission, concerns persist about how this political and societal demand can be met by individual researchers. This challenge reflects a broader dilemma: the shift from a general societal trust in universities as producers of truth and public knowledge to a more utilitarian, purpose-driven model of knowledge production. The observed emphasis on this tension may reflect the fact that loosely organised expert structures are less suited to top-down mechanisms such as international research agendas. This institutional-level dilemma becomes particularly visible in the pressure to specialise and define a clear thematic profile.

This case illustrates a research university's top-down strategy in which the primary objective was to maximise the societal impact of research—an objective driven by the need to perform well in the national assessment upon which public funding is contingent. Accordingly, the university pursues the societal impact not only out of a sense of social or regional responsibility but also as a means of securing funding. The university also seeks to attract European funding through research projects and therefore aims to foster exchange with stakeholders in order to develop more competitive proposals for European funding calls. It further seeks to enhance mutual awareness and communication between the university and its surrounding ecosystem, with the aim of jointly developing projects that respond more effectively to local needs.

Another participating research university underwent a reorganisation driven by a funding programme and a shift in governance from a generalist to a thematic orientation. The funding tied to the thematic focus led to institutional restructuring and contributed to the formation of a new organisational identity. Internationalisation has increased the institution's visibility in international rankings. Competition has emerged as a key driver of structural change, leading to a clear thematic orientation and internationally visible, societally impactful research. Structural and top-down changes have proven effective in advancing the institution's strategic goals. The newly introduced structures have been successfully implemented, yielding several positive outcomes, including improved stakeholder engagement, enhanced reputation, and increased momentum in internationalisation. The top-down strategy is therefore perceived as appropriate and has gained broad acceptance within the institutional community.

Like the other research universities in the sample, it faces the increasing institutional emphasis on research and shares aspirations to align itself with internationally successful peers. However, the issue of academic freedom is addressed differently, with an emphasis on the fact that the chosen sustainability theme is sufficiently broad to accommodate the research interests of nearly all academic staff. In this context, the top-down approach is seen as supporting researchers and disciplines in addressing complex societal challenges. It enables more effective coordination among relevant stakeholders and contributes to ensuring thematic and strategic coherence.

While the opportunities arising from the institutional membership in the European university alliance (EUI) are varied, most respondents associate them with the promotion of

the European dimension of their universities. Notably, when highlighting the European dimension of the Alliance in line with the EUI's aspirations, respondents emphasise different aspects. The European dimension is expected to be strengthened across different institutional levels. At the ethical level, it concerns European values and a cultural shift towards staff Europeanisation. Additionally, at the competitive level, respondents highlight various benefits of Europeanisation, including improved rankings, greater alignment with other universities, enhanced international visibility, increased attractiveness for students and researchers, and the European portfolio as a strategic market advantage. In terms of institutional identity, respondents identify benefits linked to a clearer institutional profile. Moreover, in contrast to other EUI mission requirements, such as the green and digital transitions or the societal impact, the European dimension is the predominant aspect of programmatic change. Other perceived opportunities associated with the EUI include professionalisation and heightened competition. In this sense, competition is a key argument for research universities seeking membership in an alliance, since it functions as a strategic response to offset their relative disadvantages compared to other, more internationally competitive institutions.

Changes at the organisational level: accountability and specialization

Our respondents suggest that EUI's focus on societal impact creates demands and pressures on HEIs to increase their research output, which impacts academic culture. This manifests as a generational gap among academic staff, tensions between staff groups, and the professionalisation of both administrative and academic staff handling third-party funding, as well as the strategic monitoring of research agendas shaped by funding programmes. Moreover, some institutions have shifted their evaluation systems from individual professorial assessments to institutional evaluations, and from quantitative to qualitative metrics. Institutional evaluation is often tied to the desire for visibility in international rankings and national assessments (e.g., mandatory accreditation processes) and has significant implications for access to funding. In our sample, the shift from individual to institutional evaluation is predominantly a top-down process, with universities emphasising their international visibility as institutions. Indicators to measure social impact are introduced when national funding is contingent upon this quality criterion. As a result, our qualitative analysis does not reveal a direct link between alliance membership and changes to the evaluation system. These changes are more closely related to shifts in the overall ambitions of institutions to compete for funding at both national and international levels. Nonetheless, the issue of changing evaluation systems as a form of accreditation is considered less significant by our respondents than other institutional changes.

Increased professionalisation and specialisation are linked to the management and acquisition of external funding. Top-down institutions, whether structural or those with top-down research agendas, implement incentives and funding-driven career development strategies. Specifically, top-down institutions recognise professionalisation in various forms, notably the academisation of administrative bodies due to the requirement for a deeper understanding of top-down strategic goals and their achievement, as well as the creation of new positions and the redefinition of administrative roles. Professionalisation is therefore a necessity, directly resulting from either an increase in externally funded research or alliance membership.

Tensions also exist within the academic staff. For instance, one participant noted that, at the level of professors—a diverse group of experts—there is tension between those unwilling or unable to adapt their professional interests and competences to politically and socially driven demands, and the more adaptable academics. This shift in working culture impacts the professional development of academic staff. The institution is tackling this issue through the implementation of a staff development strategy. The primary aim is to assist academics in linking teaching, research, and application, and to work both inter- and transdisciplinarily. This may result in a generational divide, as younger academics are more inclined to adopt the strategy, while older academics tend to persist with their established practices. This divide is a direct consequence of the non-hierarchical governance structure, as no directives from the overarching leadership can be imposed on the staff.

In another university, the thematic top-down management approach brings about changes for academic staff through incentive-driven and application-based career development strategies. This can lead to tensions, as there is a division between core researchers and those positioned at the periphery of the institution's thematic focus. Restructuring also raises concerns regarding the differentiation of staff roles, with varying levels of status in similar positions.

Other institutions face broader challenges with existing working cultures, which hinder their aspirations for greater Europeanisation and internationalisation. For instance, in one participating institution, inefficiencies within its working culture, particularly concerning administrative staff, are perceived as a significant obstacle.

One challenge for the university with regard to the alliance is to get the involvement of the university community. Because the alliance will work to the extent that there is a strong involvement of the whole university community, so this is a challenge that I see. One challenge that I think is important is the language issue, although it is true that the language skills of both students and teachers are changing. And of administrative staff. [...] It is a challenge to make people understand that we are going to focus a lot on the local, but also from a global perspective.

Because [...] is a smaller city, more peripheral and perhaps more focused on itself, or perhaps has been less open to the rest of the world, not for all sectors, of course, but there are groups of people who want to look only at the local level and find it more difficult to make the leap to the European and global level. Another challenge that comes to mind are the regulations, both regional and national, which sometimes hinder internationalisation processes.

(#19, strategic, pos. 33:11, 34:29,33:53)

Indeed, excessive bureaucracy and a lack of language skills may impede the development of the alliance, suggesting that changes to the recruitment process for administrative staff are required. In this context, engaging the academic community is also viewed as a challenge, as the decision to join the EUI was made at the top management level.

All but one of the institutions in the sample exhibit differentiation strategies as outlined in the literature. Horizontal strategies encompass the need for thematic specialisation and the establishment of a clear profile, aimed at addressing the increasing pressures of impact

orientation. These include the creation of a new organisational identity resulting from a merger, thematic specialisation driven by historical developments, the development of an individual organisational identity through a bottom-up process of value orientation, and a singularisation approach focused on pursuing geopolitical importance. Vertical differentiation strategies are relatively homogeneous and involve efforts to align with larger, more internationally renowned universities, increase public funding, and enhance international visibility and rankings.

Similar to the third mission, the differentiation strategies were implemented prior to and independently of alliance membership. Moreover, some institutions recognise the added value of membership in facilitating the achievement of these strategic goals. Thus, the EUI, which promotes both differentiation strategies within its programme, does not serve as an incubator but rather as a promoter, assisting institutions in achieving these goals in a more focused and better resourced manner. Finally, in our case study, the differentiation between UAS and research universities regarding organisational aspects of institutional change processes is not evident, unlike in other areas.

Discussion

As outlined in the previous section, one of the greatest challenges identified by the experts interviewed in our case study is the anticipated societal impact of the alliance. This stems from their awareness of the prominent role that higher education institutions in European alliances are expected to play in society. Their understanding of ‘societal impact’ aligns with the EUI’s conception, namely engagement in regional development and the societal contribution (Hartzell et al., 2023). As indicated in the literature, the interviewed experts view the university as an orchestrator of the development process (Autio, 2021) and as a change agent for sustainable transition at the regional level (Pflitsch & Radinger-Peer, 2018), thus extending beyond the concept of the ‘entrepreneurial university’ (Compagnucci & Spignarelli, 2020). However, our analysis reveals that this broad interpretation of the third mission — that is, the societal engagement of universities beyond teaching and research — is widely embraced by universities of applied sciences (UAS), while traditional research universities often regard it as a means of addressing contemporary challenges in higher education, such as increased competition and the push for internationalisation. This finding is consistent with existing literature on the role of UAS, which underscores their role as key actors in regional development (Pfister et al., 2021).

However, our results also demonstrate that the approach towards societal impact depends not only on whether the university is a UAS, but also on its historical roots and how it defines its relationship with local stakeholders. In this context, the approach towards societal impact can take different forms across institutions. One approach is a functional perspective, where societal impact is seen as a necessity driven by political, financial, or societal demands. Another approach is strategic, where societal impact is viewed as a means of legitimising alliance membership and fostering shared values and interdisciplinarity within the institution. The third mission may also be shaped by institutional historical factors. Therefore, our findings suggest that the university’s mission of creating societal impact is highly context-dependent, with a significant reliance on personal relationships for its implementation within the EUI context.

This aspect of EUI has not been addressed in the literature, although it opens interesting research implications. For example, this high level of contextual dependency makes it even more challenging to achieve the shared governance within the alliance, as emphasised by the EUI. Members will need to find common solutions to collective challenges. This includes not only addressing societal impact, but also the challenges of managing top-down approaches, fostering community engagement, linking ecosystem stakeholders to other networks. It further encompasses professionalisation, organisational culture, and management practices, all of which will ultimately lead to structural changes. We therefore argue that the EUI is more transformative at the level of new and complex governance issues arising from the nature of the project itself. It is less transformative in terms of broader trends or in turning HEIs into change agents.

In this context, heterogeneity among partner institutions may pose a further challenge. The literature indicates that pre-existing relationships were particularly crucial for applicants in the first call of the EUI programme, whereas new types of partnerships have become more common in later selection rounds (Lambrechts et al., 2024; Stensaker et al., 2023). This suggests that, as the EUI increasingly focuses on knowledge specialisation within alliances, alliances are increasingly formed by partners who share similarities and complementarities yet remain less familiar with one other. The impact of this on alliances' ability to establish shared governance remains a question for future research.

Moreover, EUI can be considered as an enforcement of European research and education policies, as they have been described in the literature as a bridge between macro and micro levels in the European higher education area (Pinheiro et al., 2024). Nevertheless, our results highlight that research universities and UAS deal differently with top-down policy strategies. While research universities strongly emphasize and justify the implementation of an external top-down agenda by referring to the need for increased European and international funding and the requirements of national assessments and rankings, UAS in our sample tend to pursue a balance between top-down and bottom-up approaches. These results may suggest that the enforcement effect identified in the literature (Pinheiro et al., 2024) could be different for UAS and traditional research universities.

In line with the literature, our results highlight the importance of the promotion of the European dimension as a key opportunity arising from the institutional membership in the European university alliance (EUI). In this sense, while the literature on EUI highlight the grand societal challenges – such as green and digital transition – as societal demands on universities that provide the most direct rationale for the creation of university alliances (Fuchs et al., 2023), our results suggest the European dimension as the predominant aspect of programmatic change. Obviously, our results show that alliances meet the societal demand for universities to promote European integration, building on the success of the Erasmus programme (Fuchs et al., 2023). But interestingly, our results also suggest that the promotion of the European dimension encompasses additional dimensions that go beyond the promotion of EU values and student exchanges. Thus, some of our respondents associate Europeanisation with achieving higher quality standards and improving the performance of universities. These results demonstrate that European initiatives can be perceived differently at university level, serving purposes beyond those initially anticipated.

Indeed, it can be inferred from the respondents' answers that membership in the EUI provides the necessary framework to justify, implement, and successfully achieve transformations at their university. In this sense, a common externally driven strategy – such as the

EUI – can also help alleviate the tensions and challenges arising from universities organisational transformations. For example, as one expert notes regarding the transformation of the university's mission, participation in the European alliance helped the institution gain a clearer internal understanding of what impact orientation entails. Furthermore, impact orientation has united member institutions and helped them develop a shared alliance identity. Therefore, as mentioned above, the EUI would serve as a bridge between the macro and micro levels of the European higher education area (Pinheiro et al., 2024). However, it would also establish an appropriate framework for driving organisational transformation in universities, such as shifting towards a more impact-oriented approach.

Other perceived opportunities associated with the EUI include professionalisation and heightened competition. In line with the literature, our results show that respondents acknowledge these challenges and hoped alliance membership would support their institutions in aligning more closely with European standards and in positioning themselves within a high-quality cohort of HEIs. Our results also support the idea that the ongoing and comprehensive transformation of HEIs has promoted an unprecedented level of competition between them (Broström et al., 2020; Kettunen et al., 2023) and the consequent need for HEIs to differentiate themselves in response to increased competitive pressure (Krücken, 2024).

We argue that the EUI embodies both horizontal and vertical strategies. On the one hand, as it has been mentioned above, our respondents associate institutional membership of the European university alliance with improving their performance and standards. On the other hand, they emphasise the alliance's thematic focus, constituting a horizontal differentiation strategy. As the literature suggests, partnerships in the latter rounds of the EUI alliance selection process have been guided by criteria other than pre-existing ties, which were particularly important for applicants to the initial EUI call (Lambrechts et al., 2024; Stensaker et al., 2023). In the same line, our results reinforce the idea that the alliance's progressive focus on knowledge specialisation has increased the importance of shared or complementary institutional characteristics among partners instead of pre-existing ties between them.

In summary, our findings support the assumption that the EUI reflects key transformations in higher education in the organisational actorhood literature. Following Pinheiro (2024), European alliances can be understood as a form of instrumental agency that promotes transformations related to organisational actorhood by linking macro policy frameworks and micro institutional practices within the European Higher Education Area. In our case study, alliance membership not only facilitates the implementation of such transformations by HEIs but also serves to legitimise them. It also equips institutions with new mechanisms to address associated challenges, such as restrictions on academic autonomy (Musselin, 2013) or the increasing emphasis on individual economic interests (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020).

Conclusions, policy implications and future research

The results of this exploratory qualitative study reveal two central findings. Firstly, through its impact agenda, the EUI is not a primary driver of organisational change in higher education institutions but rather an enabler of ongoing institutional reorganisations in higher education. On the one hand, these reorganisations, already embedded in national contexts

before alliance membership, helped institutions respond more effectively to impact-oriented funding schemes such as the EUI or comparable national programmes. On the other hand, the EUI has supported institutions struggling with growing expectations related to the third mission by helping them recognise more clearly the opportunities it presents. Moreover, it helps them to deal with growing competition in higher education sector as belonging to an alliance provides both horizontal and vertical differentiation. Accordingly, the EUI's impact agenda, as an organisational principle, has not been a significant influence. From a policy perspective, the EUI follows existing trends and long-term organisational developments rather than fundamentally transforming higher education.

Secondly, the EUI has its most transformative impact in one of its core missions, namely by emphasising the European dimension of university alliances and developing shared governance structures. These two aspects are not typically reflected in broader transformation trends in the higher education sector and thus represent a unique feature of institutional development.

The core mission of the EUI, namely positioning higher education institutions as change agents for societal transformation, is not internalised by alliance members as a direct result of membership. Rather, stakeholder approaches, third-mission activities, and thematic specialisation result from historical, financial, reputational, or structural considerations rooted in national dynamics. UAS, in particular, have acted as early adopters of the third mission, using it as a means of engaging in dialogue with society and as a way of addressing political and societal demands for greater sustainability across various domains.

Furthermore, their main organisational adjustments focus on new funding schemes, adapting to top-down agenda setting, and addressing increased competition. At the strategic level, the focus is on increasing both the quantity and the quality of applied research, enhancing stakeholder engagement, and promoting staff professionalisation.

The Alliance as a whole is expected to establish new organisational principles to coordinate activities, which will necessitate a reorganisation of governance structures and broader cooperation mechanisms. According to participating experts, the challenges associated with this reorganisation arise primarily from the diversity of governance models and institutional working cultures. Our findings demonstrate a strong contextual dependence in the development of individual higher education institutions' missions. Combined with the heterogeneity of alliance members, this is likely to complicate this process further.

In summary, the expected future reorganisations will likely focus on shared governance structures. Specifically, they concern the management of top-down strategies in research and teaching, the professionalisation and Europeanisation of staff, the integration of diverse working cultures, and the internalisation and diffusion of the European dimension within institutions. These emerging organisational principles are intended to support institutions in simultaneously delocalising and relocalising. This reflects their dual aspirations to increase European and international visibility while also reinforcing cooperation with their local ecosystems.

Our findings could be of interest to policymakers due to their policy and managerial implications. The significant differences observed between UAS and research universities in their approach to top-down research strategies and their relationship with ecosystems suggest potential adaptations for future EUI calls. More specifically, we propose that the global impact of the EUI could be enhanced if future calls prioritised alternative objectives for alliances comprising a majority of either UAS or research universities. The former could

concentrate on amplifying their societal impact through the third mission, while the latter could concentrate on strengthening their position within the globally competitive academic landscape. Alliances dominated by research universities could thus benefit from their ability to implement an external, top-down agenda, improving their access to European funding while fulfilling the requirements of national assessments and rankings. Conversely, alliances dominated by UASs would leverage their flatter organisational structure and stronger ecosystem ties to generate deeper societal impact in their cities and regions, which would be amplified by the alliance effect.

Our work also opens up new avenues for future research, particularly with regard to the differences between UAS and research universities within the framework of European alliances. Focusing on the different typologies of universities within the EUI framework raises multiple questions, such as what the implications are for UAS and research universities of joining alliances, and what the governance implications are of their different views on top-down policies such as the EUI. A deeper understanding of the role of UAS and their close ties with local stakeholders would improve our knowledge of the third mission within university alliances. This would shed light on how the societal impact of research could be addressed in the EUI call to maximise the benefits of alliances at local and regional levels.

This study has certain limitations. Firstly, it should be noted that our study does not take into account the national and regional context of the HEIs. We acknowledge that context is likely to play a crucial role in shaping the organisational transformations under investigation, especially in regard to third mission, which is highly context-dependent (Compagnucci and Spinarelli, 2020). These differences may strongly influence how universities perceive, interpret, and respond to the EUI's expectations and, consequently, may implicitly affect the interviewees' responses. Nevertheless, the focus of our study is on the transformation of HEIs linked to organisational actorhood, which are general trends shared by contemporary European universities (Krücken, 2020:163). Therefore, we consider that it is appropriate to study the transformations of HEIs within the framework of the alliance without addressing national or regional differences. Secondly, the number of interviews conducted was relatively small, in part due to a narrow selection of target groups. The restriction of interviews to responsible persons at the strategic and operational level may result in an overrepresentation of managerial or boundary-spanning perspectives, while potentially underrepresenting internal tensions, resistance, or alternative interpretations among academic and administrative staff. Nevertheless, this design permits a relatively broad comparative perspective, and given the limited time available to study a relatively young alliance, it was considered that interviewing academic and administrative staff would not be adequate, since the alliance had not yet fully permeated all levels of the participating institutions and the knowledge about it among staff was still limited and incomplete. Nonetheless, we argue that our exploratory qualitative study yields insights opening up a new line of inquiry into European University Alliances and organisational change in higher education. To generalise these findings, further empirical research will be needed, including an expanded sample and the adoption of a longitudinal research design. Complementary document analysis could further enhance understanding of institutional missions and strategic development. Future research might explore how organisational principles develop within alliances over time, how they differ from those in non-alliance institutions, and how they influence the strategic orientations of participating universities.

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