



**European Universities:
Building the future of higher
education in the European Union
through university alliances**

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Abstract

In 2019, the European Commission launched the European Universities Initiative (EUI) with the ambitious objective to transform the higher education landscape in the European Union (EU) by creating 'European Universities' - transnational alliances of higher education institutions from across the EU. Originally aimed at establishing twenty 'European Universities', the initiative has since expanded to 65 alliances comprising 570 higher education institutions, which represent one fifth of the EU's higher education landscape and more than half of its student population. In just a few years, the EUI has positioned itself as the flagship programme for developing a higher education dimension of the newly formed, EU-led European Education Area. This thesis explores the unprecedented scale and speed at which these university alliances have contributed to the formation of a regional higher education space in the EU. It examines the governance mechanisms that have enabled the European Commission to take on such a prominent role in developing this initiative despite the continued caution of Member States in granting it more power in education policy. Through a competitive dynamic articulated around bold policy objectives, the EUI has reconfigured higher education collaboration in the European Union. Drawing on a thematic analysis of policy documents and 70 semi-structured interviews, this qualitative research sheds light on the policymaking processes that have enabled the successful implementation of this initiative and ensured its crucial role in shaping both national and European policy agendas. Triggered and forged by a landscape of crises, the initiative seizes an open political and institutional window, taking a significant step toward building a more influential European higher education policy. While limited by the EU's supporting competence in education policy, the rapid upscaling of the initiative is driven by a combination of governance mechanisms available to the European Commission. These mechanisms

have simultaneously targeted and involved both Member States and the wider higher education sector, securing their support despite ongoing disagreements. The alliances are emerging as novel actors in the higher education landscape and play a growing role in shaping European higher education policy. Important policy directions have emerged from the growth of the EUI revealing an increased importance for European education policy. This includes ongoing work on the development of a European Degree, a Vocational Education and Training Strategy, and the incorporation of knowledge as a fifth freedom within the EU single market. This thesis situates itself at the intersection of research on public policy, governance and European integration and contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship in comparative and international higher education and European studies.

Introduction

Background

When this doctoral research started in 2020, there was not a single academic publication on the European Universities Initiative (EUI). The alliances were at the very start of their development with 17 alliances having been launched in 2019, followed by an additional 24 in 2020. While the tone of policymakers and practitioners surrounding the initiative suggested both ambition and optimism, the purpose, form and future of the initiative was still very unclear. Despite this uncertainty, my supervisors and I thought that there were potentially strong grounds for a fully-fledged doctoral research project on the topic of the European Universities Initiative, exploring the launch of the alliances and the growth of the initiative.

This thesis builds on my own master's research conducted in 2019-20 during the early months of the initiative. This initial research provided me with my first insights into formation of the alliances. At the time, I interviewed coordinators and local administrators from 3 of the 17 alliances. One coordinator (Alliance 17) described the process as 'digging the foundations' of their alliance - the very first step of what could become a vast construction site, one that required deep enough foundations to support a structure with the potential to rise very high.

The European Universities Initiative has grown very quickly throughout the four years of this doctoral research with many developments which I had not anticipated at the start of this work: the development of a European Strategy for Universities, experimentations on a legal status for the alliance, the centre stage now occupied by the development of a European degree, and the more recent Draghi and Letta reports which could pave the way for education and research to take a more prominent role in European integration.

This thesis was initially intended to focus on the first two pilot phases of the EUI. However, it rapidly became clear that these pilot phases were not restricted to clear boundaries. I therefore incorporated many elements related to the subsequent developments of the initiative as they unfolded. I had to find ways to reconcile the uneven developments of policy temporalities and academic research possibilities. This often gave a sense

of 'chasing' after rapid policy developments, with a concern that the data initially collected was becoming out of date almost instantly.

While these uneven developments at times made leading this research frustrating, particularly when thinking about the dissemination of research findings beyond academic circles, it also came with an undeniable sense of excitement - The topic initially selected in the hope that it would play a role in the development of European higher education was not only delivering on its potential but also exceeding my expectations.

Policy context

Since 2017, the European Universities Initiative (EUI) has been the European Union's flagship higher education programme to develop a European Education Area and embody the ambitions of its new higher education strategy (European Commission, 2017b, 2020a; European Council, 2017). These 'European Universities' are university alliances defined as transnational collaborative partnerships, often referred to as alliances or networks, involving HEIs from at least three participating countries: EU member states, Erasmus+ programme countries (or currently in negotiation to join), or the Western Balkans (European Commission, 2023). The initiative was initially meant 'to foster the emergence of at least twenty European Universities by 2024' (European Commission, 2018a, p. 8). After five successive Erasmus+ funding rounds,

the EUI has led to the formation of 65 university alliances, bringing together 570 higher education institutions (HEIs) located in 35 countries (European Commission et al., 2025). This represents 20% of the overall higher education landscape in the European Union and concerns over half of the total student population (European Tertiary Education Register, 2025). Throughout the five funding calls, the European Commission received a total of 250 applications for new alliances to be formed.

The EUI has the ambitious objective to transform the higher education landscape in the European Union by encouraging wider cooperation between its higher education institutions (HEIs) (European Council, 2017). The initiative seeks to strengthen the attractiveness and competitiveness of HEIs in the EU, foster European culture, solidarity and identity and build synergies within the European Union's knowledge square: 'training, research, scientific innovation, and service to society' (Council of the European Union, 2021a, p. 9).

While receiving important political steer from European Union institutions and member states, 'bottom-up' processes are also essential, as HEIs are positioned as the main actors of the initiative (European Commission, 2018a; European Council, 2017). As a horizontal initiative, the EUI reveals alliances that represent the full diversity of the European higher education landscape. As a hierarchical process, the initiative reveals a seemingly unprecedented desire for this level of institutionalised cooperation between HEIs driven by ambitious political objectives.

The EUI was initially launched through two successive pilot phases, with a first wave of 17 alliances launched in 2019, followed by a second wave of 24 alliances. These pilot phases were meant to give the possibility for the alliances to 'experiment' with the forms of transnational cooperation that would be necessary for the long-term success of the initiative. The alliances received an initial €5 million for a period of 3 years. Following this, an additional funding round was launched for the alliances for an additional 4 years, inciting the alliances to expand in number of partners. This additional funding could go up to €14.4 million if the alliances grew in size, expanding to a larger number of higher education institutions. Additionally, the European Commission gave the possibility for new alliances to form on top of the already existing ones. The initial pilot phases supported the formation of 41 alliances composed of 284 HEIs. The initiative has had a significant impact on the national higher education landscapes with member states demonstrating a growing involvement in the initiative. At this stage, complementary funding from member states and/or legal changes to facilitate transnational collaboration, have occurred in most countries (Craciun et al., 2023).

In addition to the main funding calls, there have been a succession of 'spin-off' Erasmus+ calls to further develop certain activities for the alliances such as calls for the alliances to experiment on the implementation of a legal status for the alliances or explore the feasibility of a joint degree. Finally, a community of practice call has been set up to

formalise the collaboration structures set up by the alliances through the FOREU1 and FOREU2 forums. These additional calls have offered certain alliances the possibility to take on a leading role in certain policy directions for the initiative. In addition to funding from the Erasmus+ programme, 'European Universities' also received support from Horizon 2020 (H2020) under the Science with and for Society (SwafS) programme to try to create synergies between both funding instruments. In addition to the €5 million from Erasmus+, an extra €2 million was available from H2020 to set up research infrastructures across the alliances.

The launch of the European Universities Initiative marks a pivotal moment in the development of an EU higher education policy. The long-term success of the alliances, their sustainability and the overall long-term reach of the initiative is still to be seen. However, the speed and magnitude at which the European Universities Initiative has upscaled is unprecedented. It is not the first time that EU institutions or certain Member States announce ambitious objectives or even policy ideas. Suggestions for a European Education Area can be traced back to the early 00s and the idea of a European university is as old as the European Community itself (Corbett, 2005; Winckler, 2012). However, due to disagreements between member states or the European Commission's lack of persistence, these ideas either failed to live up to their ambitions or disappeared as quickly as they had emerged.

Just a few years after its inception, the European Commission has managed to put the initiative on the lips of every relevant stakeholder, giving it a prominent space on their agendas. Despite ongoing disagreements about potential form and future directions of the initiative, Member States, European higher education stakeholders, and EU institutions have all embraced it as a key higher education initiative though not being required to do so. The alliances are now recognised as novel and influential actors in the development of European higher education.

A new moment in European (higher) education research

The EUI has generated growing scholarly interest as a novel form of transnational cooperation, with potential to transform European higher education landscape (Brooks & Rensimer, 2023; Cino Pagliarello, 2022; Gunn, 2020; Hartzell et al., 2023; Marques & Graf, 2024). Studies have explored the origins, formation processes, and the role of pre-existing bilateral and networked links in developing these alliances (Charret & Chankseliani, 2023; Lambrechts et al., 2023; Stensaker et al., 2023). Additionally, the initiative's ambitions to address broader European and global societal challenges, such as strengthening European identity and contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), have been explored in the literature (Frame & Curyło, 2022; Martín Bautista-Cerro et al., 2023). Despite these ambitious goals, the alliances face many challenges, ranging from internal governance complexities to financial

and legal obstacles (Maassen et al., 2022; Pina Stranger et al., 2023). A lot of grey literature has been published on the initiative from key stakeholders in the European higher education landscape, alongside reports commissioned by EU institutions ranging from persisting obstacles for transnational collaboration (Karvounaraki et al., 2018), funding mechanisms that constrain or support the development of the alliances (Craciun et al., 2023), or the transformational potential of the initiative (European Commission et al., 2025).

Thesis Structure

The following section outlines the structure of this doctoral thesis, with findings chapter articulated around three research questions: How and for what purposes do these university alliances seek to build a regional higher education space in the European Union? How do governing processes and instruments support and constrain the development of these university alliances? How has the European Commission developed a competitive programme, the European Universities Initiative, to prioritise and reconfigure higher education cooperation in the European Union?

The literature review is a way to explore the debates in higher education research mainly on higher education regionalism, European higher education governance and policymaking processes and collaboration and

competition dynamics amongst universities. The methodology chapter goes through the timeline of the fieldwork and key moments in the development of the European Universities Initiative that took place in parallel to the data collection. I outline each method used: documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews, and qualitative network mapping. I start out by explaining the document selection process and how a corpus was formed, followed by how it was analysed. In the interview section I outline how participants were chosen at different moments of my fieldwork. I then go on to explain how the interviews were analysed. Finally, I explain the network mapping exercise that was embedded in the semi-structured interviews, detailing how the maps were produced. The methodology section ends on reflections on the ethics, rigor and limitations of the study.

The first findings section of this thesis explores the historical and political context in which the initiative has emerged and presents the reasons why it has experienced such a rapid development. This section outlines that the initiative emerged from a crisis and has continued to be shaped through a series of additional crises which are all of different nature. I also explain how the initiative appeared at a time where both a political and institutional policy window emerged, providing a favourable context for the development of the initiative. The EUI is also a fragment of a wider attempt from the European Union to develop an educational policy field. The EUI is therefore a component of the European Education Area (EEA), which is both a space and a strategy. The EUI and the EEA co-exist

together and their development feed into each other. While being a novel space, the EEA is being constructed alongside the European Higher Education Area. Several participants I interviewed had been involved in Europeanization of higher education since Erasmus, or at least since the deployment of the Bologna Process. Most, therefore had clear ideas about this idea of 'moving past' the EHEA or complementing it.

EU treaties confer EU institutions a supporting competence in (higher) education. Despite this very regulated role, the EU has extended its influence on higher education issues whilst having to be fully in line with the subsidiarity principle. This has made the question of a European higher education governance a real puzzle for all parties concerned: EU institutions, Member States, national and transnational higher education stakeholders.

The section of this thesis explores how the Commission makes use of a funding programme to push its policy agenda and how both Member States and HEIs have found a way to be active actors in its development. Since the Lisbon Strategy the European Union has relied on incentive-based programmes to shape higher education policy through initiatives like Erasmus Mundus. Such initiatives are a way for EU institutions to target higher education institutions directly without having to go through member states, through funding programmes that fulfil certain objectives that have been set by the Commission. I explore how the European Universities Initiative is situated in this tradition of funding-based

initiatives but is bringing about a different response from both the higher education sector and Member States. The European Universities Initiative is a good example of a case of policy coordination that the Commission uses in higher education policymaking. The Commission has promoted a 'co-creation' process of the initiative and its higher education strategy through discussions taking place at the Council of the European Union with member states and an 'ad-hoc stakeholder group' which formed to involve key members of the European higher education landscape. The Commission has also relied on negotiations with member states for adopting non-binding legal acts, Council Recommendations, to push the development its European Strategy for Universities (2022) and of two potential new legal instruments: a European degree and a legal statute for the EUI alliances. This section argues that while these governance mechanisms are not new, using them jointly is novel and has offered the Commission the possibility to reach the levels of ambitions displayed by the initiative.

The final section of this thesis explores how the European Commission has relied on a dynamic of competition to disrupt existing form of cooperation within the higher education sector in the European Union to trigger new forms of collaboration that embody a specific policy agenda. However, these alliances are not born 'out of the blue'(Corbett, 2005) and are the result of different European histories of higher education cooperation. Some alliances focused on consolidating past links - either strong bilateral links or pre-existing multilateral links. In some cases, past links were

mostly bilateral, and at individual/faculty level. There was no real sense of institutional partnership.

Others revealed the consolidation of long-standing multilateral cooperation such as university networks or interest groups (Vukasovic, 2018; Fumasoli, 2021). Finally, some alliances revealed they are building institutions from scratch. This section also discusses how the dynamics of competition triggered by a competitive funding call did not stop once the alliances were formed. Many alliances attracted HEIs from each other in between funding rounds creating an evolution in alliance membership over time. Additionally, while most alliances received funding to consolidate themselves after the pilot phases, the number of new alliances receiving funding to set themselves up has remained marginal compared to the number of applications. Finally, I explore how despite this ongoing dynamic of competition, the alliances have emerged as novel actors in the European higher education landscape and have created collaborative forums to exchange on best practices and speak in a unified voice to lobby both EU institutions, national governments, and the wider higher education sector.

Literature Review

University alliances for a regional higher education space

Policy layering and palimpsests

The origin of the European Universities Initiative is not a blank slate. It builds on past higher education programmes and strategies developed at EU level, retains some of their aspects whilst also proposing new directions. This process is frequent in EU policy making, which the literature on policy layering, policy dismantling, and policy termination has widely explored. Streeck and Thelen (2005) develop different modes of 'gradual' policy change: Displacement, layering, drift, conversion, exhaustion. Layering is the mode which appears the most relevant for this specific research. Policy layering occurs when it is too ineffective and inefficient to get rid of an old policy altogether, and where it is more effective to 'layer' an additional policy above the previous one (Myles &

Pierson, 2001; Pierson, 1994; Streeck & Thelen, 2005). Usually, the older a system, or policy, the more financially and politically 'costly' it is to remove it. The layering process requires a revision or alteration of existing policies by adding a novel layer. Policymakers frequently tend to 'add new' policies instead of replacing 'the old' (Schickler, 2001, p. 15). These novel components which are added end up transforming and eventually replacing old policies as they progressively become less and less prominent. This is why Streeck and Thelen (2005) consider that the layering produces 'path altering dynamics' in the policy making process. The authors present 'differential growth' as the mechanism through which policy change occurs. The public policy literature focuses a lot on policymaking processes and the crafting of new policy, but not much attention is paid to how previous policies are replaced or thrown out. While literature on EU policy does discuss policy dismantling to some extent, it tends to focus on dismantling as a reaction to the financial crisis and more widely environmental policies (Brandsma et al., 2023). The dismantling process is not as present in the higher education policy literature. Policy dismantling is the 'reduction' or 'diminution' of policies that leaves some traces behind it (Jordan et al., 2013, p. 795). The policymaking process is 'messy and iterative, with each policy issue connected to multiple other policy issues' (Brandsma et al., 2023, p. 1361). Finally, the literature on policy termination in the EU remains scarce (Brandsma et al., 2023). Policy termination is the process through which previous policies are entirely removed (Jordan et al., 2013, p. 795).

These dynamics also inspired me to examine layering processes in the arts to get a sense of how layers interact with each other over time. While it is not mentioned in this thesis, this led me to explore palimpsests which I developed as a conceptual framework to analyse the different national visions that have shaped the European Universities Initiative (Charret, Oancea & Chankseliani, 2025). A palimpsest is 'a parchment or other writing surface on which the original text has been effaced or partially erased, and then overwritten by another' (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024). The palimpsest analogy has been used throughout the humanities, but in the social sciences it is Carter (2012) who introduces the concept to complement Balbo's (2005) 'policy as patchwork' metaphor by introducing a temporal dimension. The patchwork is two dimensional and gives the possibility to understand how policies can be juxtaposed. With an additional temporal dimension, the palimpsest shows how 'new policy overwrites or imbricates existing practice' (Carter, 2012, p. 424).

While Carter only sees the palimpsest as an analogy, the literature in other disciplines has moved beyond the metaphor and made attempts at incorporating the concept in methodological approaches. In anthropology, West (2020) sees the palimpsest as 'a theory of layering and a method for reading the biophysical and social text that is left behind.' (p.120). Bailey (2007) uses palimpsests to discuss different time perspectives in archaeological practices. Usually presented in archaeology as 'an unfortunate consequence of having to rely on a material record that is incomplete', Bailey argues that palimpsests should be considered as an

'opportunity to focus on a different scale of behaviour' (Bailey, 1981, p. 110), building on Foley's interest in 'long term trends [that] may be of greater significance ... than the understanding of a few short events' (Foley, 1981, p. 14). Palimpsests therefore offer the possibility to shift the focus away from the 'unfortunate loss and destruction of evidence' and towards processes of accumulation and transformation (Bailey, 2007, p. 203). In their research on Black Feminisms, Okello et al. (2021) see the palimpsest as a useful methodological tool to highlight how 'histories appear in present day realities' (p.2) and must therefore be considered when collecting testimonies and in their analysis. The authors offer a proposition towards a palimpsest critical qualitative methodology which demands researchers to practice 'critical self-reflexivity influenced by retinal attachments, as well as attending to these attachments, memory, and space/time in data collection and analysis' (Okello & Duran, 2021, p. 5). The palimpsest methodology 'necessarily reads history, participants and researchers as woven together, written over and grappling with one another' (p.2). Colmenares-Roa et al. (2022) use palimpsests as an explanatory model framework to discuss vulnerability in hospital settings 'via narratives and actions regarding the social dynamics'. The authors see palimpsest as a manner to address how 'meanings or practices from different times interact, interrelate, enabling the creation of a new meaning or practice with coherent and, at the same time, discordant traces of both interacting processes' (Colmenares-Roa et al., 2022, p.755).

ERASMUS and the Bologna Process as means to achieve a European region in higher education

Recent higher education research has investigated the formation of a European region in higher education, mainly influenced by political economy and the field of regionalism. 'Regionalism' is at the same time a field of study and a concept of its own right. Coined by Hettne and Söderbaum (1998) as part of their New Regionalism Approach (NRA) the concept of regionalism characterizes state-led regional integration processes from the top-down. It is traditionally opposed to 'regionalization' which in turn, refers to regional integration processes driven by non-state actors from the bottom-up. Börzel et al. (2016) note that in the emergent field of comparative regionalism, it is generally accepted that the formation of regions is now widely driven by a combination of both regionalism and regionalisation.

In higher education research, Robertson et al. (2016) consider that both concepts are co-dependent and must therefore be jointly used in research discussing the formation of higher education regions. Knight (2013) draws on Hettne (2005) to consider that the term 'region' is increasingly malleable. Both conceptually and in practice, 'regions can be overlapping, multi-layered, multi-actor, and multi-faceted and can be politically, socially, functionally, and culturally defined' (Knight, 2013, p. 112). Knight (2012) develops a framework to grasp the regionalization of higher education, which is a useful entry point for the purpose of this study. Her framework focuses on the bi-lateral and multilateral forms of cooperation,

the coordination of more 'structured networks', convergence with the emergence of quality assurance systems, and integration resulting in a sustainable higher education space. The framework also examines the regionalization process (e.g. top-down or bottom-up, formal or informal). Drawing from what has been discussed above with the NRA, it might be useful to associate this point to the regionalism/regionalization literature. Finally, Knight highlights three different approaches to grasp higher education regionalism: functional, organizational, or political. The functional approach is used to describe the activities and partnerships between HEIs (a joint degree). The organizational approach when regional activities are articulated around a bureaucratic structure (the Bologna Process Follow Up Group). The political approach is used when higher education becomes a political priority (Lisbon strategy). However, her work purposefully excluded the EU to offer a lens on regionalization processes occurring elsewhere in the world and thereby avoids a Eurocentric perspective.

Building on Knight's work, Chou and Ravinet (2016) propose their own framework for a comparative analysis for 'higher education regionalism'. Their framework adds the notion of 'constellations of actors' that create a map of higher education cooperation: bilateral or multilateral collaborations between states, and collaboration between states that include HEIs. The authors offer to differentiate the types of actors in the process and how they act within the constellations. They then examine

the types of 'institutional arrangements' and 'ideas and principles' promoted by the region.

A large body of scholarship has been published on the topic of higher education and regionalism, from studies on the nature of the EHEA (Chou & Gornitzka, 2014), the governance of the BP (Capano & Piattoni, 2011), and issues of convergence or divergence of higher education systems in the EHEA (Vukasovic, 2013). However, Chou and Ravinet underline the fact that most inquiries never refer to these projects as cases of regionalism or regionalization. Chou and Ravinet make this link by situating their study in the field of comparative regionalism. they identify a need for a clear conceptualization of 'higher education regionalism'. This is not surprising when considering the variety of meanings that 'regionalism' can endorse. The formation of a regional higher education space in Europe is far from a homogeneous process. 'Regionalism means different things for different people', explains Hettne as he presents the many approaches taken by scholars from different disciplines to discuss processes of regional construction (Hettne, 2005, p. 543).

Since the mid-2010s there has not been any literature that makes use of comparative regionalisms and associated frameworks to discuss the developments linked to the European Education Area and the European Universities Initiative. Instead, frameworks linked to Europeanisation theories have been privileged. The literature on alliances that looks at their role in European integration and more widely region building is

limited. However, the research that does examine these processes opts for alternative theoretical frameworks. Frame and Curylo (2022) build on Europeanisation and regional integration research by complementing them with additional concepts usually linked to nation building. The authors transpose theories of national belonging to the European level to develop the concept of 'everyday Europeanhood'. Cino Pagliarello (2022) and Galán-Cubillo et al. (2025) draw on theories of 'differentiated integration' and the literature on the existing tensions between the national and European levels to discuss how member states may have different rhythms and priorities towards achieving a same policy that has for purpose to reinforce European integration (Kölliker, 2001; Leuffen et al., 2012). Finally Brooks and Rensimer (2023; 2024) also address the differences amongst Member States regarding key concepts in European higher education policy whilst also discussing how there are different understandings of what European higher education space and who it should include, using 'European spatial imaginaries' as an analytical lens (Watkins, 2015).

Comparative regionalism is an essential lens to understand region building and can be very useful for discussing the dynamics at play in the EU between state and non-state actors, such as universities and national or European institutions. However, the work on Europeanisation seems to offer a more varied and more in-depth lens to discuss the specific issues linked to European integration, the formation of European identities, and differences in constructing European policy and political spaces. Theories

making use of regionalism and regionalisation will most likely become useful when comparing similar processes at play in other world regions.

The EU's external identity in higher education

If the concepts of 'regionalism' and 'regionalization' offer a lens to grasp the formation of regions, 'regional actorship' and 'regioness' offer the possibility to address in what ways these regions project themselves, as regions, to the rest of the world. Investigating the rise of regional actorship, Hettne (2014) presents a region, as a process, actors in the making, rather solely geographical and administrative objects. Guri-Rosenblit (2015) considers that the formation of the EHEA has fostered an external identity for European HEIs whilst at the same time attracting a great deal of interest from other world regions. This implies that the European higher education can act and express itself as a unified (albeit diverse) geopolitical bloc.

The distinction between the historic Erasmus programme, the Bologna Process and Erasmus Mundus (now part of Erasmus+) should be highlighted (Dale, 2016). The original Erasmus programme and the Bologna Process are presented as initiatives that are destined for members, with a very clear European origin and breadth. On the other hand, Erasmus Mundus (now part of Erasmus+) has been designed to strengthen the EU's foreign influence. Ferreira-Pereira and Mourato Pinto

(2021) discuss the links between soft power and higher education through the Erasmus+ programme observing the involvement of non-state actors in the development of strategic partnerships. The authors note the lack of scholarship discussing the link between Erasmus+ and the EU's external action with strategic partners. The increase of education diplomacy at EU level should produce wider academic inquiry. Such research tends towards the idea of a shift from the marketisation to politicization of higher education. Chou and Ravinet (2017) note that in regard to the Bologna Process and EHEA, many authors such as Vögtle and Martens (2014) as well as Husiman et al. (2012) have defended the 'Bologna Process export thesis'. This thesis would imply that the Bologna Process has had a direct influence in the shaping of higher education policy in other world regions. Although the authors do not contest the influence of the Bologna Process globally, they present a more nuanced vision, considering that data is missing to support such claims.

Research question 1

The EUI is a continuation of the European Union's past higher education programmes such as Erasmus, and parallel processes such as the BP and the formation of the EHEA. Additionally, the developments of the EUI are embedded within the developments of another policy idea and strategy: the European Education Area. This section of this research interrogates:

How and for what purposes do these university alliances seek to build a regional higher education space in the European Union?

What governance for transnational collaborative partnerships?

Background

Whilst a diversity in alliance formation being promoted, and the bottom-up networks apparently desired, the EUI also responds to clear political objectives. Council Conclusions on *European Universities initiative - Bridging higher education, research, innovation and society: Paving the way for a new dimension in European higher education* (2021a) draw an impressive list of 19 objectives that the initiative is expected to fulfil. These political objectives give a common direction that could hint towards a homogenization of the 'European Universities' being promoted. Although the term 'bottom-up' appears from the first Council Conclusions (2017) on the initiative, more recent documents have also highlighted the need for high level of political steering. The Communication on *Achieving a European Education Area by 2025* (2020d) highlights the commitment of setting up an operational governance structure by 2025. It is likely there will be debates on the construction of these governance mechanisms of

the EUI with a variety of stakeholders involved in the process: European institutions, the newly formed transnational collaborative partnerships, the higher education institutions, or interest groups. Robertson et al. (2016) highlight the high level of political tension on giving more power to the EU in managing higher education issue. This debate has also accompanied the development of the EHEA, which has seen scholars and policymakers either pushing for more bottom-up processes or a higher level of political steer. This section offers an overview on literature discussing these debates.

EU institution's capacity for actions in different policy domains is regulated by the Treaties agreed upon by all the EU member States. This capacity for action is divided in a range of 'competences' shared between EU institutions and Member States. In certain domains such as customs or monetary policy, the European Union, has an 'exclusive competence'. This means that only the EU has the capacity to act. In other domains, such as agriculture and research, EU institutions and Member States have a shared competence, with each of them having the capacity to implement policy change which can be carefully negotiated between them. Education policy is a 'supporting competence' of the European Union, with Member States retaining full control over their education systems (*Treaty of Lisbon Amending the Treaty On European Union and the Treaty Establishing the European Community*, 2007). EU institutions have the role of complementing and supporting the actions of EU member states and can therefore encourage cooperation between higher education institutions

throughout the European Union. EU action in education is regulated by the subsidiarity principle, which guarantees the “distribution of functions, responsibilities and powers between different levels of governance” such as Member States and EU institutions (Olsen, 2007, p. 236). The subsidiarity principle is what ensures the possibility for Member States to retain sovereignty over ‘the control and content’ of their education systems (Corbett, 2009, p. 75).

Despite EU action in (higher) education being heavily regulated, its actions and interest in this policy domain can be traced back to the foundation of the European Community and the Treaties of Rome (Corbett, 2005; Winkvist, 2005). The launch of the Erasmus programme in the 1980s, the development of the Bologna Process and European Higher Education Area, as well as the Lisbon Strategy, have all played a major role in the shaping of an education ‘policy space’ in the European Union (Lawn & Grek, 2012). Additionally, since the mid-2000s the European Union has developed successive higher education strategies through a ‘modernisation agenda’, ‘renewed agenda’ and finally the ‘transformation agenda’ (later renamed ‘European Strategy for Universities’) that accompanies the development of the European Universities Initiative (European Commission, 2006, 2011, 2017a, 2020a). The literature on how the EU has expanded its action in education policy within the limitations of a supporting competence has steadily grown over time (M. H. Chou & Gornitzka, 2014; Dakowska et al., 2018; Eeva, 2021; Gornitzka, 2007; Ravinet, 2018; S. L. Robertson, 2010). This expansion is constantly

confronted to the contradiction of Member States remaining cautious of not conferring EU institutions more power in this policy field, whilst constantly granting it more space for policy action. This contradiction has been coined as a governance 'puzzle' by Elken (2017) and Ozga (2020).

EU Institutions rely on 'soft law' and 'soft governance' mechanisms to find ways to resolve this puzzle. These 'soft' processes are non-binding and give the impression of being 'objective and forwards looking', therefore offering a form a reassurance to Member States (Lawn, 2006; Lawn & Grek, 2012, p. 98). The Lisbon Strategy and the development of instruments like the Open Method of Coordination have made these processes evolve from 'informal' and 'voluntary' to becoming 'coordinated' for the purpose of achieving the objectives set by the EU's successive education strategies (Lawn & Grek, 2012, p. 108).

ERASMUS: from bottom-up to top-down

This tension between 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' approaches in EU higher education programmes is not new. The ERASMUS programme went through a transformation, between its two first phases (De Wit, 2002). The first phase of ERASMUS (1987) relied on academics to coordinate partnerships throughout participating countries and was 'perceived' as a bottom-up approach. As part of the SOCRATES (1994) framework

programme, the second phase of ERASMUS transferred the responsibility of the partnerships from academics to institutional administrators. This shift was 'criticized' as a top-down approach. Beelen and Jones (2015) consider that this choice led to a focus on mobility as an administrative task rather than on its learning outcomes, which resulted in a lack of direct engagement from academics.

Bologna Process and European Higher Education Area: More top-down or towards bottom-up?

Most discussions on pushing for more bottom-up or top-down processes in the BP and EHEA have tended to concentrate on the issues of non-implementation. Dakowska et al. (2018) explain that the BP is a voluntary mechanism, in which national education ministers who agree on policy objectives at inter-ministerial conferences. Garben (2011) suggests that the BP and EHEA could become more legally binding in the spirit of European policy instruments. Vögtle (2019) regrets the market-based model of the EHEA which celebrated institutional autonomy and underlines the lack of involvement of national stakeholders in a top-down process of harmonization. The author presents the EHEA as a 'patchwork' and a failed attempt at policy transfer. Other authors are more moderate and consider that the policy making process is complex and the result of an interaction between different policy making levels (national ministries, European level, BP level) and the 'bottom', HEI and student levels. Kaiser et al. (2015) and later Torotcoi (2020) establish that the fact that 'large-

parts' of the BP can be viewed as 'top-down' political processes has resulted in the frustration of students, staff and HEIs alike. To resolve this issue and achieve other objectives such as creating a social dimension of higher education the authors suggests that the EHEA and BP should involve the 'bottom' levels.

Multi-characteristic governance structures

To grasp the ambivalence of these governance processes the concept of multi-characteristic governance (MCG) appears useful. The concept derives from the literature on multi-level governance (MLG). The concept of Multi-Level Governance was initially coined by Marks (1993) where he presented the European Union as:

a system of continuous negotiation among nested governments at several territorial tiers - supranational, national, regional, and local - as the result of a broad process of institutional creation and decisional reallocation that has pulled some previously centralized functions of the state up to the supranational level and some down to the local/regional level (Marks, 1993, p. 392)

Marks (2021) recently delivered a keynote speech at the 2021 COIMBRA group annual conference on the use of this concept in the framework of European higher education. The COIMBRA group articulated its annual

conference around MLG inviting stakeholders from all different levels of the EUI (representatives of the EUI alliances, European Parliament, European Commission, city councils, European student unions) to reflect on its use for the rollout of the initiative. MLG offers a space of negotiation, 'collective decision making' processes which can appear at all levels. Hooghe and Marks (2003) and later Börzel and Hear-Lauréote (2009), consider that in MLG structures, all stakeholders are interconnected and mutual learning processes occur. Piattoni (2010) suggests that these different decision-making processes can exist locally, nationally, regionally and globally. When discussing higher education in Europe, MLG gives the possibility to address local HEIs, national governments, regional institutions or non-state actors that have an influence on policy decisions, such as the European University Association.

Since Marks' original proposition, the concept has been further deployed to discuss how authority is distributed along the different levels of a governance structure (Hooghe & Marks, 2003b). Piattoni (2010) builds on this research to discuss policy-making process in European higher education through what she has named a 'state society dimension of MLG'. This dimension grasps the role of state and non-state actors in the education policy making process. This could offer a lens to study the link between interest groups such as the European University Association and national governments in the framework of the Bologna Process.

The distinction between multi-level and multi-actor characteristics is essential, argue Vukasovic et al. (2018). The authors consider that European education governance occurs on a variety of layers. It is at the same time, multi-actor, multi-level, and multi-issue (Vukasovic et al., 2018). The authors claim that most research on MLG and higher education does not address this nuance when discussing European higher education spaces such as the EHEA. In the EHEA, the multi-level aspect concerns the distribution of authority amongst the different levels of governance: Bologna Follow-up Group, national level, European parliament education committee. The multi-actor dimension on the other hand concerns insider and outsider actors who shape the policy process such as the European Commission (Member of BFUG), international organizations such as the OECD, or transnational non-state actors such as the European University Association. Finally, the authors deploy the concept of multi-issue as being particularly relevant to the higher education sector. Higher education is often mentioned in the policy-making decisions of other sectors. For example, it is expected of higher education to bring solutions to environmental issues such as climate change or to produce economic growth. The authors argue that it is only through these multi-characteristics (level, actor, issue) that an analysis of a European higher education space can be made. Levi-Faur (2011a) adds a potential fourth dimension, space, when discussing the 'multi-level and multi-spatial architecture of a regulatory space' (Levi-Faur, 2011b, p. 810). Since it is a common European higher education space which is being created, it

would be worthwhile to integrate this fourth dimension to the overall MCG framework.

Governance and networks

Governance can be viewed as the decision-making processes through which heterogeneous stakeholders are involved: people, institutions, private organizations, or third sector actors (Hollstein et al., 2017). When the term 'network' is associated to governance it implies a non-hierarchical or horizontal decision-making process where dynamics of cooperation are privileged over command. The authors argue that most governance theories making use of networks such as network governance theory' or nodal governance theory, tend to present networks as a 'metaphor' instead of an empirical tool. Networks should instead be used to 'describe different forms of governance' (Hollstein et al., 2017, p. 2).

There are also new partnerships between actors from government, civil society and the private sector in the development of novel governance mechanisms of education (Junemann et al., 2016). Organizations from the private sector and philanthropy have become key players in education policy making. Junemann et al. (2016) draw from political science to present this increased participation of organizations from the private sector and philanthropy in education policy making as governance by networks, presented as 'webs of stable and ongoing relationships which

mobilize dispersed resources towards the solution of policy problems' (Pal, 2016). The market plays a significant role in the development of these networks and is presented as an answer to social and economic problems. This has led to the progressive transfer of power from the state to the private sector through Public Private Partnerships in the dispatch of compulsory education, as noted by Robertson and Verger (2012).

Networks can be considered as a specific form of governance more appropriate to the demands of modern societies due to their non-hierarchical nature (Börzel and Heard-Lauréote, 2009). This structure makes them appear as more legitimate and efficient than markets and hierarchies. In the framework of the European Union, discussing networks as a form of governance has been a popular angle to study its policy-making processes due to its MLG aspect. However, the continued dominant role of EU institutions in governance processes corresponds to what Börzel (2010) and later Héritier and Lehmkuhl (2011) have coined as 'governing in the shadow of hierarchy'. This, for example, can be done at EU level with evaluations that measure the effectiveness of a given action or programme through concepts such as 'best practice' (Carney, 2009). Network governance supposes a horizontal negotiation between state and societal actors. Börzel and Hear-Lauréote, consider that governance in which public actors and private actors operate on the same level for policymaking is hard to find in the EU. In the framework of 'modern', 'cooperative' and 'network' governance, private actors would always be involved. EU policies are still very much shaped by governmental actors,

with power being distributed between the different EU institutions and Member states. Although private actors are often involved in policy decisions, their involvement is asymmetrical and does not meet the criteria for network governance or what the authors coin as 'governance by networks'. The authors consider that although it is erroneous to establish that the European Union is a form of governance by networks, it does make use of networks. The European Commission makes use of networks to increase its power in policy-making processes. The Commission draws from the expertise of other actors in a network in order to shape and implement policies according to its own objectives (Börzel & Heard-Lauréote, 2009, p. 140). The Commission makes use of the resources of non-state actors such as private actors without lending them more political role than a purely consultative position. This is what Börzel and Heard-Lauréote name 'governance in networks'. Despite this lack of horizontality between the EU and other actors in networks, participation is advantageous for actors. The authors suggest that networks give a privileged access to EU policy making, which leads them to have some influence on the EU norms that they will then have to respect. For the European Union institutions, networks improve the quality of policy making. Networks are flexible, which give the possibility to adapt to the complex environment of certain policy fields. The networks offer new resources, information, and expertise from participating actors.

Coordination, funding, policy documents

The Open Method of Coordination gives EU institutions and member states the possibility of setting common agendas and objectives whilst setting up monitoring processes, peer review activities and exchanges of best practices (Lange & Alexiadou, 2010; Lawn, 2006; Villalba, 2015). The decisions made through the OMC are non-binding for member states and can exist in 'parallel' to national policymaking processes. Whilst non-binding, these decisions have been described as having the potential of being 'as powerful' and 'better' than hard law and governance mechanisms, to influence and transform higher education policies at a national level (Harmsen, 2015, p. 788; Lange & Alexiadou, 2010, p. 444; Radaelli, 2003, p. 8). The European Commission also creates networks, committees and expert groups made up of stakeholders at local, national, transnational and European level. These groups tend to produce 'data based and comparative knowledge' which is used within negotiations between national policymakers and EU institutions (Gornitzka et al., 2007; Ozga, 2020). The creation of these groups is frequent in European policymaking. In their analysis of the different forms of governance deployed at EU level, Wallace and Reh (2021) coin this as the 'policy coordination' governance mode. In policy coordination, the Commission has the possibility of fostering 'technical arguments in favour of a shared approach to promote modernization and innovation' and privilege 'brainstorming' and 'problem-solving' processes with 'high level groups' of

national experts and ministers over 'bargaining' modes of negotiation (Wallace and Reh, 2021, p.107). By involving relevant stakeholders and EU member states in its policymaking design, the Commission fully respects the subsidiarity principle whilst also opening the possibility to create its own policy space and push a specific policy agenda. The ever increasing reliance of data to develop education policies at EU level, has had a growing influence on national (higher) education systems, with the EU governing by 'benchmarking performance' and through 'standardization processes' (Elken, 2017; Lawn, 2006). The capacity to produce this data to justify a specific policy direction has increased the influence of EU institutions in education policy whilst also providing an alternative to other governance modes including supranational, intergovernmental or multi-level governance approaches. Governing through standard requires them to be constructed through 'benchmarks, indicators and targets' obtained by involving relevant experts. The growing presence of these standard in EU education policymaking has provided opportunities to reach consensus more easily and also go towards a harmonization of education systems in Europe. This also demonstrates the power of 'comparability', 'compatibility' and 'measurement' in these policymaking dynamics (Lawn, 2011; Elken, 2017).

More recently the European Commission has introduced the European Semester and an instrument that can also be used in education

policymaking. The European Semester 'is an annual cycle of economic and budgetary policy coordination in the EU in which guidance is provided to EU countries before they take policy decisions at national level' (EUR-Lex). With the European Semester, the Commission has gained a formal mechanism to produce and use comparative data to develop country specific recommendations through committees and networks that involve representatives from EU institutions and member states. The European Semester also enhances the possibility for Member States to feel involved in a process of 'co-construction' which 'builds convergence - allowing soft power to do the governing work' (Eeva, 2021, p.4).

While coordination instruments are the most widely discussed EU education policymaking instruments, the Commission has also increasingly been making use of incentive-based funding programmes in higher education, giving it what Batory & Lindstrom (2011) have dubbed the 'power of the purse'. Funding mechanisms have been used as a way to bypass national governments and target higher education institutions directly to promote a specific EU policy agenda. Unlike the voluntary mechanisms of the Open Method of Coordination, the use of funding mechanisms confer the Commission with a more direct form of influence (Marques et al., 2020). Competitive funding calls, give the Commission the opportunity to 'withhold financial rewards and strategically select recipients in the wide range of programs it administers' (Batory & Lindstrom, 2011). Funding programmes have increasingly grown throughout the 2010s with a wider array of programmes available for

higher education institutions to take part in under Erasmus+ including Erasmus Mundus, Knowledge Alliances, or the European Universities Initiative.

Beyond coordination and funding instruments, the European Commission also has a wider range of non-binding legal tools at its disposal such as policy documents which can take the form of preparatory documents (Communications, Proposals, Reports). These documents offer the Commission an agenda setting capacity and a way to develop and push forward ambitious policy ideas (Alexiadou & Rambla, 2022). Making use of these documents triggers 'a new type of coordinative conversation on education policy' process between the European Commission and the Council of the European Union (p.861). With these policy documents, the European Commission proposes policy ideas or objectives through Communications and Proposals addresses to the Council. The Council then joins the negotiations to challenge, amend or reject these ideas. With this strategy, the Commission seeks to bring the Council to include these policy ideas in non-binding legal acts such as Recommendations, Resolutions or Conclusions.

Research question 2

The EUI is the result of past experiences on higher education governance at European level and combines existing mechanisms and instruments to

increase its chances of success and meet its ambitious objectives. The second part of this research asks: How do governing processes and instruments support and constrain the development of these university alliances?

Evolving forms of collaboration in a landscape of competition

Background

The transnational collaborative partnerships being formed as part of the EUI do not correspond to a 'one model fits all' system. Since the origin of the EUI, the European Commission has been promoting both pilot phases as bottom-up processes. If this is respected, 'European Universities' could vary in form, purposes and arise from different histories. These university alliances are to act as 'test-beds' and experiment what the universities of the future will look like, leading representatives from the Commission to consider the EUI as 'more than a programme' (Eriksson-Waterschoot, 2021). If the idea of European Universities is not new, the reliance on transnational collaborative partnerships for them to emerge is novel. There has been a growing scholarly interest in partnerships between higher education institutions. These collaborations vary in meaning and

purposes but has become increasingly present in the higher education landscape. The following sections explores literature which has dealt with the development of these collaborations, associations, partnerships, alliances.

University alliances

University alliances such as the European University Association (EUA) or the League of European Research Universities (LERU), can be viewed as ‘interest groups’ (Vukasovic and Stensaker, 2018). These meta-organizations (organizations made up of other organizations rather than individuals) are powerful stakeholders who interact directly with EU institutions to defend the interests of their members. Stensaker (2018) examines the case of the American Association of Universities (AAU) and draws on neo-institutional theories to define the purposes of these meta-organizations: to offer a functional response to an increasingly complex society, facilitate innovation and increase the strengths and attractiveness of their members in the global higher education landscape. There exists additional forms of cross-border partnerships of which, joint degrees, franchising agreements, twinning as well as staff and academic exchanges (Chapman et al., 2014). Each of these global university-to-university partnerships have become increasingly common in the higher education landscape. Gunn and Mintrom (2013) explore such global

university alliances like The Association of Pacific Rim Universities (APRU), Universitas 21 (U21), and the Worldwide Universities Network (WUN). These global transnational partnerships are defined as ‘strategic alliances’ formed to give their members a ‘collaborative advantage’. Ferreira-Pereira and Mourato Pinto (2021) also examine the presence of such strategic alliances between EU and global HEIs in the framework of the EU’s Erasmus Mundus programme. There also exists an immense body of literature in organization studies concerning industrial strategic partnerships and joint ventures (Contractor and Reuer, 2019). This literature has had a considerable impact on the higher education literature dealing with ‘strategic’ university alliances. This field of research reveals the benefits and mechanisms of these alliances in the world of industry. Drawing from this literature can be useful, however, it would also assume that higher education institutions can be addressed in the same manner as a firm. This literature has its limitations for higher education research, since HEIs do not operate with the same profit mechanisms as a firm and are usually dedicated to developing quality education and research (Deiaco and Melin, 2006).

Networks

There is a close relationship between the notion of ‘alliance’ and ‘network’. Although ‘alliance’ tends to emphasize strategic purposes and networks of relationships, both notions often lack conceptual clarity in

European policy documents and in higher education research. In the Conclusions (2017) of the European Council 'European Universities' are defined as a 'bottom-up network of universities'. In higher education research, there is rising academic interest in multi-institutional partnerships also named multi-university networks (Chapman et al., 2014). These multi-university networks are said to be articulated around two main dimensions: the strengthening of each partner involved in the partnerships and common goals. Fumasoli and Rossi (2021) discuss the rise of transnational networks in the latest Erasmus+ programme (2014-2020) through the *strategic partnerships* and *knowledge alliances* programmes. They build on Kehm and Teichler (2007) who associate international networks of higher education institutions to the notions of strategic alliances and international consortia. They similarly draw from Knight (2008) who discuss the formation of international networks as a combination of internationalization strategy and institutional agreements. Knight opposes networks to bilateral agreements, usually having clear strategic goals (academic, economic, political) but being more difficult to coordinate due to the diversity of the higher education systems involved. These articles offer an explanatory account of what international higher education networks, without relying on a theoretical definition of 'networks' having been developed in the social sciences.

In policy studies, networks are conceptually underdefined and have been coined in a variety of ways. Schneider presents networks as 'structural relationships, interdependencies and dynamics between actors in politics

and policy-making' (Schneider, 1988, p. 2). This perspective gives the possibility to address policies that are not made unilaterally from the top-down but rather, involve a variety of stakeholders horizontally. Börzel and Heard-Lauréote (2009) consider that as a concept, networks are useful to address the connections between separate but inter-dependent organizations involved in common policy-making processes. The actions of this 'fabric' of organizations are driven by shared interests and resources. The authors draw from the works of Mayntz (1993) and Scharpf (1997) who address networks as a specific mode of governance: non-hierarchical, based on mutual resource dependency and informal horizontality established between each of the actors of the network.

Far beyond the realm of policy, Newman presents networks as 'a collection of points joined together in pairs by lines' (2018, p. 1). These points are generally referred to as 'nodes and the lines as 'edges'. Such networks are objects of study in physics, biology but also in various disciplines of the social sciences. Wasserman and Faust (1994) highlight networks as an essential concept to research the relationships between the nodes, that they call here units. Antonucci (2014) highlights the importance of clearly defining units of analysis when leading international comparative studies in the field of higher education. Kosmützky and Nokkala (2014) or later Hauptman Komotar (2021), without neglecting the endured importance of nation-states in the development of higher education nationally and internationally, call for widening the scope of units under study in the framework of comparative higher education

research. Kösmutzky and Putty (2016) highlight the emergence of novel units of analysis in the development of literature on offshore, transnational, borderless, and cross-border higher education networks. Shajajan and Kezar (2013) and Reale (2014) underline the importance of giving more scholarly attention to these novel units. Discussing the development of university associations such as the League of European Research Universities or the COIMBRA group, Brankovic (2018a) calls for more methodological rigor when it comes to discussing these novel units. Researchers must (1) clearly define the unit of analysis (university associations, higher education networks, university alliances) and (2) locating the multiple sources of documentation that possess information on this/these unit(s). Drawing on Ahrne and Brunsson (2005), this methodology leads the author to differentiate meta-organizations from networks. Meta-organizations have clear rules on who can be qualified as a member and who cannot.

Beyond the importance of defining the units within a network Wasserman and Faust (1994) rely on additional concepts in order to define networks, including actors, ties, groups, and relations. Actors refer to the units of analysis who can be both be individual or collective. Ties are what bind the actors together, they are the link between each unit. Groups are the collection of units on which ties are investigated. Relation defines the type of ties that exist within a group. A network is the 'finite set or sets of actors and the relation or relations defined on them' (Wasserman & Faust, 1994, p. 20). If these definitions focus on the relationship between these

different units, Ball considers that 'networks are not just a set of connections between sites but are also a history of on-going effort, and are animated by social relations and performance' (Ball, 2016, p. 550). The author illustrates his point with the example of the 'Education Alliance', an Indian NGO promoting quality education in the country associating national and international actors to achieve policy reforms in the field of education. Ball highlights the importance of temporality and history when studying networks in the context of the construction of European higher education. This resonates with Corbett's claim that 'ideas do not come out of the blue' (Corbett, 2005, p. 8). It also underlines the importance of including historical accounts when leading comparative studies in the field of (higher) education and examining networks (Kazamias, 2009).

Obstacles to collaboration

The BP and EHEA were intended to facilitate the collaboration between HEIs in Europe, particularly through a push forward at harmonizing the higher education architecture and degree systems, explains De Wit (2018). Such collaborations have also been strengthened by the Lisbon Strategy and subsequent programmes through both Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020. Prior to the official start of the EUI, the European Commission asked the Joint Research Centre (JRC) to produce a report on the state of 'transnational collaborative partnerships in higher education'

(2018) in the European Union. Data was collected from partnerships initiated through EU higher education programmes such as Erasmus Mundus Joint Degrees partnerships, Erasmus+ Strategic partnerships and Knowledge Alliances, and Horizon 2020's Teaming and Twinning instruments. The report identified the drivers and objectives of the partnerships, their value, and the existing barriers for further development. The two main obstacles identified by respondents to transnational collaborative partnerships were said to be legal and administrative barriers alongside funding. Shortly after the launch of the BP Rauhvargers et al. (2002) already argued for the removal of national legislative barriers to facilitate joint degree programmes. The authors considered that such programmes were an essential stepping-stone towards the formation of an EHEA and aligned with all the objectives of the BP. Despite the increase of joint degree programmes throughout the European Union, and the development of a European Consortium for Accreditation there remains challenges in overcoming national regulations and legislation (Hou, 2020).

A competitive landscape

Since competitive funding programmes through Erasmus+ have been used to foster dynamics of collaboration within the European higher education sector, this has fostered a paradox of competitive collaboration. This paradox is visible and wider higher education policy trends globally

(Ball, 2012; Marginson, 2018). Previous national trends have often focused on how public resources are invested in a specific type of institution, “world class universities”, usually research intensive universities (Portnoi et al., 2010; Yudkevich et al., 2023). A whole strand of the literature has discussed the association between competitive and collaborative dynamics in order to shape European higher education policy (Ball, 2012; de Wit, 2018; Dent et al., 2017; Musselin, 2018; Ziegele & Mordhorst, 2019). If the literature has highlighted the development in higher education cooperation policies with the growing range of Erasmus+ actions, and the policymaking dynamics triggered by the Bologna Process, competitive dynamics have remained central (Crăciun, 2018; Denisova-Schmidt, 2018; Erkkilä & Piironen, 2014; Perez-Encinas, 2018).

Dynamics of competition have often fostered by policy reforms in higher education to increase performance, innovation and control of higher education institutions, bringing universities to compete both for financial resources and prestige (Capano & Jarvis, 2020; Marginson, 1997, 2013; Olssen & Peters, 2005). As the public funding for European HEIs are continuously decreasing due to successive budget cuts, EU institutions have found a way to promote their own policy agenda by promising resources that are no longer available at national level (Batory & Lindstrom, 2011; Deiacco et al., 2009; Hartzell et al., 2023; Jungblut & Jungblut, 2017). Beyond financial resources, prestige remains a fundamental reason for the participation of European HEIs in competitive funding calls and has grown significantly in their respective strategies.

Brankovic (2018b) notes how the EU institutions act as ‘intermediaries’, relying on ‘noble’ principles including excellence and value, to decide which institutions can benefit from a seal of excellence that confirms their prestige. These ‘intangible resources’ have become increasingly sought after by European HEIs and increased dynamics of competition. HEIs are also competing for access to key policymakers and being granted a ‘place at the table’ to take part in policy coordination processes and have a say in the shaping of the future directions of higher education policy in the EU (Horta et al., 2008; Lambrechts et al., 2023).

Research question 3

The EUI responds to a growing demand for wider cooperation at the EU level, and a desire for wider institutional integration. Despite the emergence of university alliances and networks worldwide, dynamics of competition are still omnipresent and at times used to foster novel processes of collaboration. This research explores this paradox of emerging collaboration within a landscape of competition and asks: How has the European Commission developed a competitive programme, the European Universities Initiative, to prioritise and reconfigure higher education cooperation in the European Union.

Reflections on the literature

This literature review initially started with the idea of exploring the background of three distinct concepts that could shed light on what was taking place with the European Universities Initiative. Regionalism was chosen to grasp how the EUI is used to develop a higher education dimension of a European Education Area. Governance was picked to explore the ways in which EU institutions can be involved in higher education policy, and what governance mechanisms they have been able to rely on in the past. Finally, 'networks' was initially selected as I thought it would help me understand how the alliances are formed and operate. This final concept evolved as networks also opened the door to exploring wider collaboration dynamics, which in turn invited me to discuss its relationship to competition.

This background literature was immensely helpful in preparing for the interviews and more widely analysing the data. However, I quickly realised that whilst I initially understood these concepts as operating separately, they were in fact interlinked when it comes down to understand the processes at play in European higher education policy: EU institutions govern regional higher education policies through different forms of collaboration (including but not limited to networks) and dynamics of competition. What the literature reveals, is what a regional higher education policy is, what are the possible governance mechanisms at its

disposal, and how it can form networks of actors to enact this policy, often relying on dynamics of competition. Networks do not simply refer to organisations like the university alliances of the EUI, but also wider processes of cooperation set up by the Commission in policy coordination processes involving Member States and higher education stakeholders alike. The dynamics of competition are a way for the European Commission to re-organise existing forms of collaboration by associating its own regional policy agenda.

Methodology

This doctoral research aims to explore the role of EUI alliances in the formation of a regional higher education space; analyse the governance structures that have emerged to enable and constrain their development; and observe their histories and modes of operation. Three research questions have emerged from the literature review from this thesis have guided the analysis of the data collected:

- How and for what purposes do these university alliances seek to build a regional higher education space in the European Union?
- How do governing processes and instruments support and constrain the development of these university alliances?
- How has the European Commission developed a competitive programme, the European Universities Initiative, to prioritise and reconfigure higher education cooperation in the European Union?

Three methods are conjointly used to answer each of these three questions: document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and qualitative network analysis.

This research explores the EUI as an emerging phenomenon in global higher education through these university alliances being formed while addressing the evolving context of European higher education with the formation of a regional higher education space. I outline three levels around which an EUI alliance is articulated: The supranational or European level, the national level, and the transnational or alliance level. The supranational level is the main initiator and funder of the EUI and monitors its development. This level englobes EU institutions such as the Cabinet of the Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth, Directorate General for Education and Culture, Education and Culture Executive Agency, Directorate General for Research and Innovation, Research Executive Agency. The national level is made up of the national higher education institutions that make up an EUI alliance but also all of the national organization that an HEI participating in an alliance interacts with, in the context of the EUI, such as national higher education and research ministries or associated partners in the public, private or third sectors. The transnational level is the EUI alliances themselves. It is the result of the interaction between the supranational level and the national level to create new entities, the EUI alliances, that exist at the intersection of both levels. The transnational level is what the initiative is creating and becomes an independent level that interacts both with the national and supranational level.

The articulation of these three levels goes hand in hand with the way in which this thesis is organised. I tried a first structure with each section

being related to a specific level involved in the development of the EUI: Supranational, transnational, local. The three research questions would have been answered in each of these sections that would have been dedicated to the perspective of the actors involved in a given level on the main topics that were identified after documentary analysis and leading the interviews. I went through an initial coding procedure of the interview and documentary data based on the different topics that were discussed during the interviews: relationship between the alliances and the Commission, funding, student involvement, role of FOREU and FOREU2 etc. After writing up a first section relying on this type of analysis, I realized it created a very detailed explanatory study which was difficult to digest. This felt very much like a report, that gave a sense of the perspective of each level of actors involved in the initiative. The analysis did not bring out what was at stake with the initiative and how it is situated within wider debates in higher education and EU governance research.

I therefore re-organized the thesis based on a series of analytical themes derived from the main topics and issues that were emerging from the interview and documentary data and shaped the three research questions. Based on these key topics that had been determined I developed some overarching dichotomous themes and went back to a thesis structure with each chapter corresponding to one of the research questions. The overarching themes were then attributed to a research question to create a narrative unity in its response: Ambition vs.

Pragmatism; continuity vs. transformation; Punctilious vs. Unexacting; Exclusion vs. Inclusivity; Support vs. Caution; Bottom-up/Top-down (Verticality?) vs. Synergy; Competition vs. Collaboration; Experimentation vs. Consolidation; Complementarity vs. Similarity; Diversity vs. Homogeneity. I found this option to be more fruitful in linking the data with the current debates that the initiative triggers and an opportunity to situate the analysis within the wider debates in higher education research and European studies.

This doctoral research builds on my research for my master's dissertation on the first pilot phases of the European Universities which addressed the following research question: how do university alliances in the European Union build (on) networks to foster regionalization in higher education? The master's dissertation made use of a corpus of documents that were thematically analysed and semi-structured interviews conducted with representatives of the European Commission's higher education unit at the Directorate General for Education and Culture, coordinators of three alliances, project managers for HEIs participating in the initiative, and a student. I presented the findings of the dissertation at an international PhD workshop led by the Hertie School (Berlin, Germany) and the Bamberg Graduate School of Social Sciences (Bamberg, Germany). The findings were also presented at the annual conference of the Society for Research in Higher Education and in webinar for the Centre for Global Higher Education. The dissertation was published in *Higher Education* in 2023 (Charret & Chankseliani, 2023).

Selection of cases and units

The initial pilot study conducted during my master's degree could only focus on the first wave of 17 alliances launched in 2019. By the start of my doctoral research, it felt natural to expand the scope of the study to the additional 24 alliances that were selected in 2020. In my pilot study I only focused on how the alliances were formed as networks, where they came from, and how they functioned looking specifically at their governance mechanisms. While I found this interesting, I knew it only scratched the surface regarding what was at stake with the development of the European Universities Initiative, which is not just about creating these novel actors, these alliances as new actors in the European higher education landscape but contributing to forging a European dimension to education policy. This thesis was therefore to delve deeper in what I could only hint at in my study: the policymaking processes at work to make the EUI a reality, and the role of the initiative in creating a regional higher education space and policy. This motivated my decision for the case to be the first two waves of the European Universities Initiative pilot phase.

I initially also wanted to explore more thoroughly how the alliances function in practice to explore certain dimension of alliances' practices that I did not have the opportunity to look at during the pilot study. I was

curious about: the relationship between the alliances with policy actors at local, national and European level; how the alliances formed networks beyond higher education and created ties with public and private stakeholders; and finally, how alliance formation impacted students, administrative staff and academics. This motivated my decision to research two alliances more in depth to get a better sense of what was happening on the ground. I therefore decided to pick two alliances, one launched in 2019 and the other in 2020 to get an insider view of how the alliances functioned in practice. By interviewing different types of participants involved in the development of the alliances however, I learned not only about how they functioned, but also finer details about the policymaking process.

Early policy documents published on the initiative saw a lot of potential for the initiative to promote synergies between the four components of the European knowledge square: training, research, scientific innovation, and service to society. I quickly became aware that since 2019 there had been an organisational reshuffle in the Commission with a Commissioner that now held a dual portfolio combining Research and Education. While the initiative was constantly mentioned as primarily an educational initiative, I was rapidly made aware that a 'research practices' call under the Science with and for Society (SwafS) programme was being launched to complement the Erasmus+ funding. I therefore became interested in how the alliances were to bridge the gap between a European of research and a European of education.

Timeline of fieldwork

The fieldwork for this research started after a yearlong process of familiarizing myself with the conceptual literature on networks, governance, regionalism, EU higher education and policymaking processes in the EU in education and beyond. After the research questions were refined and methodology to answer them determined, I started reaching out to potential participants in the Fall 2021. The start of the fieldwork came shortly after the publication of the second EUI funding call for the first 17 alliances that had been selected in 2019 and towards the end of the Commission's yearlong consultation for its European Strategy for Universities with the alliances, MS, and HE stakeholders. The first phase of the fieldwork lasted five months and was dedicated to the transnational level of the EUI, where I interviewed alliance coordinators. During this time, the Commission published its European Strategy for Universities as well as its Proposal for a Council Recommendation. Once coordinators were interviewed, I reached out in Spring 2022 to participants that represented the European level of the EUI: representatives from both DGs and corresponding executive agencies as well as policymakers involved in the FPEU. The publication of the Council's Recommendation occurred at that time. Prior to the start of Summer 2022, I started interviews with representatives of the two in-depth alliances that gave me insights on the national level of the EUI: first senior

managers, then local administrators, and finally students. This was also the time when I interviewed policymakers from national higher education and research ministries. During the third phase of the fieldwork, the Commission published its call for policy experimentation in higher education (joint degrees and legal statutes pilots). The fieldwork ended in October 2022 soon after the Commission published the second EUI call for the second 24 alliances that had been selected in 2020.

Beyond my fieldwork I have stayed very informed and involved in the developments of the EUI until the very last moments of the writing of this thesis. The last policy documents consulted were the European Commission and PPMI's report on the transformative potential of the alliances (2025), and the state of implementation of the 2023 Council Recommendation on building bridges for effective cooperation in higher education (2025). Additionally, presenting my research in multiple international conferences in public policy and higher education studies I met with many representatives of alliances who shared the developments of the initiative. I also take part in monthly meetings of researchers on the EUI who present their research and latest findings. Finally, I am book editor of the first edited volume on the European Universities Initiative, bringing together academics, policymakers and practitioners to discuss continuities, discontinuities, challenges and successes of the alliances five years after the launch of the initiative. Reviewing over thirty chapters on the topic written in late 2024 also provided insider knowledge on current developments and complemented my own field work. Alongside this

thesis, I have also produced four articles on the European Universities Initiative from 2022 to 2024 – two of which are published and two of which are still under review. These articles were always updated with the latest information on the initiative at the time of the submission.

Methods

Documentary analysis

The documents have been selected for the information they contain on the EUI. A corpus of documents is organized around each level of analysis: European, transnational, local. At the European Level I have selected policy documents produced by European Institutions which either directly mention the Initiative: Communications, Declarations, Conclusions, Reports, Programme guides, or that have produced prior to the start of the initiative but have had an impact on its unfolding: Treaties, White Papers, Green Papers. The corpus also includes factsheets produced by the European Commission on the overall initiative and on each participating alliance. At the transnational levels, the documents are the mission statements found on the websites of the university alliances, or all other relevant communication material found on them. At the HEI level, I explore Erasmus policy statements and mission statements relating to the international strategy of the HEIs looking at the European objectives.

These statements dealing with European strategy at HEI level are used to get a better sense of the history of each HEI with European programmes and gather insight on participation in pre-existing HEI networks. Grey literature was also consulted. This was a dynamic time in the development of the initiative with the publication of the Commission's Strategy and proposal for a Council Recommendation, and the subsequent adoption of the Recommendation by the Council. Transnational stakeholder organizations such as the European University Association, Coimbra Group, or the League of European Research Universities, published a significant amount of position papers to comment on these developments. This was an important point of reference for the preparation of the interviews as certain alliances were actively involved or stemming from such organizations. The collection of documents was the first step in the data collection process. These documents offered insight on the role the stakeholder taking part in the EUI. They guided us in the selection of participants and in the preparation of an interview script and prompts.

Although I did not expect to have such an important number of interviews, I knew from the start that I would have to deal with a significant number of documents. I had been warned by my Transfer of Status examiners that the European Commission notoriously 'drowns' researchers in policy documentation. I therefore from the start had to establish a rigorous structure of how I was collecting these documents in order to ensure the reliability of my analysis (Mays & Pope, 1995). A table was therefore created divided into seven sections: European Council, European

Commission, Council of the European Union, Member States, Alliance Key Documents, and, once they had been selected, the participating HEIs from the alliances selected to research in-depth. Each document was given a name, date, and a 'notes' section where I could include either a brief remark or a standout quote so that I could refer to it easily. Each name is hyperlinked to the actual document that I highlighted during my readings to avoid losing too much time in searches.

The analysis has taken place throughout every step of producing this thesis from the initial pilot study, familiarizing myself with the policy and theoretical literature, choosing methods, preparing the fieldwork, leading the fieldwork, producing field reports, and, of course the actual analysis stage followed by writing up a first version of the findings (Spencer et al., 2014).

My MSc dissertation served as a pilot study for this thesis. As the data for the dissertation was collected when the first 17 EUI alliances had just been launched, not much was known about these alliances and as one of the participants put it at the time: 'we are building these foundation'. What struck me at the time was the recurrence of vocabulary linked to 'experimentation', 'construction', 'creation'. This lexicon was also recurrent in the European policy documents being published and the various strategy documents of the alliances and participating HEIs. From this small-scale empirical study, I familiarized myself with the first issues emerging with the development of the European Universities Initiative and what was at stake with the development of these alliances in the

European higher education landscape. Three major questions were ‘excavated’ (Ravitch, 2016, p. 79) from an initial scan of the policy documents and my MSc interviews: How are the alliances – creating, experimenting, constructing – i) a regional higher education space ii) a European higher education governance iii) transnational higher education networks. From these three main questions which were to be refined into the Research Questions for this thesis. Three organizing concepts emerged which were in turn going to produce a series of themes (Braun et al., 2015; Braun, 2013).

Elite Semi-Structured Interviews

Table 1 *Interviewed participants*

Level	Participants	Institutional affiliation
Alliances	31 Alliance Coordinators	ARQUS, ATHENA, AURORA, CHARM-EU, Circle U, CIVICA, CIVIS, EU*RES*, ECIU, EC2U, EUDi, ENGHAGE.EU, ENHANCE, EPICUR, RUA, eu4Art, EduCones, EULGOIN, EurUni, EURECA Pro, EuroTech, Eut+, FILMEU, NeurotechEU, RUN-EU, Transform4Europe, UNA Europa, UNIC, UNITA, UNITEL, YUFE
European Union Institutions	5 European Union level institutions	DG EAC, DG RTD, EACEA, REA, FPEU
Member States and Participatin	7 National ministries of Higher Education	DE DAAD, DK Ministry of Education and Research, ES Ministry of Universities, FI

g Countries		Ministry of Education and Culture, LT Ministry of Education, Science and Sports, NL Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, NO Ministry of Education
In Depth Alliance	3 Senior Managers, 6 Local Coordinators, 5 Students	University of Torino, University of Savoie Mont-Blanc, University of Zaragoza, University of Beira Interior, University of Pau et Pays de l'Adour, University of Vest din Timisoara
UNITA	3 Senior Managers, 6 Local Coordinators, 5 Students	University of Vest din Timisoara, University of Zaragoza, University of Beira Interior, University of Pau et Pays de l'Adour, University of Savoie Mont-Blanc
ECIU	3 Senior Managers, 8 Local Coordinators, 5 Students	Tampere University, Twente University, ECIU Brussels office, Aarhus University, Hamburg University of Technology, INSA Toulouse, Kaunas University of Technology, Barcelona University, University of Aveiro

Macro-Level - Supranational - European Union Stakeholders

The initiative is coordinated by the European Commission, on the policy side by two Directorate-Generals, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC) and Directorate-General for Research and Innovation (DG RTD), and on the operationalization side, by the two corresponding Executive Agencies, respectively, the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), and the European Research

Executive Agency (REA). Participants were selected on the basis of their involvement into the initiative, after having been mentioned by alliance coordinators, or by looking at the Commission's organigrams. As Education and Research are respectively a supporting and shared competence of the EU, the role of the Council of the European Union is key to the development of the initiative, which are all subject to their unanimous approval. I therefore decided to get a pulse of the debates on the European Universities Initiative taking places at the Council by interviewing stakeholders in national ministries who have been involved in these debates and setting the agenda in the framework of the rotating presidency of the European Council.

Meso Level - Transnational - University Alliance coordinators

To achieve breadth in this research I decided to reach out to the coordinators of all 41 alliances selected as part of the initial two pilot phases of the initiative. I initially hoped for a 25-30% sample of all alliances in order to get a sense of the dynamics taking place in the alliances, understanding their differences, the challenges they were facing, the networks they are building, and their links with all relevant stakeholders involved in the initiative. I ended up with a sample representing 75% of all alliances participating in the first two pilot phases. There was a lot of enthusiasm from the coordinators to take part in an interview. Most of them expressed a sense of duty to take part in academic research as they are developing institutions with doctoral

students in mind. Additionally, coordinators mentioned they had not been asked to participate in many academic studies, which meant there was no 'interview fatigue' from their part.

Micro Level - National - 2 Alliances researched in-depth

After interviewing $\frac{3}{4}$ of all alliance coordinators I set up a matrix of the 41 alliances, where multiple criteria were set up: Coordinating country, Geographical distribution, which pilot phase, number of members, past links, student population across the alliance, type of HEIs (research intensive), position on the creation of a European degree or legal statute for the alliances, rapport with interviewee, strength of interaction with the European Commission, disciplinary focus, identity (or thematic focus), reception of complimentary Horizon funding. My initial plan was to select between 3 and 5 alliances to explore in. I quickly realized that this would not be feasible, considering the number of interviews this would have implied. I therefore narrowed down my selection to two alliances, for which I decided to interview senior managers of the alliance, local project coordinators in each participating institution, students, and representatives from national governments. A list of criteria was developed in order to select the two 'in-depth' alliances: possible participation in the legal entities call, nature of past links, geographical distribution of HEIs, strength of interaction with the Commission, disciplinary or thematic foci, rapport with coordinator.

At the start of my fieldwork, the European Commission published a Communication on A European Strategy for Universities (European Commission, 2022b) and a 'Proposal for a Council recommendation on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation'(European Commission, 2022e). Both documents announce two additional pilots, inviting existing alliances to experiment with the creation of a joint European degree label and a legal status. I asked all the interviewed alliance coordinators about the necessity or desire to implement such instruments and potential participation in these upcoming calls. UNITA and ECIU both expressed interest in experimenting with a legal status and had started consulting legal experts on which existing instruments could be used in the framework of transnational cooperation in higher education.

ECIU has existed as a university network since 1999, making it an early case of European transnational higher education cooperation. The network was also established as a legal entity prior to the launch of the first pilot phase of the European Universities Initiative. UNITA was formed between institutions that have a history of bilateral links. I wanted to explore the differences between **various forms of past links**: long-standing forms of network cooperation and more common bilateral exchanges.

I first looked at the **geographical distribution** of HEIs in the alliances I interviewed. Of the 31 alliances I had access to, only 7 were not coordinated by a Western European HEIs, 1 Eastern European and 6

Southern European. Note that the category of East, South, North, West is used by the Commission based on the United Nation's Geoscheme (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Statistics, 2022). I had initially hoped to select three alliances, coordinated by HEIs from different parts of Europe. However, when I decided to focus on two alliances, I chose one coordinated by an institution in Southern Europe (UNITA, University of Turin) and one in Western Europe (ECIU, University of Twente).

I was interested in the nature **and strength of an alliance's interaction with the Commission**. ECIU struck me as an interesting example for proximity with the Commission. As a long-standing European higher education network, they were invited to take part in the consultation phase to develop the first call. They also decided to set up a Brussels Office. ECIU also established and coordinates the FOREU that gather the 17 alliances selected as part of the first pilot phase. UNITA did not express such a strong link which I found could be a good point of comparison.

Each alliance has been constructed with strong **disciplinary or thematic foci**. UNITA has focused its education programmes on renewable energies, cultural Heritage, and bioeconomy whereas ECIU is dedicated to technology, engineering and social sciences. Unita also has a strong thematic focus, Romance languages, as well as involving HEIs in rural and

cross-border regions, which have given it a unique identity. ECIU on the other hand has made innovation and technology as the pillars of its identity.

Although this was not the key factor in deciding for the alliance, I considered the quality of the **rapport with coordinators** in order to determine which alliance to select. Both coordinators were very helpful and enthusiastic about sharing information which I thought would be a good way to have access to more participants within the alliance.

Participants

The management of both alliances is a bit different. In UNITA the management is taken care of by vice-rectors/vice-presidents at each institution. They lead the Work Package 1 of the alliance, dedicated to the management of the alliance. In ECIU there is a Secretary General, a Director, A Head of the Brussels Office, a strategy lead, and a President. I interviewed vice-rectors of three different HEIs in UNITA that the coordinator put me in touch with. I started out with a one-hour focus group interview as this is what they originally proposed. I then secured individual interviews with the three of them for a duration of 40-90 minutes. This was an opportunity to go further in depth and do the network mapping exercise. Each of the vice-rectors had been involved in writing the original proposal for the Commission and therefore had an

extensive knowledge of the development of the alliance and brought some insights on the strategic benefits for their institution to participate in the alliance. I interviewed the ECIU director, strategy lead and head of Brussels office who all brought me different perspectives on the management of the alliance as they are all responsible for different managerial missions while having a close link between each other. It was good way to identify the general governance of the alliance, who does what, and how they have deployed clear strategic objectives.

The local management in UNITA is organized in what is called UNITA offices: UNITA office Savoie-Mont Blanc, UNITA office Zaragoza etc. The head of the UNITA offices can sometimes do this full time but sometimes couples with another activity in their home institution linked to internationalization. I have received positive responses to interview all 6 heads of UNITA offices. In ECIU, the local management is led by 'ECIU local ambassadors' at each participating institution. Each local ambassador also has a position in their home institution, often linked to internationalization. I have received positive responses to interview 10 out of the 11 ECIU local ambassadors. One institution (Dublin) did not have a local ambassador at the time of the fieldwork.

The UNITA Student Assembly now has 50 members, has a constitution and elections coming up. The assembly is made up of multiple 'parties' represented. Each party needs to include members from at least two different institutions in the UNITA alliance. The majority of the assembly

then split executive positions. I interviewed students from 5 different HEIs. Although ECIU has a student agora and includes two students in the ECIU governance board, students are also involved in the challenge-based learning programmes that take place across the alliance's institutions. Local administrators put us in touch with students at their institution that were active and enthusiastic about participating in these challenges.

National policymakers were not originally going to be interviewed. However, it became clear from my interviews with the alliance coordinators and the European stakeholders that if they were not included, I would be missing out an important aspect of the initiative's development. As I neither had the contacts nor the time to interview participants from all member States and participating Erasmus+ countries, I decided to focus on the Member States and participating countries that were represented in the two in depth alliances selected: 13 countries.

Interviews

A total of 70 semi-structured interviews were conducted with European and national policy makers, alliance coordinators, local administrators working on the development of the alliances, and students. Interviews started with an informal conversation with the participants prior to starting the recording. In order to build rapport, I usually discussed where they were based, and the Covid restrictions at the time, comparing it with

what was happening in the United Kingdom. I then spent some time explaining my interest in the initiative. Participants were usually relieved that I had been working on the initiative since 2019 as part of my MSc, as it meant I already had a significant understanding of the initiative, and they did not need to spend time trying to explain an initiative that is somewhat abstract from the outside. As interviews progressed, participants also expressed a sense of trust as I had interviewed most of their colleagues. This also meant that they understood that what they told me could be more difficultly attributed to them personally.

During the semi-structured interviews participants were asked different questions in regard to their role in the European Universities Initiative with interview protocols adapted for interviews with coordinators, EU institutions, Member States (See Annex 1).

Based on the participants' experience and where the conversations were going, I spent more time on certain points than others in order to make the most out of what a participant could offer to this research. At the end of each interview with the coordinators I asked if they would be willing to send me the grant proposal that had been originally submitted to the Commission as well as their Mission Statement if it had not been made publicly available. While some refused for legal reasons, seven agreed to share some documents with me. Others also offered to share documents that came up during the interview, such as ministerial reports. These documents were all added to the document corpus.

Once two in depth-alliances were picked, coordinators were asked if they would be willing to put us in touch with the local coordinators at each participating institution. Local coordinators were asked to put us in touch with students who had been involved in the development of the alliance as well as their main point of contact at their national higher education and research ministry.

Additional interviews

I still plan on leading an additional interview with the four policy officers of the Research Executive Agency in charge of the EUI who have already agreed to speak with me. However, they explained that they were preparing a report to be shared to Member States at the start of 2023 to decide on the future research dimension of the EUI, or if there is to be one at all. I decided that it would be more useful to have the interview once the report had been completed, and initial reactions from MS assessed. The interview should therefore take place before Trinity Term 2023. If possible, I would also like to have the chance to interview a few more representatives from national higher education and research ministries to get a fuller picture of the debates that continue taking place at the Council of the European Union on the initiative.

Interview Process

During the interviews a lot of 'scribbling' happened. Because of the network mapping exercise, I constantly had an A2 piece of paper in front of me and a range of multicolour markers next to me. I therefore wrote down important remarks and points made by the participant. The A2 gave me sufficient space to write certain words in a big font for them to stick out. These 'raw records' were the first piece of information I took out of an interview and had the possibility to reflect on (Tracy, 2020, p. 138). As all of the interviews were made online, I believe this process was made a bit more discreet for the participant than if the interviews had taken place in person, who did not see this immense piece of paper in front of them. These raw notes were used to produce monthly 'progress reports' that were used to keep my doctoral supervisors informed of the progress. However, it quickly became a way for me to keep track of the data I had collected in previous weeks. Each progress report included a list of names of people I had interviewed in chronological order. The raw notes helped me remember important aspects of the interview, I then composed an early findings section of what I thought were the most interesting aspects participants had shared with me (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). These early findings did not necessarily fit under the research questions I had formulated and could sometimes go beyond as participants shared information with me that I could not have suspected. I did not keep all of this material for the development of this thesis due to lack of space and a desire to stay coherent with my RQs, but they remain stored in a back

drawer for potential future research. The process of making these progress reports helped gather a better understanding of the initiative which particularly helped me prepare adequately for the in-depth alliances.

The interviews with participants from the in-depth alliances were done at the third and final stage of the fieldwork. This meant that I had a wider understanding of the initiative, but also an understanding that was conditioned by the vision of the alliance coordinators and policymakers I had interviewed. I therefore went from a general macro understanding of the initiative which focused a lot on its ambitions, to a more practical understanding of the initiative. Interviewing local administrators and students gave me an understanding of how the initiative was being deployed and the concrete issues that were being faced on the ground such as communication, working conditions, or developing a mobility programme in times of Covid.

A different interview protocol (Annex 1) was developed for the in-depth interviews. I focused less on the link between the alliance and the EU institution as coordinators and students had less experience in this domain. I insisted on how the alliances was received within the higher education institution of the participant and its impact on the academic, students and administrative community. I discussed the strategies used to develop the alliance within each institution: what events had been led, online presence, link with local authorities and businesses. I also spoke

about links with national higher education and research ministries and links with other national HEIs participating in other alliances.

The transcription of interviews was a challenging part of the data collection process however it became a key part of the analysis. Although I made use of a transcription software which had been approved by CUREC, I went over each interview individually to manually edit them. Prior to this process the only record I had of the interview process were my field notes, network maps and the monthly progress report. The transcriptions were done at the end of the overall data collection process and were therefore a way to reflect on the content that had been shared with me in the three different phases of the fieldwork, interviews with: alliance coordinators, EU policy makers, in-depth interviews. Although I already had the list of themes that I had used to develop and refine my interview script throughout the fieldwork, I could not use the same for the coding of the interview data.

Qualitative network maps

Social Network Analysis (SNA) is a useful tool when dealing with a macro-perspective and particularly institutions. Qualitative Network Analysis (QNA) is more appropriate for a micro inquiry, focusing on individual actors or components and how they shape the policy making process. This research will use some quantitative elements: the quantity of countries

represented across alliances, which countries are the most often in positions of coordinating the participating the alliances, the financial contributions of individual member states to the EUI. However, it is mainly qualitative data that will be collected. The present research will pay close attention to the policy making processes and the role of individual stakeholders in shaping the future of this initiative. This section is inspired by two previous studies having developed a methodology for QNA, Oancea et al. (2017) and Ahrens (2018).

Both methodological approaches suggested the use of semi-structured interviews alongside the creation of network maps with the interviewee. Ahrens (2018) makes use of 'concentric circles' whereas Oancea et al. (2017) employ 'configurative network maps'. I have chosen to adopt the latter option, due to the methodological clarity of the approach. The configurative network maps (Annex 3) were embedded in the semi-structured interviews and also produced content on what participants sought to express with their diagram. Ahrens mentions the importance of understanding if the network maps developed match with the 'political system' being investigated. I therefore compared the networks maps with the descriptions of the political system that was made available to us by the policy documents but also the descriptions made by European and national policymakers in my interviews.

The network mapping only took place with the 31 alliance coordinators, and with the participants representing the two in depth alliances – senior

managers, local administrators, students. I chose not to embark in network mapping with European and national policy makers.

Making these maps served a different purpose to the one that originally intended. I originally thought that the network maps would just be a way for participants to draw the network that was created to develop an alliance, asking them about the nature of the interaction and its intensity. This for example could reveal information about the quality of an alliance coordinator's relationship with the Commission, or how they interact or do not interact with national authorities. I realized that when asked about the nature of each link, participants had a story to tell which said more about the process of building the alliance and the policy formation process taking place with the European Universities Initiative, than just about having an image of the network being built. The network mapping section of my interview therefore became a central part of how to trigger a discussion with the participants on how the initiative is being shaped.

I originally intended to ask participants what the main actors they interacted with were without giving much indication to get a sense of what came to the participant's mind first to determine the strength of the relationship with a certain actor. However, when I did this, the first question that participants would ask me is if I was speaking of the internal network of the alliance or the external network. Participants therefore differentiated how the alliance was being structured as a network internally (governance structure, the establishment of work packages, interaction with senior management of the HEIs, university administration,

academics, students) and externally (relationship with other alliances through FOREU1 and FOREU2, interaction with national governments, interactions with EU institutions, associated partners). It became clear from the start that the network being drawn needed to consider both internal and external components. This resulted in dense but rich networks that gave a sense of the governance of an alliance and the external networks contributing to the development of an alliance. I relied on the document corpus, which included the alliances and HEIs websites to gain a better understanding of their structures or strategies such as the type of governing bodies and how each activity in the alliances had been organized in work packages. This was done to be more effective in guiding my questions with the participants and to avoid wasting time for gathering information that I could easily find elsewhere.

The maps are co-constructed with the interviewees (Annex 3). The maps are built alongside the information provided by the participants during the interviews on how they judge the nature of relationships and interactions being produced in the framework of the alliances of the EUI. To produce the network maps, I asked the participants a series of questions and draw the maps myself on a piece of paper. The interviewees were informed that this mapping exercise was taking place. I asked them for some clarifications and additional information about the nature of their relationship with the actors they name. They were not told in advance that they would be asked to co-create and draw a network diagram to gain in spontaneity when asked to do so. The whole process of building

the network maps was audio-recorded as part of the interview. As with the rest of the interview, this section was transcribed and confronted with the diagram produced by the participant to identify any inaccuracies. The different aspects of the network that were explored are its composition (nodes and relationships), breadth (between the different levels of the network), relationship, content.

Ethics

This study has been approved by the University of Oxford's Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) (Annex 2). Different levels of anonymization were used for the different levels of participants. For the European institutions the name of the participants, their key role, and the department they work for will be anonymized, but their institutional affiliation will be revealed. For the national policy makers, the country they represent will be revealed, but the name of the participant, their institution, and their key role will be anonymized. For the Coordinators of the university alliances, their role as coordinator of one of the forty-one alliances appears but not the name of the alliance. Numbers attributed at random will be used to differentiate the alliances. For the two in depth alliances, I interviewed senior managers, administrators, and students. For these alliances, the name of the alliance will appear, and three broad categories will be used to indicate the position of the participants in the alliance to avoid using explicit job titles: senior managers, alliance

administrator, student representative. These three categories are accompanied by numbers to effectively differentiate the participants. I recognize that it is difficult to anonymize the coordinators of the alliance as there is only one of them. Data from the interview with the alliance coordinators in these three in-depth alliances will only be included when discussing the perspective of the 41 alliance coordinators more broadly.

All interviewees were sent an information sheet in which they were informed of the purpose and scope of my research. The participation in this study is purely voluntary. Each participant gave their informed consent via email prior to the interview. All data (interview transcripts and configurative network diagrams) will be stored on a password encrypted hard drive and the University of Oxford's secure servers. A key, also password-protected, encrypted and stored separately from the transcripts, has been used to remember how participants have been anonymized throughout the transcripts.

One of the goals of the EUI is to promote European values and foster European citizenship. Having spent most of my adult life between France and the United Kingdom, I very much position myself as a European citizen and realize that I am already convinced by one of the main objectives of the initiative. One of the reasons for me to choose studying the EUI was because of my personal belief that the European project needs to be more than an economic union. I am therefore convinced of the role of education to achieve wider European integration. I have been

cautious to avoid political statements in this research. Interviewing stakeholders with different professional backgrounds and representing a variety of national educational traditions in the EU has made me gain a better understanding of debates arising from the development of EU led higher education programmes. This research has given me a more balanced view on what could be the role played by education at a European level. Being entirely self-funded, this study is not sponsored in any way.

Rigour

To safeguard rigor in the analysis the findings establish a dialogue between the different sources of data: documents, interviews, and network maps. Furthermore, the choice of participants was made to gather different points of views and experiences of the initiative. I collected data from participants that all had a different experience of the initiative due to their role in its development. During the first phase of the data collection the two main perspectives I had access to were, the European level (EU institutions) and the transnational level (the alliances). Participants were asked questions on similar topics which had been identified during the pilot phase and document collection phase of the research while progressively being refined throughout the interview process. This gave an overarching perspective of the initiative and prepared the terrain to go into more detail with the in-depth alliances.

Although gaining insights from the different levels of actors participating in the initiative was essential to get a sense in its development, it posed some challenges when integrating the data within the thesis. As one of the thesis structures that had been considered was having each chapter correspond to one of these levels, it made the thematic analysis too descriptive and did not give the possibility to confront different experiences and visions of specific aspects of the initiative. Once the transcription was completed themes were developed in order to capture some patterns that had emerged out of the interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I looked for similarities and a point of comparison within the data in order to develop overarching themes (Gale et al., 2013). These themes gave the possibility to circulate more freely between this diversified data set, and to confront the different positions and experiences of the participants. It also gave the possibility to underline differences or commonalities between aspects and objectives of the initiative that could be announced in the policy documents. Furthermore, the insights gained from the two in-depth alliances gave the possibility to give concrete examples on some of the issues faced by the initiative. I chose both alliances as heterogeneous samples as two cases that have a variety of different characteristics (Spencer et al., 2014). This gave me the possibility to give an account of contrasting experiences of the initiative. For example, it is through the in-depth alliances that I learned about the differences between the positions of Member States concerning the initiative and their relationship with their HEIs participating in alliances.

The in-depth alliances also gave concrete insights to otherwise abstract ideas such as 'obstacles towards transnational cooperation in higher education'.

Limitations

Due to an already important number of interviews I had to make some choices regarding who was to be interviewed. As a result, there are some limitations in the participant selection. This is also a result of the scale of the initiative.

I originally wanted to interview academics as part of the two in depth alliances to get a sense of how the academic community of each alliance was impacted by the development of the initiative. I realized that this would almost require an entirely separate study that would focus on the impact of the initiative on participating HEIs and their communities. To get a sense of this, I would have needed to interview academics in different disciplines within an HEI, who both have service roles, such as heads of departments, and not. I could have interviewed academics who are involved in the academic programmes developed from the alliance. However, I felt this would give a limited picture of the reality of how alliances are perceived in each HEI, as academics who are not involved, may show some resistance to the development of the alliances, or may not be aware of their existence at all.

I did choose to include students in my list of participants. I felt omitting students would be missing an essential aspect of the initiative that, for the time being, remains an education initiative rather than a research initiative. This said, I only interviewed students who had been involved in the alliance in some capacity: either had attended an alliance's education programme, or active in the alliance's governance. I realize that this is limited, as the interviewed students were those who were actively involved in the alliance, knew about it, and 'believed' in its potential. I could have benefited from a survey to determine the number of students who knew about the alliances in each HEI and conducted additional interviews to assess the perception of the alliances from students who had not directly been involved in their development.

To achieve more breadth, I would have liked to interview more representatives from national governments. However, these were some of the more challenging participants to get a hold of, particularly in large ministries, where it was unclear who had been following the European Universities Initiative. This study would benefit from at least being aware of the position that the 27 Member States have defended at the Council on the development of the initiative.

I also could have explored the wider role of EU institutions in the development of the initiative. Interviewing some Members of the European Parliament or parliamentary assistants who have been involved

in voting the Erasmus+ budget would have been an interesting angle. Furthermore, this study would have benefited from interviewing more stakeholders involved in the EDUC committee of the Council of the European Union.

For the two in depth alliances, I could have interviewed associated partners of the alliances. However, this aspect was still under development, with different alliances at various stages of involving such participants. I therefore decided against it, but any research on the EUI exploring the development of the alliances would need to take a closer look at the networks being formed outside of higher education. This would have probably required selecting one alliance ahead of time and exploring its entire network to decipher its development.

Experimentation is one of the key aspects of the development of the initiative. It is found both in the alliance's mission statements, in the calls published by the Commission, but is also one of the recurrent terms that was used by the interviewees. Exploring how experimental the initiative is by taking a closer look at these 'processes of experimentation' would have been essential to grasp what the alliances are trying to do and what they are putting into place in order to achieve these objectives. However, the data was collected at only one point in time, which makes exploring processes difficult. This study is an instantaneous image of where the alliances were at the time of the data collection. I managed to look at the evolution of the initiative throughout that time. However, if I were to look

at how the alliances evolved, met dead ends, or celebrated certain successes, I would have had to redesign this research as a longitudinal study. I was limited by the framework of a doctoral study with the fieldwork restrained to a year.

Policy time vs. Research time

When I started taking an interest in the EUI in October of 2019 I was mainly interested in how transnational collaboration took place in the European Union: challenges, past successes, and if new forms of collaboration were emerging and offering solutions to overcome persistent issues. October 2019 was only three months after the announcement of the first call result, while the initiative was omnipresent in policy texts accompanied by ambitious and radical language there was no way of imagining that the initiative was going to take up so much space in the developments of higher education policy. One of the biggest challenges that I found with researching it with this initiative is also what I found the most exciting with it:

- It was a 'moving target' that felt like it gained in speed the closer I would get to it, making it continuously ungraspable
- Many new developments sprung from the growth of the initiative and went far beyond processes of alliance formation

These rapid developments appeared as somewhat incompatible with the temporality of a doctoral research and made it at times hard to keep up with. In a way, it felt as if the data collected from 2021 to 2022 rapidly became obsolete. It quickly became clear that my research time was moving much slower than the speed at which these policy and programmatic developments were occurring. In merely 30 months, the number of alliances has grown considerably (41 to 65), while the number of participating HEIs has doubled (284 to 570). Support from Member States was still marginal when the data was collected, whereas in 2025 all Member States have provided some sort of financial support to the alliances. Additionally, only Spain had started changing its national legislation to create a state of exception for the alliances and facilitate transnational collaboration. Countries like France, that I initially pointed out as not providing any legal flexibility is in the process of doing so. Additionally, I had identified, two new policy directions with the creation of the legal statute for the alliances and the European degree, that were launched simultaneously and with a spirit of complementarity. While discussions on the legal statute have become somewhat marginal, the debates on the European Degree have become essential and pave the way for future higher education policy developments in the EU.

This thesis is therefore incomplete. A longitudinal study would offer the possibility to grasp the policy developments of the EUI and I anticipate a

future data collection stage in the upcoming year. This would offer me the possibility to draw from data collected in 2019-20; 2021-23; and 2025-26.

Anatomy of a European Union (higher) education policy

This chapter presents the European Universities Initiative, and the overarching EU higher education strategy it is a part of, the European Education Area, and addresses the following research question: How and for what purposes are university alliances being used to build a regional higher education strategy in the European Union? While the European Education Area, could be viewed as a regional (higher) education space in the European Union, I chose to focus my attention on how it serves as the newest EU education strategy. The higher education dimension of this strategy was presented as a ‘transformation agenda’ (European Commission, 2020a) before being renamed the ‘European strategy for universities’ (European Commission, 2022b).

I argue that 2017 marked a turning point in the European Union’s ambition in (higher) education policy with the proposition of two novel policy ideas: the European Education Area and the European Universities Initiative. Throughout policy documents and my interviews, I found that the initiative was regularly referred to as having an ‘unprecedented level of ambition’ and seeking to ‘transform’ the higher education sector in the European Union. The alliances ‘act as trailblazers for the entire higher education sector’ (European Commission, 2024a, p. 2). Both policy ideas

are similar in the scale of their ambition and in the political support they require to be achieved at European and national level. A national policymaker spoke of a case where there was both a common ambition by Member States proclaimed at the highest level and a case of the Commission witnessing this climate and taking advantage of it to push forward bold policy ideas that would receive political support. To materialize this 'political ambition' the Commission presented a 'vision' for a European Education Area (EEA) which includes working towards the creating of 'truly' European Universities (European Commission, 2017d, pp. 5, 11). Efforts to build the EEA and the launch the EUI illustrate the Commission's statement that 'it is time to give a new direction to EU support for higher education' (European Commission, 2017a, p. 4). The European Commission has relied on the diffusion of these aspiring policy ideas in order to initiate a dialogue with other EU institutions (e.g. Council of the European Union; European Council) and Member States and make use of its agenda setting power to occupy a more significant space in the realm of European higher education (Alexiadou & Rambla, 2022). Subsequent preparatory documents and legal acts all reflect the necessity of an ambitious 'vision for the transformation of the higher education sector in Europe' (European Commission, 2022e, p. 1).

It is the scale of this strategy that has conferred to the European Universities Initiative such significance since its initial announcement in 2017. I explain the importance that has been given to this programme by four factors:

- A context of crises giving it a reason for rapid development and upscaling
- Political and institutional windows and integration of past higher education strategies' objectives with an enhanced focus on cooperation
- A nested flagship initiative within a wider education strategy at European level
- The necessity to move above and beyond the Bologna Process with an EU focused initiative

Crises and higher education in the European Union

Jean Monnet famously considered that 'Europe would be built through crises, and that it would be the sum of their solutions' (Monnet, 1978, p. 417). The accumulation of crises have led some of the EU Studies literature to theorise and highlight the potential 'disintegration' of the European Union (Rosamond, 2019; Vollaard, 2018; Webber, 2014; Zielonka, 2014). However, crises and their effects usually result in policy changes (Baumgartner & Jones, 2002; Falkner, 2016; Nolte & Weiffen,

2020). I identify three crises that have shaped the development of an education policy change, the European Universities Initiative and European Education Area: Identity – 1) Brexit and the rise of nationalisms (From 2016); 2) Health – Covid-19 Pandemic (from 2020); 3) Security – (Russian invasion of Ukraine (From 2022). Vollaard (2018) discusses the potential disintegration of the EU as the result of growing dissatisfaction from EU citizens, with the European project, of which some feel they are the ‘losers’. The author presents education as a form of ‘compensation’ that ‘might help (potential) losers avoid losses’ (Vollaard, 2018, p. 229). I argue that the development European Universities Initiative as part of the European Education Area has been a policy response to these three different crises and have given a legitimacy to the further development of an Education policy dimension for the European Union. Additionally, most of the literature on higher education regionalism in the European Union has been mostly published prior to 2016 and the Brexit referendum. There is therefore no work on the role the three crises highlighted in this section have played in shaping, reshaping or potentially disintegrating higher education regionalism in the EU.

Crisis of Identity: The rise of populist nationalisms in the European Union

While most commentators and the literature have emphasised the importance of Emmanuel Macron’s phrase on the creation of ‘twenty European universities’, the context in which this proposal is announced is

rarely mentioned. After his 2017 victory, at the French presidential elections against the far-right, largely promoting a pro-European agenda, Macron's Sorbonne speech was meant to propose the country's vision for the future of Europe. The sentences preceding the 'European Universities' announcement are all dedicated to warnings regarding the rise of nationalisms, inward looking attitudes in Europe, and the necessity of strengthening a sense of European belonging (Macron, 2017). Macron's speech coincided with moment of interrogation about the future role that education could play in the European Union following the departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union. The Directorate General for Education and Culture's (DG EAC) resources mainly come from the European budget. A year after Brexit and amid the start of the negotiations for the next Multi-annual Financial Framework (MFF), with the EU losing one of its biggest contributors to the Erasmus+ budget, there were questions about what would be the future of the EU's education portfolio and if DG EAC would remain relevant or even 'necessary at all tomorrow' (French Policy Maker). The same policymaker pointed to Brexit and its multiple impacts as one of the key factors that motivated the launch of the initiative.

Brexit and the overall rise of nationalisms in the European Union, also present in 2017 following the second round of the French presidential election, seeing far-right candidate, Marine Le Pen reach the second round of the election, brought an additional sense of urgency to the European project.

These growing nationalisms are highlighted as an existential threat to the European project (Rosamond, 2016, 2019; Zielonka, 2014). The scale of this threat is both found in EU policy documents (e.g. Commission Communications) and national declarations (e.g. Macron). The launch of the EUI is response to this crisis and proposes higher education as a way to strengthen European Identity. The 2008 economic crisis and its aftermath has posed some major issues with European integration and put pressure on the higher education sector which may be responsible for some of the shortcomings in meeting the European Higher Education Area, Europe 2020 and ERA targets. Institutions have been asked to achieve higher objectives with national resources having weakened and there has been created more bureaucratic control from national governments and given less scope of EU level education policymaking (S. L. Robertson, de Azevedo, et al., 2016). Previous EU higher education strategies focused heavily on the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, with emphasis on labour market needs and the role education could play in strengthening European economies (European Commission, 2006, 2011, 2017a) . While some of these objectives have not disappeared from the EEA strategy altogether, the role that education should play in the development of the block has changed. If this role has changed it is because the nature of the crises affecting the EU has changed. The Communication announcing the novel strategy appears in the midst of a European context marked by Brexit and the overall growth of populist nationalisms across Member States, in which 'European values and democracies are tested by awakening populist forces at home and abroad

or by the spreading of "fake news" and the manipulation of our information networks' (European Commission, 2017b, p. 2). While Brexit is never named and any national political party mentioned, their spirit inhabits their Communication and the subsequent Council Conclusions.

Education is presented as a solution to this shifting political paradigm and its mechanisms, by promoting 'active citizenship', 'European values', and 'unity in diversity' through increased cooperation between Member States (Council of the European Union, 2018; European Commission, 2017b). It is through increased cooperation that the EU's education dimension will be able to deliver on the promises of past strategies (skills, employability, mobility) while fostering an urgently needed sense of European belonging and identity to counter the rise of 'populist forces'. While these policy documents, and ensuing strategies and programmes (the European Education Area and European Universities Initiative), merely make promises about what solutions more cooperation in education throughout the EU could bring to solve this crisis, there is a shift from 2020 about education has done to resolve crises rather than what it can do. Through the European Universities Initiative, the European Commission is capable of assigning universities in Europe a new meaning and purpose: embodying Europeanness. The alliances are meant to represent European values, and through the programmes they offer, the mobility experiences and the wider integration processes they promote beyond the higher education sector, they are meant to play a role in strengthening European

identity and play a part in resolving the crises sprung by the rise of populist nationalisms.

COVID-19: Crisis or opportunity?

The COVID-19 pandemic plays a determinant role in the claims for the need of a European Education Area, both in terms of what it could bring to Europe, but also what its premise over the first years of its development have brought in terms of the resilience of education systems facing the pandemic. The European Commission considers that the pandemic has impacted 'ways of learning, teaching and communicating' in the EU, and that there is a risk that it could establish 'barriers' in learning and acquiring skills (European Commission, 2020a, p. 1). The European Education Area is presented as a means to make sure these barriers do not become generalised by building 'resilient and future looking education systems (p.1). The Commission considers that the early developments of the EEA and the emphasis placed on cooperation has been a way to facilitate the ways in which education communities in the EU have responded to the pandemic. However, whilst highlighting the early merits of its EEA strategy, the Commission also takes the opportunity to emphasise some of its key objectives that would require further development, by tying it directly to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the higher education sector, mainly: 'digitalisation, innovative pedagogies, inclusion and well-being, students, researchers and staff

support, mobility and funding' (p.10). The EEA is therefore both presented as something which has limited the early negative impacts of the pandemic, but also as a way for higher education systems in the EU to adapt to a post-COVID-19 conditions focused on 'creating knowledge across borders, disciplines and cultures for a resilient, inclusive and sustainable society' (p.19). The crisis triggered by the pandemic gives the Commission the possibility to request from Member States the possibility to work towards an 'accelerated transformation' of the higher education sector in Europe (p.19). The Council goes in similar direction as the Commission's statements, considering that the pandemic has highlighted pre-existing challenges to the higher education sector whilst also creating 'opportunities for further development within the foreseen higher education transformation agenda' (Council of the European Union, 2021d, p. 7).

Our interviews often highlighted the opportunities that came about because of the pandemic to rapidly develop essential cooperation tools for the success of the alliances. An alliance coordinator (Alliance 3) was fully aligned with the spirit of the Commission and Council's policy texts, considering that the pandemic had been 'an opportunity to boost the revamping of higher education in Europe' and initiate 'a very fast transformation of higher education in Europe'. An alliance coordinator (Alliance 2) explained that they originally faced scepticism when proposing digital mobility as one of their original objectives, as many people thought 'that mobility is physical, not online'. The coordinator

considered that when the pandemic hit, they were 'lucky to already have had that vision' for which they were encouraged to accelerate the development. Another coordinator (Alliance 25) mirrored this position considering that the pandemic accelerated 'new ways of collaborating' with digital tools such as video conference meetings which increased the regularity of meetings (every two weeks) with the partners of the alliance. The coordinator wondered whether they would have had 'such regular meetings in such a short time' without COVID-19. Another coordinator (Alliance 27) explained that one of their original topics, well-being, became central for all stakeholders involved, particularly associated partners, who embraced it 'enthusiastically' once the pandemic started. The coordinator considered that the pandemic was responsible for leading to key 'positive exchanges' on the topic. The European Universities Initiative has therefore been responsible for getting HEIs in the European Union to think about new ways of cooperating transnationally before the pandemic ever hit. These new ways of thinking and proposed programmes to solve some of the pre-existing issues with transnational cooperation appeared as a 'step ahead' once the pandemic hit, giving alliances an advantage and the opportunity to further develop tools which has not necessarily gained the same level of attention before the pandemic hit. The alliances therefore had some ready-made solution for some of the issues faced by the higher education sector in the European Union and were therefore encouraged to further develop them.

Additionally, another coordinator (Alliance 19) explained that the pandemic made national governments more flexible on legislation that would have otherwise negatively impacted the development of the initiative. Greece does not legally recognize digital mobility as a type of mobility. However, during COVID-19 they 'exceptionally granted accreditation' to digital mobility programmes. Following the pandemic, the Greek government passed a law which officially authorizes Greek institutions participating in the European Universities Initiative to operate and organize Joint International Interinstitutional Study Programs (Κ.Δ.Δ.Π.Σ), and authorizes non-Greek partner institutions in alliances to manage, organize and regulate these programmes "without restrictions" from the Greek Ministry (Υπουργείο Παιδείας, Θρησκευμάτων και Αθλητισμού, 2022, p. 4848). The Greek government therefore now gives institutions participating in alliances to participate and organise programmes that it would otherwise not recognize, therefore facilitating the development of the initiative. The COVID-19 pandemic can therefore be seen as a trigger for the flexibility and adaptation of national legislation to facilitate transnational cooperation. This process is also recognized in subsequent policy texts from the Commission. The Commission highlights the importance of finding 'hybrid solutions between physical presence and digital tools', and considers that COVID-19 has opened up the door for wider 'recognitions of foreign qualifications' and 'the partial recognition of virtual and blended learning' as it was done originally exceptionally during the pandemic period (European Commission, 2022b, p. 12, 2022e, p. 10). Similarly, the Council encourages member states to support HEIs

participating in alliances to remove obstacles with transnational cooperation and support physical, virtual and blended mobility in a more 'systematic' and 'flexible' way (Council of the European Union, 2022b, p. 4). Much like the previous crisis of identity, the crisis triggered by COVID-19 has given the Commission the possibility to establish that its higher education strategy focused on enhanced cooperation was the way forward whilst continuing to confer a sense of urgency. Despite the challenges raised by the pandemic, it also became an opportunity to push mobility processes in the European Universities Initiative. The pandemic gave legitimacy to the objectives pursued by the EUI by placing them at the forefront of what should be achieved and transformed through higher education cooperation in Europe.

Ukraine: Mobilisation of the higher education sector

As higher education systems were adjusting to the new realities linked to the rise of nationalisms and the pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine also mobilised the higher education sector and has had an impact on the development of the European Universities Initiative. The Commission considers that the strategic framework that has been implemented through the European Education Area has been the reason why the higher education sector has been able to respond so well to the Ukrainian and sanitary crises, as it 'strengthened its responsiveness in face of unexpected challenges' (European Commission, 2022a, p. 5). The

Commission considers that the response to these crises is the result of the objectives that had been set by the European Education Area such as promoting equality, equity and inclusion in higher education which has been a key manner to address the response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Additionally, the Commission considers that it is in part the flexibility of the Erasmus+ programme that has given the higher education sector the possibility to best respond to these challenges. In response to the Commission's Communication, the Council also acknowledges that the new governance mechanisms and the emphasis on cooperation brought about by the development of the European Education Area has been a way to respond to these crises (Council of the European Union, 2023).

University alliances also mobilised themselves as novel higher education actors in response to the invasion of Ukraine. An alliance coordinator (Alliance 23) explained that the alliances were a way for European higher education institutions to bring their 'relief programmes for Ukraine together to create as much impact as possible' particularly regarding welcoming students and staff to other European countries. The coordinator told us that each institution in their alliance was initially doing something on their own. The alliance's role however is to provide a 'cluster of all of those offers and then provide Ukrainian institutions them with an overview of where they can be displaced'. The coordinator believes that the alliances are a good opportunity for Ukrainian institutions to have a clearer overview of their options to better distribute

students across based on possible different needs. While there is this possibility of centralising this offer, the coordinator highlighted the fact that it is still up to the various universities as it is also dependent on their local policies and regulation. The alliances are not 'in a position to take measures that have implications on immigration'. It is the role of each university to consult their local governments to see what they are planning to do and understand how universities can play a role in best supporting these policies. Another alliance coordinator (Alliance 19) explained that as part of their work on developing transnational projects on specific themes such as migration and refugees, they developed a joint action specifically on Ukraine. One of the HEIs of the alliance in a country who shares a border with Ukraine, decided to completely open their doors to Ukrainian staff and students and is acting as a first point of contact to then potentially send them to other members of the alliance. The coordinator actions said that this type of actions is something that they would like to pursue to strengthen the global engagement of the alliance. The coordinator also explained that this requires a high level of commitment from participating institutions but that they tend to see their own interest in taking part in such initiatives.

An alliance coordinator (Alliance 18) discussed how they work with colleagues in HEIs in countries that share a border with Ukraine. The alliance seeks to bring together HEIs in Lithuania, Poland and Romania so that representatives can have a contact on this specific topic and coordinate their actions in welcoming Ukrainian refugees. The coordinator

explained that since the HEIs are currently opening their infrastructures (gymnasiums etc.) they have a strong knowledge of the current situation and what is needed as well as historical links with colleagues in Ukrainian universities. The coordinator considered that these institutions are 'essential bridges to build an efficient response' to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The coordinator explained that the alliances are leaning on what is already existing to coordinate their actions together. The FOREU1 and FOREU2 forums, that bring together all the alliance selected as part of the first and second pilot phases, have been used to put out a joint statement condemning the attack on Ukraine, calling it 'illegal'. The idea behind this joint declaration was to 'provide a collective response rather than an individual one'. The alliances spoke with Commission to discuss what the alliances could do together. The coordinator told us that the idea is to develop 'strategic partnerships adapted to the situation' with the alliances that could head these actions for the EU. This would signal that the EU commits itself to supporting the Ukrainian higher education sector 'in a systemic way, it would do so through the alliances that it supports through cooperation in all its dimensions'. However, the coordinator mentioned that part of the difficulty is that the Ukrainian universities are very different in terms of size and affected by the invasion in various ways with some 'totally destroyed, while others partially'. The alliances therefore must provide solutions on a case by case. Additionally, the 41 alliances are not structured in the same way and have different objectives. The coordinator explained that what the discussion were mainly about how to create efficient and flexible system to connect

alliances with Ukrainian universities that considers the needs and realities of both sides.

A 'rare' policy and institutional window

Policy entrepreneurship has played a determinant role in how the initiative has been shaped and pushed forward. This policy entrepreneurship is closely tied to French policymakers, institutions and national strategic priorities. The initiative:

- Reformulates some demands made by the French higher education sector mainly through 'France Universités'
- Received political momentum through French President Emmanuel Macron's Sorbonne speech
- Obtained strong support from the French Presidency of the European Council that was coming up in 2021 and being actively prepared
- Was shaped through policy entrepreneurship from a French head of unit at DG EAC

From the national to the European realm

The start of the European Universities Initiative is usually traced back to Emmanuel Macron's speech, with the objective of putting forward a

French vision for the future development of the European Union. In this speech, Macron explains that:

We should create European Universities – a network of universities across Europe with programs that have all their students study abroad and take classes in at least two languages. These European Universities will also be drivers of educational innovation and the quest for excellence. We should set for ourselves the goal of creating at least 20 of them by 2024. However, we must begin setting up the first of these universities as early as the next academic year, with real European semesters and real European diplomas.

Ahead of the 2017 President Elections, the Conference of University Presidents (CPU), now France Universités, made a series of proposals, a *vademecum*, from the sector, to ‘think the university of the future’ (Conférence des présidents d’universités, 2017c). 84 proposals were made, synthesised into a four-page report sent to the President elect, Emmanuel Macron, which explains that ‘universities must switch from collaboration policies to a strategy of institutionalised privileged partnerships which include cross-border cooperations. A reflexion must be led on the role of France’s role as a leader with Germany, as well as relations between Northern and Southern European countries’ (Conférence des présidents d’universités, 2017b, p. 18). Rather than a bold individual proposal solely looking outwards, Macron is actually mirroring the expectations and proposals stemming from the French higher education sector and therefore also sending a strong signal inward. Between this report being sent in May and Macron’s speech in September, the dialogue evolved from “structuring partnerships”, to “transnational campuses” and finally into “European universities” (Conférence des présidents

d'universités, 2017a, p. 8). The CPU proposal mirrors what would later come out in the first EUI call: 3-6 partners, synergies between research and education, use of existing tools (mobility of students and researchers), 'long-term process so that the programme can have the time to leave a mark on each participating institutions'. A French policy maker explained that in the weeks following the speech, the Ministry started working on and circulating policy notes. While the 'Sorbonne speech' is addressed outwards and meant to signal a renewal in French leadership for the future construction of the European Union, the proposal for European Universities also looks inwards.

Beyond looking inwards however, the speech also seizes an upcoming policy window with the French Presidency of the European Council. An EU policymaker explained that while the policy idea was being developed 'looking forward to the French Presidency of the Council. Education was mentioned a lot of with the French link in mind'. Regarding the French Presidency of the European Council, an alliance coordinator (Alliance 17) mentioned that the French authorities 'at all levels' had been very 'powerful and efficient go-betweens'. A coordinator (Alliance 13) explained that it is only since 2021 that Member States started speaking directly to alliances, at least through their national HEIs taking part in alliances. However, the coordinator revealed that the French Ministry of higher education and research, organised a meeting with alliances in preparation of the French presidency of the European Council set to start two months later. The alliance coordinator explained that what is at stake with the EUI

during the French presidency is 'symbolic', since the idea of 'European Universities' is attributed to Macron. The coordinator considered that this created a 'special French interest' for the initiative. Additionally, the coordinator mentioned, that since its higher education minister, Frederique Vidal, had formerly been a University president, she saw a potential for a 'positive transformation of the higher education sector'. Many coordinators (Alliance 7, 11, 27, 28) explained that the meetings organised in the framework of the French Presidency were an opportunity for the ministry of higher education and research to interact directly with the alliance coordinators, and therefore the alliances as actors of their own rights, rather than only interacting with representatives from their national HEIs participating in alliances. One of the coordinators (Alliance 7) presented as a 'novelty' that they hoped would continue with future presidencies. The coordinator said that this was an opportunity that they did not have beforehand to tell member states directly how they can help and how barriers can be removed. The coordinator's alliance made the decision to send them instead of the representative of a French partner of the alliance to avoid a dialogue 'in-between French'. They explained that other alliances made an opposite choice, which led the minister to comment that it was not very interesting for her to speak with French university representatives as she already has many opportunities to do so. Another coordinator (Alliance 23) also highlighted how the Minister did not want to speak to university president or rectors, and instead wanted to have an open dialogue with the alliance coordinators in order to get a sense of what was happening with the alliances on an 'operational level,

with obstacles, and what was needed'. The coordinator explained that the Minister saw the French presidency as a way to push the European Universities Initiative to other Member States, and to have them support their national universities participating in alliances either financially, legally or at the very least morally. A coordinator (Alliance 22) considered that the actions taken by the Ministry in the framework of the French Presidency had 'put universities back to the centre of the political debate, after having been neglected for a long time'. The coordinator went on to explain that the meetings organised were also a way to signal to the other Member States that a dialogue with alliance is possible and necessary in order to overcome barriers. The coordinator said that at the very least it was viewed very positively to have a minister that is 'prepared to sit down with them and listen, which doesn't mean she has to take on board everything'.

This reflects what my interviews revealed about the debates that took place between Member States prior to the publication of these Council Conclusions about contrasting visions of what these European Universities could look like. An interview with a French policymaker explained that Macron's proposal was followed by a 'rare' moment when there is 'top down political' proposal, an 'overall a shared enthusiasm from national and European higher education communities, which is not always the case. It brought forward an issue that was expected by the sector'. Macron's statements were quickly followed by policy notes on how to shape Macron's declaration. However, other Member States also started

to think about what these 'European Universities' could mean. Similarly, the Danish Minister for Higher Education publicly endorsed the proposal of a creation of a network of universities and joint degrees in order to enhance the quality of EU HEIs (Nicholson, 2018). All interviewed participants from national higher education ministries expanded on some of the initial discussions between Member States - that have persisted throughout the development of the European Universities Initiative - about the actual form of these European Universities and about their exact purposes: Should they focus on research rather than education? Should they be inclusive and attract the full diversity of the European higher education landscape or should they only include the most prestigious research-intensive universities in the EU? The Conclusions mention that the future objectives and the support these 'European Universities' are to receive will be defined jointly between Member States and the Commission. While previous literature on the development of higher education policy in the European Union describes it as a 'tug of war' (M.-H. Chou & Gornitzka, 2014), these six months appear as a situation more comparable to a 'three legged race', with ideas from Member States (individually and collectively) are used in unison with the proposals of the European Commission.

On the side of DG EAC, they felt that the Sorbonne Speech gave an impetus to embrace the European Universities idea. A policymaker explained that DG EAC needed 'a hook into the Presidency and that would be it'. 2017 also marked a change of leadership in Unit B2 at DG EAC, in

charge of higher education, with Vanessa Debiais-Sainton being appointed as head of unit. My interviews with policy makers at DG EAC involved in the initiative mentioned that with the change of leadership, the new head of unit 'wanted to bring her own big ideas. She took over. There was an existing strategy for higher education. That was sort of set up, agreed with all the stakeholders and it needed years to be implemented properly. Suddenly we needed a new big and sexy idea.' The previous strategy for universities had been published a few months earlier, in May 2017, and was the result of consultations that took place over two years with stakeholders of the entire higher education sector in the European Union. The conclusions of these consultations were displayed in a communication by the Commission On a renewed agenda for higher education in Europe. This communication was agreed upon with all the stakeholders of the sector and it had taken 2 years to negotiate. This Communication and its proposals were very pragmatic; however, they did not present anything new or anything that was groundbreaking in the higher education sector in the European Union.

With the change of leadership in Unit B2 of the Directorate General, there was an ambition to create something new that would have the potential of becoming bold and ambitious and transform the higher education sector in the European Union. This was also an opportunity for Debiais-Sainton to really 'leave a mark' and assert her leadership in the Unit. During my interviews, there were mentions of regular meetings with the founder of the Centre for Research and Interdisciplinarity (now Learning Planet

Institute), François Taddei. My interviews revealed that there were multiple meetings between Taddei and the head of the higher education unit of DG EAC, in order to flesh out the 'European Universities' prior to proposing it at the Gothenburg Social Summit. Taddei played an important part in linking the idea of European Universities to the labour market relevance, and the Sustainable Development Goals. Taddei's ideas were taken very 'seriously' by the head of unit who wanted to 'put them in' the proposal. A policymaker explained that Taddei was present at all of the different French consultations and was one of the stakeholders who had sent 'a letter to Macron's team about 'European Universities'. The policymaker explained that he worked 'backstage to develop the idea with this long letter explaining why things should be done in a certain way when the initiative was being developed'.

Corbett (2005) details how key actors in EU institutions have played a role in shaping European higher education policy since the premises of the European community in the 1950s, leading her to consider that 'there are almost always politically skilled individuals to respond in specific contextual and institutional circumstances to the opportunity to advance policy ideas' (Corbett, 2005, p. 151). Corbett highlights a series of reasons for why this policy entrepreneurship has been successful at different periods of time for the construction of Europe: a) there is an opportunity for a new policy to emerge due to a specific context at a given time b) a commitment to this new policy for which energy, time and resources are deployed to make it a reality c) an individual or an institution making full

use of the function that has been given to them d) making use of a multiplicity of instruments and processes at their disposal. Corbett's study tends to focus on individual policy entrepreneurs as being the main reason for the advancement of EU institution's role in shaping higher education policy, considering that 'the policy entrepreneur is a master of process, seizing opportunities that arise from institutional rules and procedures both formal and informal' (Corbett, 2005, p. 186). However, Corbett recognizes that while the ambition, skill and power persuasion of an individual plays an important role in the implementation of a new bold and innovative policy, institutional circumstances are the key factor for any policy change.

Recent scholarship on policy entrepreneurship has moved away from individuals to focus on the policy entrepreneurship processes, considering that most policy advancements are usually the result of multiple individuals working together within and across institutions. I argue that the development of the European Universities Initiative, corresponds to a case of policy entrepreneurship, 'a specific pattern of action finalised towards the promotion of policy innovation' (Capano & Galanti, 2021, p. 6; Mintrom, 2020). Capano & Galanti (2021) identify a series of phases for the enactment of policy entrepreneurship:

- Building coalitions in support of the 'change pursued'. This requires building 'consensus' and 'trust' which is required for the adoption of the new policies (Capano & Galanti, 2021, p. 7; Petridou, 2018).

- 'Seeking opportunities and attention' from stakeholders at all levels as well as the public by displaying 'political acumen', and having access to a wide range of policymakers (Capano & Galanti, 2021, p. 7; Kingdon, 2014).
- The actors that are in charge of the policy entrepreneurship need an 'expertise and the time (...) to advocate for new ideas'. For these new ideas to take shape and to be promoted, actors rely on discourse to orientate the debates on specific policy problems. The level of novelty is not what is the most at stake here, but rather rearticulating existing ideas in an 'original way' to create new links between problems and possible solutions (Béland & Cox, 2016; Capano & Galanti, 2021, p. 6).
- The entrepreneurship requires to come up with policy solutions 'as a recombination or packaging of policies and problems'. This requires expert reports that can demonstrate that these solutions respond to specific problems and that they are workable (Capano & Galanti, 2021; Mintrom, 2013; Oborn et al., 2011, p. 7).

Building coalitions

Policy coordination has been at the heart of the construction of the European Universities Initiative, as the wider higher education sector was invited to reflect on what these 'European Universities' would be the process they put in place, getting together various levels of stakeholders, engaging 'everybody, from the highest ministerial level to students'. A policymaker from the Commission said that the head of Unit 'played it very well'. Originally the meetings were done at the highest level, through meetings with national ministries, and this was then taken to the programme committees. There was then a consultation with all stakeholders of the higher education sector to co-construct the initiative. A policymaker explained that despite going through this whole process of involving everyone, the head of unit 'already had the idea worked out'. The purpose of the consultations was not for co-creation but to obtain the 'buy-in'. The same policymaker revealed that 'people came up with different ideas and she just shot them down, saying, "that's interesting", but she never took them on board". What was 'necessary in order to push a new action' was to create a buzz around it and get the 'buy-in'. The idea of the 'pilot' was also a way to bring everyone on board. Launching a two-year pilot meant that 'the amount of money was low scale' and not too much money was being diverted from other Erasmus+ programmes.

Additionally, alliance coordinators often highlighted the role of the head of unit, and the deputy head of unit in supporting the alliances, and the direct communication they had with them. An alliance coordinator (Alliance 17) considered that the work done by DG EAC was 'impressive'

with multiple meetings directly with the head of unit. The coordinator said that the 'energy and commitment from DG EAC was admirable'. Another coordinator (Alliance 18) also considered that the relationship with the heads of unit was 'clear and efficient'. An alliance coordinator (Alliance 28) explained that they had a direct link with the heads of unit in case of any question or issue. Several alliances (Alliance 22, Alliance 6, Alliance 10) consider that the Commission has played a proactive role in engaging with the alliances and listen to what we have to say'. A coordinator (Alliance 14) explained that while DG EAC does not always have solutions to the problems that they are facing, they are always there to at least listen in a constructive way. The coordinator said that this was the first time they had experienced this in the implementation of an Erasmus+ project. The coordinator said, that as an alliance they felt the European Universities Initiative was much more than a project, and that they felt that DG EAC acted in a way that reflected this position. The coordinator explained that the European Universities Initiative is much 'more than a project for DG EAC because it offers the possibility for their political action to evolve'. This mutual understanding of the EUI as more than a project creates a 'cohabitation which functions very well'. Another coordinator (Alliance 20) also agreed that they had never seen such a direct link with the Commission despite having extensive experience on EU led education projects.

Political acumen and communication

A European Commission policymaker considered that if it had not been for the entrepreneurship of the head of Unit, the initiative would not have worked. Beyond policy coordination as a governance mechanism to push a novel policy idea forward, I identify two key aspects of the entrepreneurship that can account for the success of the initiative: speed and saturation. The policymaker highlighted the speed with which the initiative was pushed as a key component of its success. An examination of the policy documents of this period gives a clear account of this speed. There are 80 days between the mention of European Universities in Macron's speech, and the approval at the highest level (European Council) for the creation of 'European Universities'. It is in this short amount of time where the Commission deployed all its efforts to shape a few seconds of a very long speech into a flagship initiative with the ambition to transform the higher education landscape in the European Union. However, there are some questions about how a policy idea could become strong enough in such a short amount of time to become not only a flagship initiative, but the one which concentrates such an important part of the Erasmus+ budget, which inevitably condemns other pre-existing initiatives that would no longer benefit from their slice of the budget. A policymaker explained that this was far from being the only European higher education policy action at the time. However, DG EAC's efforts were transformed into what a policymaker called 'a communication campaign' and 'branding'. The head of Unit, had to pass this through the Erasmus+ and EDUC

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committees to be able to push this forward. A policymaker explained that 'the speed at which the head of unit caught everyone by surprise, to the extent that no one had the right tools to block it'. It is this speed which 'surprised the Erasmus+ committees, internal people at the Commission, the stakeholders, DG RTD, and no one was ready to fight back'. It was not even clear what the alliances were, but they were mentioned in every single communication opportunity: research communications, briefings etc. A policymaker explained that she was 'very good at pushing them forward as policy options even when they were underdeveloped'. For example, the European Education Area was not initially meant to have such a strong higher education component. However, because of a desire to push the 'European Universities' policy idea, it was introduced as an EEA action, at a time when it was not clear what European Universities would be.

Another policymaker explained that the head of unit 'hijacked' every occasion to add 'European Universities' in every policy document, policy development that she could think of. DG EAC pushed this policy idea for each 'State of the Union' speech from 2017 to now. While the idea did not end up in each speech, it has continued to be pushed as a suggestion. A policymaker considered that the success in the development of the initiative is in large part due to 'the speed and the throwing of the net across the board and making sure the alliances were inserted everywhere'. The head of unit also put all of her teams to work 'at an incredible pace'. Another policymaker explained that this is how the head

of unit got the 'buy-in' at the political level. When briefings were prepared for Commissioners, policy officers at DG EAC were 'forced to find a way to put in European university alliances' even if there were no apparent link with them. The head of unit vetted all of these briefings, and if a policy officer did not mention them, they would face a 'show down' with the head of unit and have to explain why the alliances were not mentioned.

Expertise and resources

The EUI is not the first initiative by the Commission whose purpose is to bring universities together. Previous initiatives such as Erasmus Mundus and Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions were designed for these initiatives. However, an EU policymaker highlighted that since these actions are limited in time, usually lasting 3 years it raised issues tied to their sustainability and the need for a more ambitious visions with actions that would have the opportunity to spread out longer in time. Beyond temporal issues Erasmus+ programme evaluations preceding the launch of the initiative also highlighted a large number of issues with past cooperation actions (European Commission, 2018c; European Commission & ICF, 2017). Erasmus+ Key Actions are divided into 3 Key actions funding mobility (KA1), cooperation (KA2) mobility and policy reform (KA3). KA1 represents roughly half the projects received (European Commission, 2018c; European Commission & ICF, 2017). In contrast KA2 only funds about 17%, as 'the demand (...) exceeds the funding available (...) the

success rates are low and scores for successful projects high. This means that the bar for those who wish to enter the programme with little or no experience is very high' (European Commission, 2018c, p. 17). Erasmus+ cooperation actions therefore notorious for being fiercely competitive and creating an advantage for organisations that have had more experience in participating in funded projects or who have a long-standing history of cooperation. Prior to the 2014-20 Erasmus+ programme Higher Education was under represented in terms of cooperation projects which have since then known a significant increase (European Commission, 2018c, p. 31). This funding phase has sought to fund 'fewer large-scale projects' in order to limit funding fragmentation and focus on quality, alignment with EU strategic priorities, innovation, and continue previous achievements regarding better geographical balance of projects. Furthermore, the Erasmus+ programme evaluations (2018c; 2017) highlight that significant system level impacts and policy changes are more likely to occur at local, national and European level to through a) large scale mobility actions b) involving high level influential stakeholders from the beginning c) an alignment between national and European priorities.

The new head of unit had extensive experience working on Erasmus Mundus, as a past Erasmus+ Head of Sector, and MSCA actions, having been policy officer for these actions within DG EAC. Debiais-Sainton had 'insider information on why these other short-term initiatives were not pulling their weight' in terms of what needed to be achieved at a European level for European higher education and was fully aware of the conclusions

of these reports prior to their publication. The faith put in the European Universities Initiative was not 'blind faith'. A policymaker explained that she 'knew the Erasmus programme in higher education on the back of her hand but never thought highly of the strategic/corporation partnerships' that took up an important portion of the budget despite 'not making an impact'. She considered that it was 'under resourced' as there was only 1/3 of a person working on the entire strategic partnerships policy, budget, monitoring and evaluation. European Universities were also launched to have the possibility to distance themselves from past actions such as Erasmus Mundus and MSCA. A policymaker explained that at each briefing, they had to explain how the EUI was different from these past actions. The EUI was structured around 3 Ss: Sustainability, Structural Change, Systemic change. The head of unit was convinced that the initiative had the potential to bring about systemic changes, whereas previous instruments could only bring forward incremental change, whereas the EUI could 'jump'.

New packaging

The European Universities Initiative is also situated within the continuity of past European higher education strategies. The EUI incorporates lessons learnt from past

agendas and makes use of an open policy and institutional window for a recombination and repackaging of existing problems under a newly branded idea. Ideas do not 'come out of the blue' and instead recycle a lot of the objectives that had previously emerged at European level for a development of an EU focused higher education policy (Corbett, 2005). The EU's higher education strategies have progressively shifted in focus: the 'modernisation agenda' in the mid-00s and early 2010s tended to focus on the role on education to foster skills and employment. The 'renewed agenda' of the mid 2010s also focused on skills but emphasised the importance of mobility (European Commission, 2006, 2011, 2017a). As a new strategy, the European Education Area, does not discard skills, employability and mobility but highlights the importance of cooperation between member states and educational institutions. The renewed agenda was described by an EU policymaker as 'not sexy in any way for the new leadership. It was rational evidence-based document led by a team of people at the Commission who really believed in quality and relevance of higher education, but it was not sexy at all and there was nothing interesting enough in it to propose to the Gothenburg Summit'. DG EAC felt that the summit and Macron's speech were a policy window where they needed 'something sexy, big and attractive to propose'. The policymaker mentioned that Macron's idea was taken forward because it was a 'big grand idea' with 'better branding'. While the renewed agenda was not taken further in was not abandoned entirely. Instead, its objectives were incorporated in the European Universities Initiative, as it was impossible to 'ignore everything that the stakeholders had agreed to'

a few months before. This is the reason why there was initially so much expected from the alliances as they had to be relevant for ‘the labour market, sustainable finance of higher education, mobility and everything else that was in the renewed agenda that now had to be present in this new strategy’.

While the economic crisis that shook the EU may have hampered a rapid and ambitious development of European higher education, the size, range and budget of Erasmus+ has continuously grown (see Table 2), the Commission has gained extended experience in policy coordination through the Open Method of Coordination and the implementation of the European Semester (Brøgger, 2019; Eeva, 2021; Radaelli, 2020), and has had the opportunity to reflect on successes and persisting challenges in its actions and programmes paving the way for what needs to happen next in a clearer manner. The development of the European Universities Initiative and the European Education Area appear at a moment where the European Commission is capable on capitalizing on the experience of the expansion of its range of actions in education. The European Council sets out the existing instruments that the EU has at its disposal in order to achieve the necessary transformations mainly, ‘incentive measures’ and non-binding legal acts such as recommendations and conclusions. The European Council also highlights the possibility of relying on ‘pilot projects and advocate for additional Erasmus+ funding. (European Council, 2017b, p. 1). Considering all these instruments are existing it also situates the launch of both ideas as very much within the framework of establishing

European education policymaking processes while displaying ambitious ideas.

Table 2 *Evolution of Erasmus budget 2007-2027* (European Commission, 2021; European Commission & ICF, 2017)

Evolution of Erasmus+ and predecessor programmes Budget			
Period	2007-2013	2014-2020	2021-2027
Budget	€9Bn	€14.8Bn	€26.2Bn

The EC communication that first proposes the creation of the EEA and launch of the EUI mirrors this context, situating their inception within the objective of *strengthening of European identity* (2017d). In just few weeks' time the Commission puts forward an ambitious political proposal ahead of heads of states' meeting in Gothenburg but following Macron's speech and re-using some of the vocabulary of the declaration. Macron speaks of 'European Universities' as networks of universities with: a) enhanced mobility b) multilingual approach c) pedagogical innovations d) excellent research e) European Semesters f) European Diplomas (Macron, 2017). The Communication by the Commission reflects on the context of changing times, profound transformations and risk of fragmentation highlighted by Macron and also asserts shared objectives to most of the ones set forward in his speech: the creation of European Universities as networks of higher education institutions and the necessity of enhanced

mobility and multilingual approaches in the European Union (European Commission, 2017d). While in the past and since then, most of the decisions regarding EU (higher) education policy have been made at the level of the ministers, in 2017, within a month's time, the centrality of renewing EU involvement in education policy was made at the highest level through the heads of states, both at the Gothenburg Social Summit (November) and through Council Conclusions (December) (See Table 3).

Table 3 *Key Policy developments for the premise of the European Universities Initiative*

Date	Event	Summary
30-May-17	European Commission Communication <i>On a renewed EU agenda for higher education</i>	First Communication in six years dedicated entirely to Higher Education
26-Sep-17	Macron Speech on <i>New Initiative for Europe</i>	European integration and education which proposes the idea of European Universities as a network of Universities - European Semester
Sep-Nov 2017	Circulation of policy notes from National Ministries	French Ministry refines ideas from the president and possible application; Other Member States also start proposing ideas about what 'European Universities' could look like
14-Nov-17	European Commission Communication: <i>Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture</i>	Incorporates multiple ideas from Macron's speech (e.g. Creation of European Universities) and proposes creation of a European Education Area
17-Nov-17	Gothenburg Summit	Convergence at the highest level (heads of states) around the ideas proposed around European

		Universities and European Education Area and Proclamation of European Pillar of Social Rights with Access to Education and Training as First of Twenty Principles
14-Dec-17	Council of the European Union Conclusions <i>On a renewed EU agenda for higher education</i>	Incorporates most of the Commission's suggestions from the May 2017 Communication
14-Dec-17	European Council Conclusions	Approval at the highest level of the Commission's proposal and officially states convergences that took place at Gothenburg; Tasks the Commission with the development of a European Education Area and creation of 'European Universities'

The modernisation Agenda(s) for Higher Education (2006, 2011), agreed upon by member states part of Europe 2020 strategy set out five key priorities: a) increasing the number of graduates with a 40% target by improving access to HE and lowering drop-out rates b) improving the quality of teaching and learning c) increasing international cooperation and mobility numbers d) synergies between education research and innovation e) more efficient funding and governance mechanisms. In 2015 the Commission launched a public consultation to take stock of the progress made on these priorities and to propose next steps (European Commission, 2016). The consultation process targeted Member States and relevant HE stakeholders acknowledges the progress made towards the objectives of the 2011 modernisation agenda particularly in increasing the number of graduates and lowering dropout rates but identifies persistent challenges. Based on these challenges the Communication on a renewed agenda for higher education (2017) identifies four priority actions based

on the successes with the modernisation agenda but point to a series of challenges that remain to be overcome: a) skills mismatch b) having 'inclusive' and 'connected' HE systems c) fostering innovation through HE d) structural issues linked to governance and funding (European Commission, 2017a, p. 2).

Beyond the priority actions the Commission also seeks to use cooperation within 'European HEIs' between students, research, staff and governments to increase quality (European Commission, 2017a, p. 11). The consultation that led to these policy directions also stressed the importance of mobility and internationalisation as a vector for quality (European Commission, 2016, p. 13). The Commission still very much thinks with the frameworks of the Bologna Process and plans to gather member states to discuss the future directions to be taken by the European Higher Education Area. The modernisation agenda (2011) and the renewed agenda (2017) present a lot of similarities regarding their priority actions which reveals a strategic emphasis on skills, innovation and performance indicators for the EU higher education sector that are to be achieved such as mobility and graduate targets. The development and successive nature of both agendas reveals a pragmatic coherence in the EU's higher education objectives as well as common policy making mechanism relying on a long-standing policy coordination process, involving key stakeholders from the sector and relevant national higher education and research ministries to agree on common objectives. In terms of language both agendas speak of modernising and renewing the higher education sector

in the EU's involvement in higher education policy to meet commonly agreed upon political targets over years. An EU policymaker explained that the renewed agenda 'agreed with all the stakeholders, and it needed years to be implemented properly'. Another EU policymaker explained that once the Gothenburg Summit was announced and that it was revealed that education and training was going to be high on the agenda, the higher education unit in DG EAD saw it as an 'opportunity to make a mark for [themselves]' and decided to 'chuck the [previous] strategy out the window'. The policymakers explained that this decision took place at the level of the unit leadership, describing a climate where none of the policy officers were involved. The decision to come up with a 'new big idea' and move on from the previous strategy took place over 'a weekend. The leadership got together on a Saturday and a Sunday and came up with the idea'.

European Education Area and European Universities Initiative: An interlinked evolution since 2017

Nested policy ideas

While the idea of 'European Universities' originally came from France as a result of newly elected French President Emmanuel Macron taking in some propositions that had stemmed from his very own national higher education sector (Conférence des présidents d'universités, 2017c), the idea of a European Education Area (EEA) stems directly from the European

Commission's Directorate General for Education and Culture (DG EAC). A European Commission policymaker explained that the idea of the EEA appeared as a way for DG EAC to gain more terrain than the Directorate for Research and Innovation (DG RTD), who was already responsible for the European Research Area (ERA). While the ERA had been established over a decade ago and was according to a European policymaker 'not a success. It was something DG RTD would always refer to'. DG EAC's proposal of creating the EEA is a response to RTD's influence and its ERA, revealing internal territorial wars going on'. The policymaker also explained that the Commission had the intention of 'reinforcing the idea' of the European Education Area 'with a flagship initiative' articulated around 'European Universities' which became the European Universities Initiative (EUI). The EEA and EUI are therefore two policy ideas that emerge simultaneously, but which do not exist separately or in parallel. Both policy ideas are nested with the EUI being one of the main drivers in achieving the EEA. The Commission explains that all of the actions used to develop the European Education Area, such as 'European Universities' are not separate but rather 'intertwined' (European Commission, 2018a, p. 9).

The development of both policy ideas reveals the policymaking dialogue that exists between the European Commission and the Council of the European Union (Member States). Member States can require for the Commission to make certain proposals or reports for the further development of European Education policy. However, it also has the power to make its own spontaneous proposals. The proposals formulated

by the Commission are then subject to the approval of Member States. These proposals must be approved either at the highest level, by European Heads of States (European Council), or at a lower, ministerial level (Council of the European Union. Member States have the power to modify, enhance, or reject any of these proposals). The policymaking process therefore results as a dialogue between Member States and the Commission that can be observed through the back-and-forth of policy documents stemming from each institution, usually Communications and Proposals for Council Recommendations (European Commission), and Conclusions, Resolutions, or Recommendations (Council of the European Union; European Council). The simultaneous development of the European Education Area and the European Universities Initiative reveals this process in a careful movement of proposals of ideas and strategic objectives that are often retained but modified or forgotten. While the European Education Area can be seen as a space, it is first and foremost the newest strategy in forging a European education dimension.

The European Commission starts off by proposing to create a European Education Area with a strong focus on cooperation and mobility that it hopes to enhance by 2025. A series of key objectives are put forward such as achieving: the mutual recognition of qualifications across the EU, modernizing the curricula, developing innovation in and through education, supporting teaching professions, strengthening a shared European identity and creating interconnected world class universities. To achieve the later, the Commission proposes to create 'European

Universities' which are thought of as networks of higher education institutions that would have the possibility to cooperate seamlessly across border and compete internationally. A European policymaker explained that the Communication (2017b) was strategically published right before European heads of states would gather for the Gothenburg Social Summit, which was also an opportunity for European heads of states to proclaim a commitment to social dimension of the European Union at the highest level with the proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). The first principle of the EPSR concerns education and training. The Commission therefore saw the Summit as a political window where bold and ambitious policy ideas could be presented directly to heads of states to accelerate their approval and launch. While a more standard policymaking process is the result of a dialogue between the European Commission and the Council of the European Union, the launch of the EEA and 'European Universities' also rests upon the centrality and decision-making powers of the European Council. The original approval of the creation of a European Education Area and 'European Universities' initially appears at the highest level (the European Council) through European Council Conclusions (2017) before then being fleshed out in more detail through Council of the European Union Conclusions (2018).

These Council Conclusions (2018) somewhat revise some of the key objectives originally outlined by the European Commission. While enhancing cooperation and mobility are still at the heart of the EEA should achieve, the importance of developing a lifelong learning continuum (from

K-12 to Tertiary education) is also highlighted. Similarly, the Council also sees the development of the EEA as an opportunity to improve the overall access to education in the EU while also promoting digital skills. Much like the Communication by the Commission a strong emphasis is also put on the ways through which education and existing programmes like Erasmus+ can be used to strengthen a sense of European identity and values. European Universities occupy an important space in these Conclusions with a much more developed idea of the shape that they could take. The overall form of networks of higher education institutions is retained as well as their 'flagship role' in achieving the European Education Area. However, their purposes go much beyond objectives of resolving existing issues with transnational cooperation and competitiveness. These cross-border networks are to be 'geographically and socially inclusive', promote synergies between education, research and innovation, further strengthen multi-linguism, promote joint programmes and 'empower' European citizens (p.9). These diverse objectives reflect a lack of clarity in regard to the purpose of these 'European Universities' and reveal the possibility to assign them with a large panel of vague tasks and objectives.

To resolve these debates and in the interest of time, the following EC Communication and subsequent Erasmus+ call for the creation of 'European Universities' puts forward all the broad objectives agreed upon by the Council for the development of European universities: focus on values and identity, strengthening competitiveness, quality and

attractiveness of European HEIs, synergies between research, innovation and education. However, the resolution to the debates, particularly regarding which and how many HEIs to include in the programme, was achieved by introducing a key aspect in the launch of this new programme: experimentation. 'European Universities' are presented as 'bottom-up networks' with 'no one-size fits all' (European Commission, 2018a, p. p.8). These experimentations are intended to lead to 'European Universities' that could then become 'models of good practice' for the wider higher education sector (European Commission, 2018b, p. 126). A European policymaker insisted on the original importance of these networks to act as 'models' by establishing structures to 'share their knowledge and experience with others'. While the policymakers explained that this is not what ended up happening in the end with the Commission waiting nearly five years after the launch of the first alliances to set up a monitoring framework, the promise of having the alliances be 'models of good practice' was key in order 'to sell the initiative to all stakeholders and to satisfy both the excellence camp and the inclusion camp. They told the inclusion camp that since these will be models for everyone else, everyone will benefit, not just the ones who are getting money'. A representative from DAAD explained that they believed that the 'European universities should act as role models, game changer, accelerators and testbeds. They should provide a quantum leap in any field'. However, the stakeholder considered that it would be important to 'give them more time to develop themselves. I think this is sometimes too ambitious. They are meant to work on so many different topics and

this needs time. So, we should maybe'. The stakeholder suggested for both Member States, the HE sector, and the Commission to ' Lower our expectations to the level of time.'

Strategic framework for the European Education Area and the European Universities Initiative

The subsequent Council resolution (2019) call for a strategic framework for cooperation in the European Education Area in which Erasmus+ is to play a key role by promoting inclusive, lifelong learning and innovation-driven policies through learning mobility and partnerships and which focuses on the importance of measures to ensure equal promotion of all levels and forms of education and training. This resolution considers that the European Universities Initiative is 'ambitious' and has the potential to be a 'game changing step forward' (Council of the European Union, 2019, p. 4). To achieve the European Education Area with the level of 'ambition' displayed, the European Commission offers for it to be articulated around six dimensions: Quality; Inclusion & Gender; Green and Digital; Teachers & Trainers; Higher Education; Geopolitical Dimension. The Higher Education dimension is to be supported by a 'transformation' agenda for higher education of which the European Universities Initiative is to be the main driver. The transformation agenda (2020a) signals a new step after the modernisation agenda for HE (European Commission, 2006, 2011), and the renewed agenda for HE (European Commission, 2017a). The European Education Area is now supposed to deliver transformation

(European Commission, 2020a), based on the results of the experiences led by the European University Alliances by creating a policy framework capable of making ambitious transnational cooperation between HEIs in Europe a reality. The Council's response to the Communication agrees that the EEA should be ambitious and establishes that it will be the 'overarching political objective of the new strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training' (Council of the European Union, 2021c, p. 3). However, the six dimensions of the EEA proposed by the Commission have been converted into five strategic priorities: 'quality, equity and inclusion'; 'lifelong learning and mobility'; 'Education profession'; 'Reinforcing European Higher Education'; 'Green & digital'. Reinforcing European Higher Education will go forward by encouraging European HEIs to form 'deeper transnational alliances' to increase mobility and participation for students and staff, improve research and innovation within universities while seeking synergies with the European Research Area. Furthermore, the transformation agenda was later renamed with a more sober title as the 'European strategy for universities'. A coordinator (Alliance 13) explained that 'at one point, they changed the name for it, but no one really knows why'. The coordinator considered that the European strategy for universities took away from the idea of transformation of the higher education landscape as well as from the focus on the alliances.

The European Universities Initiative as one of the key actions of the European Education Area

After a series of consultations with the higher education sector, the alliances, and member states, the European Commission put forward its *European Strategy for Universities* (2022b). The strategy proposes a series of key actions for the higher education dimension of the European Education Area to be achieved: a) Continued development and full roll out of the European Universities Initiative b) European Student Card Initiative c) Legal Statute for the alliances d) a European Degree. While the EUI and Student card have already been launched and are expected to scale up, two new actions are announced, the legal statute and the European Degree. Much like the EUI was 'nested' within the European Education Area, both new 'actions' are nested within the European Universities Initiative, as it is the alliances that are expected to experiment with the development of these two new instruments. The degree and the legal statute are meant to strengthen the influence of the European Universities Initiative and increase their reach. These 4 actions 'will - taken together - leverage the strength of universities across Europe and further strengthen both their inclusion and excellence in all their activities' (European Commission, 2022b, p. 5). The Strategy for Universities is accompanied by a proposal for a Council Recommendation which outlines how these different actions can be put in place in practice, and how Member States can best support their developments. One of the key purposes of the further rollout of the European Universities Initiative is to achieve wider cooperation between the different types of HEIs in the EU, from large-

scale research-intensive universities to universities of applied sciences or vocational training institutions. The proposal highlights the importance of more sustainable funding for the alliances, that need to achieve synergies with existing programmes such as Horizon Europe. The additional funding and the synergy between the funding instruments are presented as a condition for the long-term success and deeper integration of alliances. Beyond, funding the two additional actions proposed are also presented as condition for the alliances to achieve their goals. The legal statutes is presented as a way for the alliances to share resources across institutions such as ‘financial, human, digital and physical resources, and services’ (European Commission, 2022e, p. 2).

The European Degree on the other hand is aimed at resolving some of the key issues regarding the development and recognitions of joint programmes across multiple institutions. The Proposal for Council Recommendation further emphasises how ‘joining forces’ and ‘transnational cooperation’ are the way forward in order to strengthen the competitiveness and attractiveness of European HEIs, while offering the possibility to tackle common challenges such as those related to the green and digital transitions. The Councils recommendation agrees to some of the possible developments to achieve EEA objectives such as pursuing the full roll out of the European Universities Initiative. However, the possible nested developments within the EUI such as the development of a joint degree and legal statute are subject to exploring their actual necessity, and are not receiving any commitment from Member States,

apart from allowing an experimentation and the review of results to potentially take further action.

We can observe a design in the policymaking process in which each of the policy developments within the overarching European Education Area strategy are presented as ways to assure the success of the overarching policy while also being brand new entities that stem new developments. This process has taken place since the launch of the European Education Area with the European Universities Initiative, the legal statute for the alliances, and the European Degree.

Role of the European Universities Initiative in progress towards achieving the European Education Area and future perspectives

In late 2022, the Commission proposed an account of the progress that had been achieved with the European Education Area and the European Universities Initiative, since their launch five years prior. In this Communication (2022f) the EUI is named as one of the key actions that have been developed in order to achieve the EEA alongside future possible developments European degree and legal statute for alliances. The EEA is considered to have played a 'pivotal role' in achieving the wider policy agenda in the European Union which includes supporting promotion of a European way of life, digital and green economy, and fostering equality and democracy (European Commission, 2022f, p. 2).

Additionally, the EEA is also presented as an important element that has given the European Union the possibility to overcome 'unexpected challenges' and crises including the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In response to this Communication, the Council names the EUI as one of the essential as a key factor to achieve the EEA with focus on sustainability and strengthening research and innovation. The Council notes, that achieving the EEA by 2025 requires strong political commitment from Member States, the Commission, and relevant stakeholders at national and European levels. The Council also highlights the importance of synergies with EHEA, ERA, while avoiding duplication of resources and structures. The

4 Key priority areas highlighted for the EEA: Equity inclusion; enhancing teaching profession; removing obstacles for mobility; Lifelong learning. Recent policy documents from the Commission (2024a) have continued to recognize the EUI key in progress of the EEA with transnational cooperation driving reforms and the creation of nearly 60 European Universities alliances, involving around 500 HEIs, which it considers as 'trailblazers for the entire higher education sector' (p.1). The alliances are also still tasked with overcoming persisting challenges linked to Quality Assurance, whilst addressing the issue of the recognition of the efforts academic and professional services staff dedicate to transnational cooperation that it sees as essential for the long-term success of the initiative (European Commission, 2024d, 2024c).

Differences between a higher education dimension of the European Education Area and a European Higher Education Area

Our interviews have revealed different perspectives from EU institutions, Member States and the alliances in regard to the development of the European Education Area alongside the Bologna Process:

- EU institutions: The European Education Area can exist in parallel to the Bologna Process and EHEA while offering the possibility to take a step further.
- Member States: See the value in a complementarity between the European Education Area and the Bologna Process but consider that there is a risk of redundancy.
- Alliances: Confused about the purposes of the European Education Area and key differences with the existing European Higher Education Area. Shared feeling that it has the purpose to transform the higher education sector quicker and extend the range of influence of EU institutions over higher education policy.

Moving faster and quicker

While the Commission's Communication (2020a) makes no mention of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and only briefly refers to the achievements of the Bologna Process, the Council Resolution (2021c) recentralises their importance by considering that as a priority for the EEA, higher education initiatives such as the EUI need to build on the progress made by the EHEA and the BP. The development of the European Universities Initiative and the higher education objectives of the EEA, should maintain 'close and structured synergies' and ensure 'consistency' with the EHEA and avoid 'parallel or double structures and instruments already developed' within it (Council of the European Union, 2021c, pp. 8-9). Despite this strong signal from Member States that the EHEA should not be replaced, the Commission has continuously highlighted its inadequacies and limitations. Most recently, the Commission signals that:

Despite 25 years of cooperation within the intergovernmental Bologna process, and the development of several tools to improve the transparency of national higher education systems, the quality assurance of educational offers and recognition of degrees, significant challenges remain. Progress within the European Higher Education Area has been hampered by differing levels of implementation between and within countries. The EU needs to move further and faster to allow its universities to cooperate smoothly and efficiently (European Commission, 2024a, p. 3)

It is these persisting challenges that have pushed the Commission to find ways to reach the Bologna objectives through a more efficient way. A policymaker from the Commission explained that in the premise of the launch of the European Education Area key players inside the Commission displayed 'a lot of scepticism around Bologna, which led to

this idea of taking the Bologna implementation tools and to fast track them inside EU countries to not have to bother with non-EU countries'. Another policymaker added that 'with Bologna, many of the reports were showing that we were not gaining ground on many of the objectives', and that having an EU focused process 'made more sense' and that 'things could materialise much faster'. The policymaker also explained that initially the EU wanted to keep non-EU countries such as Norway out of it, until Norway found a legal basis to integrate the European Education Area alongside Iceland.

A coordinator (Alliance 28) expanded on the existing difficulties within the development of the European Higher Education Area between EU Member States and non-EU Bologna Process countries there is a 'very strong difference in terms of putting in place structural reforms'. The interviewee took the example of ECTS which has been adopted by all Member States, but which is still very far from being achieved for a lot of other non-EU countries part of the EHEA. The Open Method of Coordination has given the Commission an instrument that has facilitated the implementation of such reforms and therefore already set the premise for having a two-tier higher education space in wider Europe. However, the coordinator saw the development of the EUI, and the EEA is a 'pragmatic move' from the Commission that does not wish to wait on all other Bologna countries to go through with the expected reforms. Another coordinator (Alliance 22) considers that the EEA 'is a European Union political response to the current situation'. The EEA is therefore presented as a way to cement a

dynamic that is already well in movement: rather than simply acknowledging the different speeds and two-tier aspect of the EHEA the EEA goes a step further by creating a separate space altogether. The coordinator went on to explain that despite the fact that EU institutions 'only' have a supporting competence in training the reliance on incentive-based funding programmes or the different instruments that have developed in order to influence national higher education policy have forced higher education institutions in the EU to 'think in terms of the catalogue of terms and actions that have been set in motion by EU programmes'. An alliance coordinator (22) explained that while they did not think that the EEA would strengthen the EHEA, it may do something to strengthen education policy within the European Union.

Confusion in terminology

During my interviews I asked participants to clarify how they understood the differences in the development of a higher education dimension of the newly announced European Education Area and the simultaneous developments of the European Higher Education Area. A policymaker from the Commission noted that despite the progress made through the development of the EHEA and accompanying Bologna Process tools, these are not 'fully applied there'. The policymaker mentioned explained that the purpose of a higher education dimension of the European Education Area was to take all these developments 'a step further' and making

'cooperation between European Member States even smoother'. The higher education dimension of the EEA was presented as 'a sort of fast track where Member States can be pushed to go even further than what is in Bologna'. The ambition and main policy goals with this development is to achieve 'closer European integration' while maintaining a complementarity between what has been achieved through the BP and the EHEA and the potential of the EEA. During my interviews EU policymakers often mentioned the legitimacy they must pursue this objective considering that this also a 'commitment from European leaders' with these 'objectives put forward by European heads of states and governments'. The Commission also explained to be lucid about the fact that their ambition is not to bring the whole range of Bologna countries up to speed. However, with these shared commitments from the Commission and Member States, the policymaker considered that if pursuing the EEA 'means going a step further than Bologna than this is what we will do'. A coordinator (Alliance 3) saw the 'post-COVID' context and the launch of the EUI and EEA as an 'opportunity to boost the revamping of higher education in Europe with a very fast transformation of higher education'. The coordinator explained that there was a more long-term vision to the EUI which differentiates it from past EU initiatives such as Erasmus Mundus. The coordinator considers that the efforts put into the EUI have the potential of creating the basis for the future'. The coordinator believes that the rest of the higher education sector 'will follow this model in the next ten or twenty years and that current institutions participating in alliances 'are in the great position to take the lead and imprint this new

higher education area'. The coordinator explained that the development of the alliances to achieve a European Education Area is an 'institutional gas factory'. The coordinator explained that what was currently missing to achieve the objectives presented is some 'flexibility' and sometime from academic staff who are already under a lot of pressure of taking on more research projects, doctoral students, teaching responsibilities. Adding another layer and asking them to be involved in a leadership role for a European project raises the issue of the availability and energy of those involved at faculty level.

A coordinator (Alliance 7) highlighted some 'confusion' in the sector on the differences between the EEA and the EHEA particularly in terms of 'benefits from European education'. Another Alliance coordinator (Alliance 27) considered that part of the confusion was linked to the objectives of the development of the EEA: to increase excellence and create a system comparable to the Ivy League universities in the United States or to facilitate exchanges between European higher education institutions and increase mobility. My conversations with EU policymakers showed that one of the reasons for this confusion is that a lot of different ambitious objectives were incorporated in the development of the EUI and the EEA to maintain the results of the previous European modernization and renewed agenda strategies. This created a high level of expectation from both initiatives which seems to have also created a sense of confusion within the sector. A Danish policymaker also found too much confusion and closeness in terminology between the EEA and EHEA. The Danish

position is that the tools put in place with the BP with its multilateral set up and learning processes that give as much time as MS want to implement reforms, corresponds to their vision of EU education policymaking. Additionally, the participant highlighted the risk of making it 'redundant or killing off the Bologna Process'. A Danish policymaker also highlighted this possible risk of having to do 'two things at the same time' and creating 'unnecessary double work' with the efforts of one 'undermining' the efforts of the other'. However, the Dutch position was more measured than the Danish one considering that both areas could 'co-exist' as long as there is 'cooperation'. The Spanish position also considered that there could be a complementarity between both areas but that it was important to remember that neither the EUI nor the EEA are 'reinventing the wheel after the EHEA'. However, a Spanish policymaker saw the development of the EEA as a way for the higher education sector, and particularly universities to 'develop new ideas and projects' that might be easier to develop through the EEA despite existing obstacles with national legislations and to 'address these problems in a specific way'.

Moving in parallel or in complementarity ?

An alliance coordinator (Alliance 28) explained that it is sometimes 'difficult to alternate between two distinct spaces that are also at the same time complementary'. The coordinator also explained that while this

complementarity was desired, it is unlikely to achieve it as there are 'different tools with different intentions'. As mentioned by the Danish policymaker there is an issue of time. The European Higher Education Area gives a lot of time to Member States to determine if they wish to engage in the proposed reforms or not, through learning processes and a specific multilateral set up. With a strong political ambition, the EUI and the EEA have the unhidden objective to take European higher education policymaking to the next level with a stronger desire of integration. The coordinator (Alliance 28) explained that if both spaces are to co-exist it will be essential to face the 'possible contradictions' that come with it and for the EU to be clear about what its political objectives are with the development of the EEA which remains at times vague. The coordinator (Alliance 28) guesses that the European Commission, has the ambition 'to finally regain control over the entire education sector', which goes beyond higher education but also the wider 'panorama of the education and training sector from Kindergarten to Higher Education'. Another coordinator (Alliance 22) also considered that both the EEA and the EUI have been a way to 'put education back on the political agenda'. An alliance coordinator (Alliance 28) considered that the European Universities Initiative is 'logical continuation of the 30 years of the Erasmus programme with the idea to go even further by offering an even more structural tool to have a European Education Area'. Alliance coordinator 20 explained that all the tools for collaboration are already there 'the next step is convincing Member States and the universities to use them to create something jointly, and this is the current work of the

Commission'. An alliance coordinator (Alliance 7) shared some doubts about the creation of the space and risks of harmonization of regulations across all Member States. The coordinator considered that the concept of the European Education Area appears to be 'a bit too regulatory'. However, the coordinator did acknowledge the usefulness of having a European education space that could be 'based on values', where each university across the EU 'teach the same values. Which currently may not be the case between a university in Rotterdam and Budapest'.

Resolving the puzzle of a European Union higher education governance

There have been considerable amounts of literature dealing with how the European Union intervenes in a policy field for which it only has supporting competence, through the launch of Erasmus, taking an active role in the Bologna Process and the formation of the European Higher Education Area, but also through its own initiatives following the adoption of the Lisbon strategy, successive higher education strategies, the European Semester and cooperation programmes such as Erasmus Mundus or the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions. The issue of EU institutions intervening in (higher) education policy, and occasionally

seemingly overstepping the role to which the treaties should confine them, is as old as the idea of a European Community itself (Winkvist, 2004; Corbett, 2005). Chou and Gornitzka (2018) establish that the relationship between EU institutions and MS reveals ‘cooperation and contestation patterns’ in regard to the expansion of EU competence to the (higher) education policy field, labelling the relationship as a ‘tug-of-war’. Despite this apparent ‘conflict’ they also note that ‘higher education is a policy domain on the rise in the European Union’. Eeva (2021) argues that despite subsidiarity, education has become an ‘established’ site of EU policymaking. Dakowska and Serrano (2018) go as far as considering that the adoption of the Lisbon Agenda has signalled a break ‘with the principle of subsidiarity that had been imposed on social policy since the Maastricht Treaty [and] paved the way for the development of a genuine EU policy agenda’ (p.260). This apparent contradiction between resistance of member states towards the expansion of EU competence to the higher education policy field, whilst continuously agreeing to grant the EU new instruments to further develop the domain is what Elken (2017) and Ozga (2020) view as a ‘puzzle’.

The European Universities Initiative is situated at the heart of this governance ‘puzzle’. Puzzle is here understood as a conundrum that I examine in this chapter by exploring how the initiative navigates the balance between its ambitions and the competence of EU institutions in education policy, and different visions of member states for the purpose and role of the European Universities Initiative. I found that the

Commission is making use of a blend of governance mechanisms to deploy the EUI:

- Funding programmes
- Policy coordination
- European Union Legal acts

In a first instance, this chapter shows how the Commission is making use of top-down financial incentives to push its vision of the initiative whilst having designed a bottom-up programme that relies on the capacity of its participants to be flexible and experiment. Secondly, I explore how the Commission relies on policy coordination to involve a wide range of stakeholders and foster dynamics of cooperation between education stakeholders and member states to legitimize the further roll-out of the initiative whilst inevitably nurturing competition amongst its ranks. Finally, I look at how the Commission is using non-binding legal acts to attempt to develop transnational legal tools with the support of the alliances and MS who nevertheless remain cautious.

(Higher) education as a (only) a supporting competence

One of the main topics of discussion that arose during the interviews is the tension between the ambition of the initiative which seeks to ‘transform the higher education landscape in the European Union’, and the (higher) education as (only) a supporting competence of EU institutions. Interviewing stakeholders at EU level, MS level, and alliance

level offered different perspectives on this tension, what they would hope for the future and the reality of the governance mechanisms that can be put in place for the initiative. The main subject of this section is to show how the EUI offers an example of how these three levels work towards a common programme that in appearance may seem to go beyond the legal framework set by the Treaties.

Alliance coordinators reflected on the difficulties faced by the Commission in the rollout of the initiative. The issue of education being only a supporting competence came up as a significant limitation in some interviews. One of the coordinators (Alliance 13) stated that the Commission always did its best to help the alliances 'but in the limit of its prerogatives, and that is where the limit will be. The Commission helps alliances identify obstacles and offer solutions but also has to act as a mediator with member states to offer solutions'. Another coordinator (EU-CONEXUS) identified the political context surrounding this supporting competence as a 'problem', with national ministries not wanting to 'let too much supranationalism enter the higher education space'. The coordinator explained that 'although they are listening to us, I know DG EAC have their hands tied. Since it is a domain in which they do not have competence. (...) They would want to do more, but they say: The Netherlands and Germany said no, and we feel that they are sorry for the situation.' One of the coordinators (Alliance 4) explained that they sometimes received phone calls from the Commission asking them for

documents or reports on specific topics so they can tell the Council of Ministers what ‘the alliances want.’

Our interview with EU level stakeholders was unambiguous: ‘we do not have competence in this field. We can only act where we can, although we would love to act personally, but we are bound by the we need to respect the rule of law through the subsidiarity principle to which we want to strictly adhere’. Another representative from the Commission explained that ‘with the European Universities Initiative, the Commission is stepping on the territory of the Member States, so it is very sensitive. And that's why Member States are a bit hesitant about creating legal status for cross-border entities or joint degrees’. All Policy texts published concerning the initiative or those with an EEA dimension always state the importance of respecting the subsidiarity principle. However, from its very first Communication on the topic, the Commission stated that ‘although the Union's competences in education and culture clearly do not allow for harmonisation as in other fields, action at EU level based on cooperation is possible and desirable’ (European Commission, 2017c, p. 5). It also mentioned that the initiative and development of the EEA would require a political ambition of the Member State that should be reflected in the funding.

I spoke to alliance coordinators about this sensitive issue of the space the Commission was occupying regarding higher education debates. An alliance coordinator (Alliance 28) said that they did not believe there

would be shift in competence any time soon, as the 'classical European drivers, France or Germany (...) will difficultly abandon their competence in terms of education. Education is still very strongly linked to a form of national identity, and what is the value of a country'. The coordinator explained that in their view this is what had made Bologna difficult despite the involvement of key ministers in the EU. Another alliance coordinator (Alliance 22) agreed that education is too closely linked to 'national identity and sovereignty' for the European Union to ever have full competence. This said the coordinator said the initiative and the formation of the European Education Area more widely may 'do something to strengthen education policy within the European Union'. The coordinator said that although the current political climate in the EU did not appear to go in the direction of giving the EU more competence in Education, they reminded us that originally, 'France, Germany and the UK didn't want the Erasmus programme (...) Which means things are possible as well.' The coordinator said they felt the Commission was being 'very intelligent here in their use of their incentives for universities' as part of the EUI. An alliance coordinator (Alliance 29) said that the initiative had 'opened the discussions on moving some competences to the European level.' However, the coordinator said that such a move would bring about some suspicion from MS saying: 'well, you see, they're willing to take even further competences from us.' A coordinator (Alliance 7) explained that one of their partners in a country where education is a regional competence, reported that their regional government was furious when the initiative was announced, claiming that the EU wanted to 'take their

power from them' which was unfair because they believed to have 'a very good and above average and better than a lot of other countries'. The regional government insisted that they could not 'let the EU destroy that'. An alliance coordinator (Alliance 8) spoke of the limits that came with the Commission not having more competence in education for further developing the initiative. They noted that although the Commission is very eager to collaborate with the alliances, they reach their limits 'when it comes to asking for more funding or bringing the Horizon and Erasmus frameworks together to have a more programmatic approach.' Another alliance coordinator (Alliance 14) also said that the Commission 'realized that it is not a simple project, it is an initiative that has fostered an evolution of their political action'. The coordinator said that one of the issues was the political context with MS. The coordinator explained that when they spoke to the different national ministries, they are open to collaborate with them as an alliance but with the limit of never allowing 'more supranationalism in the area of higher education'.

Chou and Gornitzka (2014) argue 'that the overall condition framing the tensions between the supranational and national governance levels with respect to higher education as a policy area is the issue of national sensitivity' (p. 9). A Lithuanian policy maker told us that they felt that the Commission had 'overstepped a little bit, both in the legal sense, (...) they're walking the edge a little bit here.' However, what worried them, and many member states was 'the speed of change that they're trying to attach new ideas to the initiative, the European degree, the European

statutes'. A Danish policy maker said that it appeared to them that the Commission 'wishes for a stronger role in terms of the debates in higher education.' The policy maker explained that their ministry considered that the current proposals arising from the European Universities initiative, are proposals that the Commission has wanted 'to push forward for a number of years, without ever having the opportunity. Now they see a window being opened and try to push it forward.'

Incentive based programme: Top down or bottom-up?

The following section explores how the European Universities Initiative operates as an incentive-based programme that serves as a governance mechanism for the Commission. Batory and Lindstrom (2011) discuss how the Commission has increasingly been making use of funding programmes in higher education, conferring the EC what they have referred to as the 'power of the purse', giving it much more influence than voluntary mechanisms like the Open Method of Coordination. Furthermore, through a selective call, the Commission has the capacity to 'withhold financial rewards and strategically select recipients in the wide range of programs it administers.' (Batory & Lindstrom, 2011). This is typically the case for the EUI, with the call, ultimately decided on by the Directorate General for Education and Culture (DG EAC) and administered by the Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Marques et al. (2020) consider that a lot of scholars working on Europeanization have

'erroneously' focused on the Bologna Process rather than the direct support and influence on universities through incentive-based programmes. The authors consider that reliance on funding programmes are a way for the Commission to 'bypass Member States (...) even as these EU activities affect organizations within them' (Marques et al., 2020, p. 2). In this section, I look at how the European Commission has relied on a funding instrument in order to impose top-down political objectives whilst presenting the entire process as 'bottom-up' and giving the alliances a large amount of autonomy (European Commission, 2020b).

My exchanges with certain alliances reflected this degree of autonomy. One coordinator (Alliance 2) explained that there was 'a lot of flexibility, how to answer or react to EC's political goals.' A coordinator (Alliance 15) said that the only thing the Commission imposed was for the alliances to promote inclusive education, multicultural and multilingual environments, transdisciplinarity and new teaching methodologies. Another alliance coordinator (Alliance 7) explained that although the funding comes in a top-down manner, they said that 'the decision to participate and what [they] do is pretty much bottom up'. The coordinator explained that the Commission gave quite a lot of freedom. However, the coordinator explained that at the point where the European Commission starts to say that a European degree, or a legal entity is needed, the processes stops being bottom-up. The coordinator gave the example of when they were building the alliance, they wanted to associate themselves with historic partners that were not Erasmus+ programme countries, which was

refused by the Commission. The coordinator understood that when an institution is giving substantial funding it comes 'with a certain set of rules (...) and you have to accept that and work around it'. Another coordinator (Alliance 25) also agreed that they felt constrained by the same regulations amongst which they are expected to experiment. The coordinator said that 'very high expectations were formulated' but they were not sure they could meet these goals within the existing frameworks.

In its latest 'European Universities' call, the European Commission has conditioned funding to achieve one its main political objectives with the initiative: the expansion of the alliances to increase the amount of HEIs involved in the EUI and attaining a wider geographical distribution. Batory and Lindstrom argue that by making the alliances dependent on EU funding, the Commission turns the alliances 'into agents for its policies' who lobby national governments from the bottom (Batory & Lindstrom, 2011, p. 313). However, these high financial incentives that came with the new call concerning enlargement fostered a large amount of criticism from the alliances. A coordinator (Alliance 24) explained that this had not been 'perceived positively from the higher education community'. In the new call the Commission continually states that the 'expansion is voluntary in full respect of the institutional autonomy, and each alliance can decide on the number of partners to be added.' (Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2021, p. 8). The Commission political goal of striving for geographical inclusion is made clear saying that the realization of the voluntary expansion strategy should strive to ensure a balanced

geographical coverage of regions in Europe (Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2021, p. 9). However, if I take the example of one of my 'in-depth' alliances, UNITA, I can evaluate the choice that was offered to them to expand or not and the corresponding grant. UNITA can choose to consolidate its current form and remain with its 6 members and receive a maximum grant of €6.48m. However, if UNITA chooses to expand from 6 to 8 members, it can receive a maximum grant of €12.80m. If UNITA goes even one step further and chooses to have at least 9 full partners it can receive up to €14.40m (Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2021, p. 23). This means that the Commission is offering alliances that agree to participate in its widening strategy the possibility to see their grant increase by 122.22%. A senior manager from UNITA explained that this is the strategy they had adopted and were in the process of involving new universities in order to meet this expansion goal and receive the maximum amount of funding for the next call. The alliance plans to go 'from 6 to 10 HEIs'.

Financially incentivizing alliances to expand was met cautiously by certain alliances. A coordinator (Alliance 2) said that for them, the idea of incentivizing alliances to have a minimum of nine partners to receive the maximum amount is 'ridiculous'. The coordinator felt that this was 'politics leading rather than what matters, which should be determining funding based on the costs associated with the activities of the alliances'. The coordinator felt that the funding system 'penalizes alliances that are being very intensive and concrete in getting somewhere and then moving to the

next steps of upscaling and expanding their offer to be actually as inclusive as possible.’ A coordinator (Alliance 24) explained that this demand coming from the Commissioner made the development of the initiative ‘tricky’, creating ‘unnecessary demands’ that may result in ‘a lot of alliances breaking up’. An alliance coordinator (Alliance 13) explained that the alliances ‘that do not wish to expand yet because they feel it is too early or because it does not correspond to their model, will find themselves in a chronic crisis of underfunding’. The coordinator also explained that the financial incentive remained modest in regard to what was expected of the alliances as welcoming new members and bringing up to speed requires a lot of work and the development of new tools which will lead to more expenses. One coordinator explained that from the Council Conclusions (2021a) they quickly understood that there was a political objective to reach a higher number of alliances, with 500 HEIs as a target. This led them to immediately start identifying partners and start negotiations as they understood that this high political priority would condition the future of the participating alliances and their ability to receive funding.

This ‘resistance’ has also been an opportunity for the alliances to find a common voice to interact with the Commission. An alliance coordinator (Alliance 24) explained that twenty-six alliances expressed their concern over the new call that had just been published by the Commission and requested a meeting with the Commissioner shortly after the call was published in May 2021. The coordinator explained that the response the

twenty-six alliances received was: ‘sorry the Commissioner doesn’t have any time until mid-October.’ The coordinator expressed frustration that even though twenty-six alliances composed of two hundred higher education institutions had made this request, the meeting was refused. The coordinator believes that the alliances and HEIs should be ‘the first stakeholder that she should be speaking to’ and that although there is some contact it ‘could be much closer to be honest and that’s not really from lack of trying so there is no existing dialogue’. This said, an alliance coordinator (Alliance 24) explained that this ended up leading to a meeting with the Head of Cabinet that told them: ‘we will listen to what you said but the Commissioner feels strongly about this so sorry.’

Despite these voices of caution and resistance towards the growth of the alliances by expanding to new members, many alliances from the first two pilot calls, decided to go along with the Commission’s incentives and integrate new members (See Table 4). Batory and Lindstrom (2011) note that ‘opting out of Commission-funded programs has become a luxury that universities can ill afford, particularly in the face of increasingly significant national fiscal constraints’ (p.325).

Table 4 *Expansion of the Alliances*

	Name of alliance	Members 1st call	Members 2nd Call
1st Wave			

	UNA		
	Europa	7	9
	4EU+	6	6
	ARQUS	7	8
	CHARMEU-		
	EU	5	8
	CIVICA	7	9
	CIVIS	8	9
	EU		
	CONNEXUS	6	9
	ECIU	11	12
	EDUC	6	8
	EPICUR	8	9
	EUGLOH	5	9
	eu4art	4	N/A
	EUTOPIA	6	9
	FORTHEM	7	9
	SEA-EU	6	9
	UNITE!	7	9
	YUFE	8	8
2nd Wave			
	ATHENA	7	N/A
	AURORA	9	9
	Circle U	7	8
	E3UDRES2	6	10
	EC2U	7	8
	EELISA	9	9
	ENGAGE.E		
	U	7	9
	ENHANCE	7	9
	ENLIGHT	9	9
	ERUA	5	8
	EUNICE	7	10
	EuniWell	7	9
	EURECA-		
	PRO	7	9
	EuroTeQ	6	8
	eut+	8	8
	FilmEU	4	8
	INVEST	5	7
	Neurotech		
	EU	8	8
	RUN-EU	8	8
	T4E	7	10
	ULYSSEUS	6	8

UNIC	8	10
UNITA	6	10
UNIVERSE		
H	5	7

Different visions for the future of the alliances: Expanding to new members or creating new alliances

Much like Erasmus Mundus before it, the European Universities Initiative is ‘designed framed by, and governed by the European Commission’ (Dale, 2016, p. 67). However, unlike the EM, that barely associates Member States (MS) in its governance (Dale, 2016), the European Universities Initiative requires significant involvement from national governments to meet its ambitions. As discussed in the pervious chapter, the shaping of the initiative is narrowly linked to policy issues experienced at national level. From the premise of the initiative, the European Commission has been careful to closely consult and involve Member States to discuss their needs and visions for what ‘European Universities’ could be. Much like within the community of European higher education stakeholders, these visions for the purpose and role of the initiative are not homogeneous amongst member states. The development of the initiative has revealed different and sometimes contradictory visions for its deployment. For example, certain Member States have shown some reluctance towards conditioning funding on the alliances growing in size by expanding to more members. A Lithuanian policymaker explained that they believed

that 'more resources should be allocated to existing alliances because the objectives that they are trying to achieve are really resource hungry and trying to spread the limited funding to even more institutions put the success rate a little bit at risk.' A Dutch policymaker revealed that the financial incentive was originally even higher. The policymaker explained that some Member States thought that the 'financial incentive was too strong.' The Dutch position is much more geared towards focusing on quality and strengthening the alliances as they already are as a way forward. The Commission listened to these concerns and lowered the financial bonus for expansion, which led the Dutch ministry to accept the content of the new call. A Danish policymaker also said that they found that there was no general consensus within member states as to which direction to go in: quality or widening. Some Member States were defending a quality route, and the Commission with its desire to create a financial incentive for alliance expansion, particularly to the East, chose a widening route. The policymaker said it was not just the 'usual suspects' (Nordic countries and the Netherlands), who usually have a more 'conservative approach' when it comes to new initiatives at a European setting in terms of higher education, who were reluctant, but also Germany who became quite vocal. Several national policymakers explained that if the Commission continued pushing too hard, they could lose the political support from their ministers. These different visions were also shared amongst the alliances themselves. Certain coordinators considered that promoting expansion could also mean not giving the chance to focus on consolidating what already exists. An alliance

coordinator (Alliance 2) said that their position as well as that of many Member States was that the expansion of the alliances in size was only going to fragment the funding. These different debates regarding the visions for the future of the alliances resting upon expansions or consolidation remain prevalent today with the future funding routes for the alliances set to dominate discussions on the Erasmus+ budget for the next Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF) for the 2028-2034 period.

Timeframes of the initiative and evaluation of progress

An alliance coordinator (Alliance 2) considered that having '45 alliances working on innovative models already 4 years after the launch of this initiative does not give the time to identify a first pool of successful alliances'. Asked if they were surprised one alliance did not receive the top up funding, the coordinator (Alliance 2) replied they were 'surprised there was only one'. The coordinator explained there was 'no signal from the Commission that performance progress matters.' The coordinator said that it was clear that some alliances had made 'very little progress or have shown very little progress', and that the fact that the Commission was not taking this into account in the way that it is attributing funding is 'not the way to go forward'. The coordinator said they believed that the decision to not condition the funding on an evaluation was made because of pressure from certain alliances on the Commission. Another alliance coordinator (Alliance 5) said that the next funding rounds should offer long

term and sustainable funding, even beyond the four plus two years that the Commission is currently offering. However, the coordinator insisted that this long-term funding should be conditioned by quality assurance with deliverables and performance. The coordinator said that these evaluations should take place throughout the course of the funding period. The alliances did all have a mid-term report to produce. A Lithuanian policymaker shared this perspective and said that the Commission should 'take a step back and give breathing space and time for the alliance to develop their objectives'. This would give the Commission time to evaluate the process and the progress that the university alliances have made. (...) we just need to give breathing space and time for the alliances to do their thing and to develop their objectives that they've started in their projects.'

Conversely, it could be argued that as the alliances are piloting new frameworks, they need sufficient time to experiment freely prior to any type of evaluation. One of the coordinators (Alliance 17) said they were unsure how the Commission was going to evaluate their performance. The coordinator explained that the time frames are so short and the expectations so high that it would make an evaluation difficult considering that 'you cannot change the world in four years, and you cannot change any kind of organization and institution within three years.' Furthermore, the coordinator was concerned that all of the alliances did not start at the same level, particularly between those that had a long history of cooperation, and those that were starting from the ground. The

coordinator also considered that the diversity in forms and objectives set out by the alliances made a common evaluation by the Commission difficult. The coordinator asked: 'how they are going to be aware of these differences and take them into account when they are going to evaluate?'. This said, they also said that the Commission is 'aware of the fact that we're essentially pioneering something new, so they are very much interested in us also telling them what doesn't work.' Another coordinator (Alliance 18) said that all the alliances had understood that 'if they had a significant activity and had progressed well, they would be supported in the framework of the new call, which relieved the pressure'. The coordinator explained that if the Commission had decided not to support some alliances based on poor results, it could have a 'harmful' impact on the initiative and its dynamic. A coordinator (Alliance 29) said that they expected that once the Commission will have the results of an evaluation of the pilots, they will most likely narrow down the focus. However, since they currently do not have this evidence, the limits remain 'the capacity and the money'. Another coordinator (Alliance 27) also saw the limit in the funding but also the 'very strict timeframe' that they have to follow. The coordinator said that they needed the appropriate time and financial resources to experiment with new concepts.

Different types of support to the alliances: funding, legal changes, moral support

Table 5 *Forms of Support to the EUI alliances from participating countries in the initiative* (Data from interviews conducted with national stakeholders, alliance coordinators and academic and administrative staff in participating HEIs)

Country	
name	Summary
Austria	Very supportive - Universities have received additional funding and have many exchanges with the ministry on how the ministry can help with topics such as mobility and degree recognition
Belgium	Seem to have received some funding for participation of HEIs in alliances, but are cautious about funding (Flanders)
Bulgaria	Government supports as there is a lot at stake for them for Bulgaria to succeed in the initiative
Croatia	Have changed legislation to make joint degrees easier as part of the EUI
Czech Republic	Seem to have given less support
Denmark	Tendency to have been less involved in internationalization of HE. One participant goes as far to consider it a problem. They are reducing the number of international students and are
Estonia	Lots of discussions between participating institutions in the country
Finland	Extra funding to participating HEIs, country with less legal barriers for degree accreditation, originally a bit reluctant but has now become very involved
France	Lots of financial and political support - no signs yet that there will be an additional top up for the next call. Very rigid legal framework and not will or plans to modify national legislation to facilitate transnational cooperation
Germany	Significant additional funding but a cautious about changing laws. Lots of exchange through the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD)
Greece	Quite rigid legal framework but possible change in legislation to facilitate transnational cooperation
Hungary	Political and financial support possible change in legislation to facilitate transitional cooperation
Ireland	Flexible legal framework for cooperation and HEIs have started to receive additional funding
Italy	Not much activity from Italian government, no extra

	funding, but 'moral support'
Latvia	Seems to not have received much support Strong political support and many exchanges with the government. Possible flexibility with national legislation and additional funding
Lithuania	
Netherlands	Cautious support from the government difficulty to obtain co-funding (non as of yet)
Norway	Originally less support but have now opened up and are receiving extra funding Strong political support and exchanges between government and HEIs who have received significant extra funding.
Poland	
Portugal	Strong political support, no additional funding apart for funding of PhD positions in HEIs participating in alliances
Romania	Law has been modified to allow joint programmes to take place in the alliances
Slovenia	HEIs are meant to receive additional funds
Spain	Receive extra funding, have modified legislation and have granted an exception status to participating HEIs so that they can push transnational cooperation further No extra funding and started out with a very cautious stance towards the initiative but have been recently opening up. Networking events between participating HEIs and the government have been organized.
Sweden	
United Kingdom	Discussions about future of participation without a very promising impact

Funding the initiative was a recurrent topic of conversation with Commission officials, the coordinators and the MS. During the interviews many coordinators called for additional funding from the MS. At the time of my interviews, there were currently twenty-two participating countries that say they bring some support to the initiative. However, the type and degree of support alliances receive from MS is very unequal (see Table 5). Not all MS offer additional funding to national HEIs participating in the

initiative. While some MS do not financially support the initiative, some may support the alliances politically by adapting legislation to facilitate transnational cooperation. Other MS may only offer 'moral' support. One coordinator explained that the degree of intensity of the relationship between participating HEIs and their national ministries is 'pretty much linked to the amount of money they get.' The coordinator used the example of France and Germany which are giving the most funding out of all MS and where the links between the alliance and 'the ministries is also fruitful, it works, and something comes out of it.' This said, the coordinator explained that Germany is also quite 'quite sceptical about some parts of the initiative [and] quite reluctant to come to actual legal changes, but they really want to support initiative, and you can see that.' The degree of support universities participating in the EUI receive from MS 'depends on how high it is on the political agenda'(Alliance 8). Lithuania is presented as such a country which has put the initiative rather high on the political agenda, which has led to a very fluid dialogue between participating HEIs and the government (Alliance coordinators 3, 8, 12; Lithuanian policymaker). HEIs receive 'a lot of support, not only financially but also in terms of making national regulations more flexible. They are really sitting with the Minister, at the table on a regular basis' (Alliance coordinator 8). The involvement of Member States seems to be evolving over time. Certain Member States, such as Sweden or Finland that had been quite reluctant at first and are now getting more involved and building stronger contacts with participating HEIs (Alliance coordinator 11).

Additional funding does not just mean injecting more money into a Commission led initiative. It is a way for MS to attain a complementary role to the Commission in the further rollout of the EUI. The FPEU has insisted that MS should also be supporting alliances financially to achieve a European governance of the initiative. If the Commission puts money alone, the MS may have less legitimacy, particularly in their relationship with the alliances in saying that they are for or against an aspect of the initiative's development. A policymaker involved in the FPEU said that it was important to find some more balance in the funding as for MS to have an appropriate involvement in the initiative, there need to be a financial participation coming directly from them. However, the policymaker insisted this was a difficult task as this is a matter of national funding mechanisms and the Commission cannot ask MS to put additional money in this, before adding that this would 'not completely be in its interest either.' The amount of funding is very variable. The FPEU pushed the idea that the more you have synergies between national funding and various European funding, the closer you get to a partnership or a 'common EU-MS fund through which each alliance has institutionalized themselves'. Developing a more programmatic approach would not just guarantee the alliances a more sustainable existence it is also arguably a stepping-stone towards a common governance framework. The Council of the European Union agreed to 'consider more sustainable funding instruments for the 'European Universities', including through exploiting synergies of regional and national with European schemes'(Council of the European Union, 2021a, p. 21). An alliance coordinator (Alliance 23) said the alliances

needed to 'go on for decades in order to cause a fully-fledged impact'. The coordinator went on to explain that for this impact to be achieved there needs to be a 'funding mechanism that is tailor made for the initiative'.

Many alliances consider that there needs to be more significant funding to reach the transformational ambitions of the initiative, and if the Commission is unable to develop a proper funding instrument alongside the Member States, then they 'will have to find it elsewhere'. A policymaker said that currently, for many MS, the European Universities Initiative is a success just because their national HEIs are in it. However, for others, it remains a higher education project amongst others, that does not justify additional attention and certainly not complementary national funding.

Alliances often pointed to the lack of synergy between Erasmus+ and Horizon funding instruments. This lack of synergy in funding is 'a limitation in the work that [DG EAC] can actually do' (Alliance coordinator 11). An alliance coordinator (Alliance 28) said that although budgets were not at the height of the ambition of the initiative, they are still substantial, which means it is therefore essential to have an authority that regulates how these funds are used and therefore a top-down approach. The coordinator also explained that there was also inevitably a bottom-up approach because of the amount of people involved in the alliance, '150 to 200 people (...) with people from the different department of each HEI, research centres, professors, administrative staff that are involved in the

construction of the alliance'. Another alliance coordinator (Alliance 23) echoed this point, considering the initiative to be 'a huge transformational process' and that 'bottom-up requires time, and bottom up is not enough'. The coordinator explained that at HEI level, you need to get all the levels involved: students, administrative staff the scientific staff involved, the mobility officers, the professors, the vice-presidents and the leadership. The coordinator said that it is not always easy because they have 'to persuade people of something very abstract'. The coordinator also explained that the Commission's objectives add a level of 'pressure'. An alliance coordinator (Alliance 25) said their biggest issue with the new call was how the budget was allocated, considering that it created a competition in having access to the resources, particularly between the existing alliances that sought to enter a consolidation phase, and new alliances that wanted to join the initiative.

Policy coordination and co-creation

The governance of the EUI was discussed with the different stakeholders to get a sense of the role of the Commission, MS and the alliances in shaping the initiative. My interviews with DG EAC revealed the formation of a consultation group set up by the Commission which also includes MS and Higher Education stakeholders called the 'ad-hoc expert group'. This group was set up at the very start of the initiative and was used to 'co-create' the concept of European Universities prior to the launch of the first

call in 2018. This idea of co-construction is not foreign in the ways that the European Commission 'does' higher education policy. Discussing how the Commission develops country-specific recommendations as part of the European Semester instrument, Eeva, also refers to a process a co-construction which 'builds convergence - allowing soft power to do the governing work' (Eeva, 2021, p. 4). Of the HE stakeholders involved in the initiative are European university networks whose members later launched EUI alliances themselves: LERU, The Guild, COIMBRA group, Yerun. In 2021, the Commission also launched stakeholder consultation meetings with the alliances as part of the development of the European Strategy for Universities. Wallace and Reh (2021) present the formation of such groups as quite common in the 'policy coordination' mode that the Commission tends to rely on in order to shape policies in the field of (higher) education developing networks of 'experts, or of stakeholders and/or civil society, and accumulating technical arguments in favour of a shared approach to promote modernization and innovation (...) and convening high-level groups of national experts and sometimes ministers in the Council and occasionally the European Council, in brainstorming, problem-solving, or deliberative rather than bargaining mode'. Closely associating relevant stakeholders and MS is a way for the Commission to respect the subsidiarity principle whilst creating a space to push its agenda forward. Dakowska and Serrano-Velarde (2018) argue that 'in order to "do" higher education policy, Commission officials in higher positions need to build coalitions with governmental representatives of member states, who seek an external source of legitimacy for their

domestic reforms, organized stakeholders, professional organizations, or representatives of the academic community' (p.261). Coordinators (Alliance 8; 27) explained that this co-creation process took the form of workshops that were mainly led by DG EAC, although there were always a few people from DG RTD who were normally present. An alliance coordinator (Alliance 29) explained that the roundtables and workshops for the construction of the first call also involved representatives from the national conferences of rectors. These consultations also provide the opportunity for stakeholders to gain a 'seat at the table' in the discussion on the future directions of education policy at EU level, providing an additional sense of prestige to representatives and institutions invited to take part (Horta et al., 2008; Lambrechts et al., 2023)

Aside from the ad-hoc expert group and the consultation rounds for the European Strategy for Universities, my interviews revealed that the Commission also relied on the Erasmus+ Programme Committee in which MS representatives are involved and consulted on a yearly basis. The Commission has also set up a working group on higher education with the European Education Area strategic framework. Finally, a representative of the Commission also said that a lot of the work to discuss the latest issues and potential development of the initiative was done at the EDUC committee of the Council of the European Union, one of the more traditional spaces where education policy is formulated at EU level. Alexiadou & Rambla note that 'the existing governance arrangements are patiently constructed institutional structures of cooperation in education,

formed in the last 20 years with active contributions from the Commission and member states through the Education Council.’ (Alexiadou & Rambla, 2022, p. 15). A Commission representative said that the Council has asked them to provide a report based on the mid-term reviews submitted by the alliances for MS to be up to date with the latest progress and issues the alliances are facing. The Commission has published an independent study (2025) led by the European research and policy analysis centre, PPMI, to ‘assess the transformational impact of the European Universities Initiative as a whole’.

My interviews revealed that although funded by Erasmus+, the initiative was a ‘kind of decentralized’ action in Erasmus+. A Finnish policymaker explained that the initiative was partly discussed inside and partly outside of the EDUC and Erasmus+ Programme Committees. The policymaker discussed how the Ad-Hoc expert group is in between the level of the EDUC committee and the Erasmus+ Programme Committee but said that although the group was very ‘useful in the beginning’ it was not a group where political decisions could be made. The policy maker explained that this was a ‘strongly Commission piece of art in the beginning’, but they thought that the development of the initiative ‘should be discussed in a democratic way with the Member States’. A representative from the Commission said that although stakeholder organizations took part in the working group, ‘the main components are really the member states’. A Danish policymaker believed that the Commission has adequately involved MS through the working group and Erasmus Plus Programme

Committee, where they were 'allowed to say what [they] feel (...) there has at least been room for discussions in the different settings that has been given ample room, both in the working group and the Erasmus Plus Program Committee and such.' Similarly, many coordinators (Alliance 14, Alliance 22, Alliance 10) praised the listening skills of people at DG EAC. Others (Alliance 10) highlighted a constructive approach in their relationship throughout the different group meetings that had been set up.

Ad-hoc expert group

The consensus that came out of interviews with alliance coordinators, MS and the Commission, is that the initiative emerged in a context where the Bologna tools were not working. A coordinator (Alliance 22) said that what had 'been signed in the Bologna agreements had not filtered through to national legislation. Again, a lot of lip service. Cosmetic adaptation'. The EUI was therefore seen as 'very important' as a 'new stimulus, both personally and institutionally', and an opportunity for the evolution of national legislation. Participants in the Ad-hoc stakeholder group saw it as a way to shape this new impulse insisting on a series of key topics to set up the first call:

- Research and education synergy
- Excellence or Inclusiveness
- No overlap or dismissal of existing university networks

- Timeframe of the calls (paradox of having a long-term vision with short term calls)
- Size of the alliances and the necessity of setting up evaluations
- Change national legislation to not fall in the same dead ends as Bologna

While setting up the blueprint of the initiative there were discussions with stakeholders present at the Ad-Hoc expert about making the initiative research based and led by DG RTD or education based and led by DG EAC. An alliance coordinator (Alliance 22) explained that this decision was not clear at the start. At the time of the first meetings, there were still two different Commissioners for research and education. This changed in 2019 with the Von der Leyen Commission, with Mariya Gabriel being responsible for both portfolios. The coordinator explained that at the time of the co-creation process there was 'very little synergy (...) the Commission tends to be very compartmentalized'. This was presented as an odd conversation, particularly for research intensive universities, where research and education go hand in hand. This said, where the funding comes from (Erasmus+ or Horizon2020) has 'a huge impact on the design of the initiative'. This was the first issue that needed to be resolved in the first meetings, who was going to lead the initiative: EAC or RTD? The coordinator suspects this was solved on a very pragmatic basis based on who was prepared to take up the initiative and where there was money, and the initiative landed with EAC rather than RTD. The coordinator insisted that the HEIs present at the stakeholder meetings

very much insisted that the initiative should be designed taking into account both of their missions in education and research and create synergies. Without surprise this was the position of representatives from university networks composed of research-intensive universities.

The role of research in the initiative also sparked another debate about the type of institutions that should the initiative be tailored for, and should it be striving for inclusiveness or excellence. An alliance coordinator (Alliance 29) explained that the Commission really listened to stakeholders representing other types of HEIs, such as universities of applied sciences and opened up the call to all types of higher education institutions and not just research-intensive universities. A Lithuanian policymaker said they initially felt a risk that the initiative could become a 'golden list of institutions that are already privileged in various ways'. The policymaker explained that many 'smaller' Member States felt this could be detrimental to their institutions and instead privilege the HEIs that are 'already the strongest in Europe'. They therefore pushed for the criteria of more regional balance to insure as much inclusivity as possible and less focus on pre-existing criteria of excellence. A Dutch policy maker who insisted that it was important for them that Universities of Applied Sciences be included in the call and not just elite research-intensive universities. This said, other policymakers (e.g. Denmark) said they were concerned about this focus on a widening perspective with a 'focus on bringing everyone on board and capacity building rather than a pure quality emphasis'. A policymaker involved in the FPEU, also revealed the

French had to modify their position a bit. Originally the French pushed for only twenty alliances made up of the 'best'. The policymaker said that the model they had in mind was close to what was set up domestically with the French excellence initiative. They ended up having to agree that 'we take the best, but we cannot leave anyone behind', which resulted in the formation of the 41 alliances. Although a lot of the HEIs in the alliances are in the West, each alliance had at least one or two partners 'in countries that may have less renowned institutions.'

Another topic that was discussed in these meetings is what the alliances could bring to the European higher education landscape that is not already accomplished by European higher education networks like Coimbra, LERU, The Guild etc. During the discussions, it became clear that these networks and the alliances would have different levels of cooperation, as 'the existing networks have no pretension of becoming universities or becoming campuses as such'. The coordinator also highlighted time scale as an issue. The Commission presented a long-term vision for this initiative and asked the alliance to match this vision in their proposal. However, the Commission was initially only proposing a five-year time scale. The alliances were 'all very clear that this should be ten or fifteen years, that this was not something that could be done in three years and four in five. The commission started to understand that and have understood better now.' The coordinator (Alliance 22) told us that during the group meetings, the 'Commission listened. (...) Which doesn't mean they took everything on board, but they listened.'

The size of an alliance also emerged as a topic of discussion at these preliminary meetings. A senior manager from ECIU mentioned that for the alliance the main points that they defended was being able to have sufficient HEIs within an alliance. The ECIU network had the intention for all of its members to be able to form an EUI alliance together. Originally the discussions spoke of 4-6 HEIs in an alliance. During the co-creation process ECIU pushed for more, for its 13 members to have the opportunity to be accepted. Their argument was that 'size just does not matter if you have the commitment and the resources'. As part of the second call, they have been advocating for the inclusion of lifelong learners in the overall strategy of the alliances, saying that the first call was very much focused on a traditional Bachelors, Masters, PhD route. The coordinator mentioned that they were less involved in the construction of the second call. There were informal conversations, but unlike the first call, the Commission did not share draft texts for amendments to be made by the alliance. They did however reach out to the alliances asking what the issues were and what could be changes compared to the first call.

There were some discussions amongst alliance coordinators about who was invited to take part in the ad-hoc stakeholder group and what that meant for having a successful application. A senior manager from UNITA was quite critical about the formation of the ad-hoc group, as they felt it excluded HEIs who were not previously part of long standing European

higher education networks. The manager found it difficult to obtain any information on what the Commission expected, and they went to the first call knowing that they would not be successful but were expecting 'useful comments to understand what the Commission expects from this pilot phase'. When the second call was published, the alliance aligned its long-term vision and mission based on the objectives that had been published by the Commission, a result of the work in the ad-hoc expert group.

Stakeholder rounds for the European Strategy for Universities

The governance of the initiative has been structured around bilateral relationships between the EC and: 1) the alliances 2) MS 3) European higher education networks (COIMBRA, LERU, Guild etc.). The one space where all of these bilateral relationships could converge has been the consultations for the European Strategy for Universities, with monthly meetings which had a more variable geometry, sometimes in bilateral, but sometimes all together. The European Strategy for universities is the newest strategy for EU higher education policy in order to achieve a higher education dimension of the European Education Area. If as discussed in the previous chapter, the European Education Area is not only space, but the overall strategy for education policy at EU level, the European strategy for universities is its higher education component. While the strategy was initially referred to as the higher education transformation agenda (European Commission, 2020a) the Commission

later opted for a more 'neutral term' with the European strategy for universities (European Commission, 2022b).

An alliance coordinator (Alliance 14) said that the Commission went out of their way to make the initiative possible 'even if they do not always have a solution to their problems, it is always done with a constructive approach and active listening from their part'. The coordinator said this was not typical from an Erasmus+ project and insisted that it is easy to forget that at this stage it is just an Erasmus+ project with financial rules, reports and deliverables. An alliance coordinator (Alliance 9) explained that they had never 'seen such a direct contact with the Commission'. They explained that in order to develop the Strategy, the Commission set up consultation with 'the alliances, MS, sometimes together, and sometimes separate, with rectors'. The coordinator also said that whenever the alliances organize conferences, they are always willing to be present and saw this as 'a big step for the commission in this desire to co-construct' with the alliances. Many alliances also mentioned this as a way for them to keep a relationship with the Commission. An alliance coordinator (Alliance 3) detailed how they were invited, the Commission, as well as four country representatives, to discuss the development of the initiative, request help and receive feedback. Multiple Alliances (Alliance 6, Alliance 30) mentioned that when they invited the Commission to participate in any type of events, such as annual conferences or summer schools, they would always accept and participate.

An alliance coordinator (Alliance 27) spoke of the stakeholder rounds that the Commission organized to develop its European Strategy for Universities as a 'positive experience' and qualified them as an 'open exchange'. The coordinator said that it felt like the Commission was 'really trying to get the alliance's feedback on how to further develop the whole initiative.' The stakeholder rounds took place throughout 2021 with surveys through which the alliances were 'invited to feedback on individual topics concerning legal problems, problems with joining educational programs, or administrative areas.' The coordinator saw this a 'co-creation of process and taking seriously the concerns of the alliances'. Another alliance coordinator (Alliance 3) explained that these stakeholder meetings were one of their main points of contact with the Commission due to their regularity.

The European Commission is used to deploying large scale consultation for developing its higher education strategies. Large surveys were deployed to develop the past strategy: the 'renewed agenda' for higher education. However, an alliance coordinator (Alliance 16) said that the consultation process used for the European Strategy for Universities was very different from the way the Commission had been acting up to now. They felt the Commission was very accessible and that this was a co-creation process, with the Commission 'asking first before doing something whenever they could'. An alliance coordinator (Alliance 17) said that there were meetings with the heads of the higher education Unit very regularly and that it was 'insane the amount of energy spent by EAC

for this thing to exist'. The coordinator said that although it is true at times it could be a bit chaotic and not always completely aligned, they found 'admirable' and 'impressive'. A coordinator (Alliance 15) said that the meetings were to co-create the EEA but also 'the transformation' of the higher education landscape in the EU. The coordinator said that their experience but also their wishes were constantly considered.

Towards a tripartite governance

Drawing on Hackl (2001), Batory and Lindstrom (2011) refer to one of the issues with the Commission's use of incentive based programmes like the EUI is that HEI, or in this case, the alliances, become the Commission's 'clientele'. As such, the link is directly between the Commission and the alliances, with the MS sometimes experiencing some difficulty in finding their place. I asked policymakers from different MS about instances where the Commission, would bring together MS and the alliances to discuss the development of the initiative. A national policymaker said that there were a few instances where all the groups were included. However, the policy maker said it did not feel like a discussion, as all the stakeholders are invited to state their position either in writing or during the meetings, ones after the other. The policy maker said the process did not feel like a discussion 'or a place where everybody can speak their mind', qualifying the process as being a 'rushed'. The policy maker went on to say that process felt a bit 'fake' as it is the Commission that chooses the

presenters and the presentations making it seem that 'everybody is supporting the direction that was proposed at the last meeting'. A Dutch policymaker echoes this perspective saying that the instances where all three parties were gathered it is usually to discuss the Commission's proposals. The policymaker said that it 'would be nice to have more time or room for alternative ideas rather than focus on the proposal by the Commission. Then it would be more of a co-creation process.' A Lithuanian policymaker explained that they believed that MS should have a 'balancing role' for the Commission, considering that some of their political goals were 'unrealistic'. The policy maker said that alliances were the ones that had on the ground experience of what functions and what can realistically be achieved. Member States who work closely with the alliances also have this knowledge. The policymaker believes it is the duty of MS to say when the tempo of the initiative should be decreased when the 'overall success of the initiative is at risk'. A coordinator said that the problem with this is that they were asked to 'promise the moon but were given a bike to reach the moon'.

A policymaker involved in the FPEU said that the initiative was structured around three edges: the Commission, MS, and the alliances. However, the policymaker explained that the Commission spoke with Member States, and the alliances, but there is no dialogue between the Member States, the alliances and the EU at European level. States speak with their national higher education communities, but it does not function in the same way as the Bologna process meetings where HE stakeholders, MS

and the EU are present. Here, on a technical level, the Commission spoke with both branches separately. Which gave the possibility to have the first two calls, without any changes between both calls.

The FPEU made three oppositions toward having a common governance framework for the initiative.

- An evaluation of the pilot phase, which is not just done by the Commission, but also in close cooperation with the national quality assurance agencies in order to deliver a label to these European Universities, once a model has been tested and has shown to work.
- A European governance framework relying on a platform where MS, the alliances and the Commission can discuss and lead the development of the initiative to resolve issues of administrative cooperation by creating the necessary legal and administrative regulatory tools that will give the alliances the possibility to function
- Common funding from both the Commission and the MS.

No evaluation of this sort is planned for the pilot phase. But this has not stopped the Commission from moving forward. 'Understandably so' said a national policymaker as they could not tell the alliances 'wait a year and a half for the evaluation and we will tell you if you can continue or not'. A policymaker involved in the FPEU, said that what was missing to achieve a European governance was an institutionalised group which co-directs the

initiative. Currently, the meetings that exist between the Commission, experts, MS and the alliances are always rather informal. The policymaker suggested that this governance framework could look like what exists in research with the ESFRI European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructures. The policymaker did not just blame the Commission for this considering that it was essential for national ministries to recognise the existence of these transnational alliances and to interact with them as such, much like what was proposed by the French higher education and research minister, holding a forum of European Universities where all alliance coordinators were invited. Since, the French Presidency, both the Spanish and Polish presidencies of the Council, respectively in 2023 and 2025 have organized similar events, sending a strong signal regarding the recognition of the alliances as key actors in the European higher education landscape.

A Dutch policy maker said that it would be important for Member States to have the opportunity to hear what the alliances have to say in the meetings with the Commission for them to understand what they are going through. Currently they only interact with Dutch universities, but said they would like to have the opportunity to dialogue with the alliances as a whole. The Dutch policy maker said that they were not one of the most vocal member states 'but perhaps more one of the hesitant MS, whereas some MS are very eager to go forward'. In a policymaker involved in the FPEU said that the Commission has a tendency to justify their actions by saying that it is what the alliances want, which is

‘something that the MS do not want to hear’. The MS would rather a system where ‘the Commission consults the MS, who consult their national HEIs, and then work together to experiment. The Commission could then always produce reports for the MS in order to move forward quickly’.

A Lithuanian policymaker explained that the Commission is trying to find a balance between their own agenda and the position of Member States but called their chosen methods as ‘quite sneaky’. The policymaker explained that on certain topics like the European degree and the legal entities, the Commission tried very hard ‘to find way to make it happen, even with an opposition from 85% of Member States’. The policymaker said that some Member States have given up and accepted that the Commission was not really listening and was ‘going to do what they want’. When asked why their ministry supported the launch of these pilots despite some doubts, the policymaker said that ‘it was going to happen anyway’, and that they thought it might be best to get involved and join one of these projects to be able to defend their position. A Dutch policymaker said that many member states felt sometimes it was hard ‘to steer the Commission’ in the direction they wanted and often to be considered they have to repeat themselves multiple times ‘before an adjustment is made’. The policymaker suggested to have a more open dialogue at an earlier stage, would help the co-creation process. The policymaker also admitted that ‘maybe there is no good way to have to give everyone enough room or space to say what they think or want or desire’.

Non-binding legal acts

Despite the governance being set up through the mechanisms of an incentive-based programme and policy coordination, my fieldwork took place at a time where the Commission was making use of an additional governance tool: Non-binding legal acts, specifically Council Recommendations. The Commission issued a Proposal for a Council Recommendation (European Commission, 2022e), which was then negotiated, modified and adopted by the Council a few months later (Council of the European Union, 2022b). The following section explores the policymaking process regarding two key issues that the future of the initiative faces as it concerns the possibility of creating two new legal tools: A legal statute for the EUI alliances and a European degree. The topic of 'legal entities' and 'European degrees' first emerged in the Commission's Communication *On achieving the European Education Area by 2025* (European Commission, 2020a), and are central aspects of the 2022 Recommendation.

Council Recommendations are a type of legal acts that can be adopted by EU institutions, like regulations, directives, decisions, and opinions (Consolidated Version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, 2012). Although Council Recommendations are non-binding legal acts, 'the political weight of such a commitment is substantial' (World

Health Organization. Regional Office for Europe et al., 2019, p. 9). Recommendations are adopted by the Council based on a proposition by the Commission. A policymaker involved in the FPEU explained that the European Strategy for Universities 'sets out the vision for the next few years on cooperation in Higher Education including European Universities, whereas the Recommendation is more technical and precise in terms of instrument and next steps.' By relying on a Council Recommendation, the Commission is no longer only seeking the support from MS and HE stakeholders through policy coordination or inciting MS to change their national legislation as a result of incentive-based programmes it has developed that rely on facilitating cooperation between HEIs in the EU. The Commission is now seeking the support of Member States in creating new instruments that it considers could have the potential of durably transforming the European higher education landscape.

The Commission's use of legal acts in education policy making is not very documented in the literature. A representative at DG EAC explained that in the case of the European Universities Initiative, a Proposal for a Council Recommendation was their 'strongest answer to the pleas' from the higher education sector to resolve one of the 'biggest problems' that they are facing: 'The non-application or the unequal application of the Bologna tools.' The representative said that this proposal for a Council Recommendation states all 'the elements that [they] would like member states to implement in their in their countries to ease transnational cooperation.' Beyond all the policy coordination processes the

Commission has engaged, particularly through spaces such as the ad-hoc expert group, or peer learning activities with Member States, the ‘main instrument that [they] have at [their] disposal is Council Recommendation.’

Legal entities

A policymaker involved in the FPEU told us that the development of a legal statute for the alliances should give them the ‘means to their ambitions, and we have decided that their ambitions should high particularly in terms of pedagogical innovation, the creation of inter-university campuses and joint education’. The policymaker explained that the alliances that have been created go ‘way beyond a simple Erasmus project: they are institutional networks’. The development of a legal statute for the alliances is a means for these alliances to ‘go further, and have the ability to hire in common and receive common funding’. Some alliances view the creation of a legal entity as a strategic priority and a condition for creating a European University.

I draw examples from two alliances research ‘in-depth’ – ECIU and UNITA – to understand more clearly the difficulties faced by the alliances and their HEIs on the ground, and what could be the advantages for them of adopting a legal entity. A senior manager of the ECIU alliance told us they believed that ‘you cannot be a European university if you don't have a

European status.’ A head of one of the UNITA offices mirrored this statement considering that ‘if we really want to have European universities, we really need a European legal framework because we cannot work with six different legal frameworks’.

ECIU is established as a foundation under Dutch law and is therefore one of the alliances that has had a longstanding experience in experimenting with national legal tools to develop transnational higher education activities. The senior managers from ECIU I interviewed explained that for them, simply operating as a network was not sufficient anymore. It poses some issues of recognition from the different national governments, who may not be aware of the characteristics of a foundation under Dutch law. One of the senior managers of the alliance explained that the word ‘joint’ was often used when discussing the development of the activities of the alliances. However, the manager explained that for them, joint was not just about developing joint activities in a bottom up or distributive way, but rather that for them ‘joint means one. (...) This is not about merging universities, but there needs to be one legal entity that is able to do all sorts of things and serve the different users of ECIU university’: students, researchers, staff and external organizations alike. In my discussions with coordinators the main points that came up on what would be the use of a legal entity was facilitating joint hirings, the establishment of joint programmes, and the possibility of acting and communicating as a unified entity.

The head of a UNITA office explained that until European Universities exist legally, they are nothing more than 'university collaborations'. Regarding joint recruitment, the interviewee told us that if someone is hired by the alliance, they are necessarily affiliated to the HEI that hires them rather than the alliance itself. The French partners received additional funding from their national governments and have therefore more resources to recruit someone new for the alliance. However, they can only recruit in the French HEI, even though they may have more candidates in their Romanian or Portuguese partners, which creates 'logistical issues'.

Our interviews showed that while certain alliances and some Member States like Spain or France demonstrated significant support for the creation of a legal statute for the alliances for these European Universities and the creation of a European degree, other Member States and alliances often had a cautious stance. A Danish policy maker shared the political reluctance from their Minister to build these new legal structures, as they feared that it could lead to 'shift a competence from a national setting to a European setting'. Furthermore, the Danish policy maker said that the reason for Member States' reluctance was the lack of clarity about what this legal statute means and what it would entail, considering that the Commission's proposal was 'already a conclusion that those were the tools that were needed.' A Lithuanian policy maker explained that at one point they 'had a very weird position basically saying that, okay, so first of all, do the pilot projects and then we will for sure implement the best tool that the pilot projects will show.' For a Dutch policymaker the main

question on the added value of a new instrument would be and 'why it is necessary before really diving into it.' My interviews with the Commission revealed a more nuanced stance from their perspective. A representative from DG EAC told us that they did not have 'have a predefined solution yet' and 'not yet a policy indication from [their] side to the alliances on where to end up.' The representative from the Commission also spoke of the challenge of creating something completely new which is why they are 'seeing how whether in a first instance, it could not be done through possibly amending existing tools.'

One of the main issues arising from debates on legal entities for the alliances is what their added value would be. An alliance coordinator (Alliance 12) said that these legal entities are 'not going to be a universal solution for all the issues that we have at the alliances currently'. And sometimes I feel that this is a lot of what has been sold by the commission to the alliances, and that does not make justice to the reality.' An alliance coordinator (Alliance 2) echoed this position considering that the discussion should be 'what do we need a legal entity for? Do we need it for a European degree in the future? Do we need it for joint Staff appointments? (...) there is often a rush to develop something without reflecting on the purpose.' A Lithuanian policy maker also believed that 'the alliances are moving slower than the European Commission'. While certain alliances were very enthusiastic about creating a legal entity, usually with the hope that it could facilitate the direct recruitment personnel and sharing resources more effectively, many had a lot of

questions about what the end goal was of creating this new tool and how to resolve more complex legal issues such as giving a transnational entity a degree-awarding capacity. A coordinator (Alliance 27) expressed doubts on the capacity for legal entities to resolve funding issues as 'the alliances would still be working with the same type of project money'. An alliance coordinator (Alliance 5) asked why the EU would 'give money to an entity that it does not even necessarily trust, rather than national universities that are legal entities under the supervision of a ministry and a government?' Another alliance coordinator (Alliance 2) considered that 'legal entities will not help if there is not an adequate European legal framework that is signed by all of the member states.' The coordinator went on to say that the focus should not be 'on the type of political entity but focus on laws regulations that need to be overarching and apply in all member states. Then you can define legal entity that makes use of such a set of regulations.

While certain alliance coordinators and national policy makers question the added value of a legal entity, a senior manager from the ECIU alliance considered that thinking about 'the entity of a European university is about what a university is. It is also about a recognition issue, which is not very easily solved by only looking at the legal context.' The manager mentioned that there was currently no clear definition of a what a European university is or could be at a European level and that having this definition may be helpful to understand what each alliance is 'striving for', as there currently is not a common understanding amongst alliances and

‘also not with the European Commission’. The manager saw the call as an opportunity to develop the characteristic of what is needed ‘at European level to be allowed to call yourself a university and distance? (...) the piloting of a legal entity is also about this, about defining what a university is at European level.’

A Lithuanian policy maker said that they believed that in some cases the alliances are supporting the rapid development of these tools ‘because they feel as if that will increase their chances of staying in the initiative (...) in some cases they are just playing the political game themselves and trying to support the European Commission and hoping for some positive outlook towards them as well’. An alliance coordinator (Alliance 4) questioned the feasibility of creating a supranational legal entity that would defend the interest of long-standing research-intensive universities. The coordinator mentioned that it was possible to ‘invent a legal entity for the European Commission and play pretend’ but on the long run ‘we cannot base ourselves on a system that would be hierarchically superior to universities in terms of responsibility. It is unlikely we will develop this anytime soon, and I will not engage my university in this, and I doubt any of our partners would as well.’ My interviews showed that many alliances did not necessarily view this as immediate priority and will wait to see what comes out of the debates between MS, the Commission, and the alliances, as well as the results emerging from the pilot. A manager from ECIU said that this diversity between alliances in seeing the development of a legal entity as a priority also shows that ‘whatever the solution at the

European level needs to be really sort of flexible in many ways, which is not exactly what we see in legal contexts, but now it just needs to happen.'

A policy maker involved in the FPEU spoke of an interaction with the head of the higher education Unit at DG EAC who was aware that MS would not be on board at first but betted on a pedagogical approach and specific workshops to convince them of the uses of these new tools. However, this proved to be rather inefficient as the policy maker explained that what MS did not want 'was to appear like they were giving a blank check to the Commission'. Despite this caution, a policy maker involved in the FPEU explained that all MS agreed that in the current state, 'it is difficult for 4-5 HEIs in 4-5 Member States to work together, and that they need to test solutions to resolve this'. For the Recommendation to be accepted, two strategies were used: 1) a more restrained language for the topic of legal entities for the alliances and 2) the adoption of a 'roadmap' for the potential development of a European degree.

A Danish policy maker spoke of 'strong discussions in the Council between Member States on the wording on these initiatives, especially the legal statute'. One of the ways used to soften the language in the Recommendation was to present possible legal entities for the alliance as 'institutionalised cooperation instruments' (Council of the European Union, 2022b, pp. 3 and 7). A policy maker involved in the FPEU explained that the use of this language was a direct reference to the vocabulary

developed for the Institutionalised European Partnerships in Horizon Europe, previously approved by the Council (Council of the European Union, 2021b). Since Member States had an issue with the Commission pre-emptively determining that new legal instruments were necessary, calling them institutionalised cooperation instruments gave the possibility to refer to an institutionalisation process rather than an institution, and to remain vague on the type of cooperation instrument, which could be a new legal entity for these alliances but could also refer to making use of pre-existing statuses like the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation, European Economic Interest Groupings, or European Research Infrastructure Consortium.

When asked what pushed Denmark to finally accept the Council Recommendation, a Danish policymaker spoke of a softening of the language used. The recommendation published by the Council also speaks of 'Exploring... Seeing different paths... Possibly moving towards a legal statute... Possibly moving towards European degrees. But not concluding anything at this point.' A Lithuanian policymaker explained that they supported the Recommendation once they felt they had the possibility to 'say that we'll see what happens after the pilot projects,' rather than feel forced to create a new tool. From the Commission's proposal to the actual Council Recommendation, the purpose of the pilot went from being a 'step with a view to developing by mid-2024 of a legal statute for alliances of higher education institutions' (European Commission, 2022e, p. 14) to a step 'on the way to facilitating deeper, long-term and flexible

transnational cooperation and in examining the need for and feasibility of institutionalised cooperation instruments, such as a possible legal status for alliances of higher education institutions.’ (Council of the European Union, 2022b, p. 7). Furthermore, there is not commitment from the Council that the recommendation is a green light for the future creation of a legal statute, and instead invites the commission to ‘report at each step to the Council for further decision.’ (Council of the European Union, 2022b, p. 7). The Erasmus+ ‘European policy experimentation in higher education’ call released in June 2022 for the development of these new tools is equally cautious in its title: ‘Pilot institutionalised EU cooperation instruments to explore the feasibility for a possible European legal status for alliances of higher education institutions’ (Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2022, p. 8). This reflects the ways in which the European Commission, within the realm of its supporting competence in education, promotes certain policy ideas. Ambitious policy ideas can be circulated in preparatory documents such as a proposal for a Council Recommendation, which is then negotiated with member states (Alexiadou & Rambla, 2022). The policy idea can be retained, modified, or rejected but the Commission makes use of these preparatory documents to display its agenda setting power and bring forward ambitious policy ideas that it knows will most likely be heavily modified.

Some national policymakers expressed their desire to be more involved in the initiative and saw the ‘cooperation instruments’ call as an opportunity to strengthen their ties with participating national HEIs. This tended to be

more cautious ministries, seeing the 'European policy experimentation in higher education' call as an opportunity to become involved in the initiative a bit more, and therefore have a more important say in its development. A Lithuanian policy maker explained that being involved was a way for MS to 'have a little bit of impact of how it's being driven.' This is a position also shared by the Netherlands who consider that 'it would be a very good idea to get involved with the Dutch institutions that want to participate in these pilot calls'. They saw themselves as being able to be involved in the writing and giving support to the alliance's proposals and a way to push their national agenda so that the initiative is open to all sort of institutions to include both the research universities and universities of applied sciences in the Netherlands. An alliance coordinator said that they were seeking the support of the national governments of their partner HEIs as they 'need their help' for the new call.

A Lithuanian policy maker explained that their government and also many other MS 'supported this pilot call because [they] felt as if [they] will have a moral right if the call succeeds or fails'. The policy maker explained that this was the compromise they tried to reach with the European Commission when publishing this Council Recommendation. The policy maker warned of the aftermath of the pilot call where they predicted a similar moment of tension between the Commission and the MS like the one that followed the publication of the Commission's proposal for a Council Recommendation, if the Commission tries to force 'its agenda too hard'. In contrast, very supportive ministry, like Spain, told us that as a

ministry they could be consulted by the alliances, but that they didn't see their role as so crucial. The policy maker explained that the Spanish ministry believed that the work should 'be concentrated on what alliances on universities themselves consider is best for them.'

A Norwegian policy maker also stated that their position was aligned with the Council Recommendation and the view of most Member States that despite supporting the pilots they believed the original Commission proposal was 'jumping a little bit ahead'. The Norwegian policy maker also insisted that before developing new tools 'you should rely first on the tools developed with the Bologna'. This view to focus on the implementation of the Bologna tools was shared by most interviewed policy makers. However, a Danish policy maker viewed this as a political move from the Commission who has seen the European Universities Initiative 'as an opportunity to make the agenda setting for the EU rather than the Bologna process'. A Lithuanian policymaker explained that they would assist their national HEIs by joining the pilot as partners as for them it is a way to 'have a little bit of impact on how it's being driven.' A Dutch policymaker shared this perspective and also considered that it would be a way for to 'hear back from the institutions that are testing, what their experiences are, whether they see an added value, what this added value might be, if this requires a change in a negative situation in our case, or whether we might find out that it does not have an added value'.

An alliance coordinator said that the pilot call responded adequately to their need to experiment with new forms of cooperation. The pilot is structured around 'a smaller, more agile unit of alliances that pioneer the work. And when it works and they get financial support for that, and then we could apply it to all the other alliances.' The coordinator found it a good work method that should be used more throughout the initiative as 'it combines what the European Commission expects, what the universities can do. But it doesn't require that everybody works on it on their own'.

Our interviews with representatives from the FPEU revealed that the level of ambition of the European Universities Initiative is higher than previous EU led higher education initiatives with its goal to go beyond a project-based approach and exist in programmatic manner. The policy maker explained that although they were still far from it, once there will be 'legal entities for the alliances, [there] will be a partnership apparatus, where the MS and the Commission directly interact with an alliance. The alliance would present its programme for the next years going over all its different missions, and after an assessment, funding would be attributed'.

European degrees

If for the Legal Entities the method that was used to reassure MS was a softening or restraining of the vocabulary used in the Recommendation,

when it comes to the European degree labels, vocabulary remains important but the establishment of a proper roadmap towards their achievement was presented as essential. European degrees were first mentioned by Macron in his initial speech seen as the first step towards the initiative where he called for the creation of 'real European diplomas' (Macron, 2017). Much like with the legal entities, MS and certain alliances asked why there is a necessity to create a European degree or a European degree label in the first place. A DG EAC representative said that although there were currently a lot of joint programmes, Most of the time it's only between two or three universities because it's too complicated to set it up with seven or eight universities. A policymaker involved in the FPEU said that one of the issues with how these joint degrees were accredited, through the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes was that 'it does not say anything about the content of the programme. It does not say that the programme must include multilingualism, multidisciplinary, mobility, or the necessity of having a certain number of partners. You can have a bilateral programme that is evaluated by this type of quality assurance mechanism.' The idea of this European degree is to take new or pre-existing joint programmes and ask if there is a specific European added value. This is where the idea of creating a criterion for this added value was introduced. A European degree label and eventually a European degree would be a diploma delivered multilaterally that responds to these European criteria. The policymaker involved in the FPEU insisted that 'the only thing that will be

European is these criteria, since there is no possibility for it to be delivered by a European institution’.

One of the main issues with the creation of European degrees is that the current Treaties do not allow it. What is being called European degrees are therefore not degrees as such. A policymaker involved in the FPEU did say that some European higher education stakeholders were calling for the creation of such European degrees that would be delivered by the ‘European Commission, or a supranational institution that would perform quality assurance. But this is not possible due to the current treaties, and the treaties will not be modified just for this.’ However, there were some questions about what a European degree would actually mean. A policymaker involved in the FPEU spoke of what these different forms could be:

- A national diploma that is recognized in all of Europe which focuses on resolving the issue of degree recognition in Europe.
- A diploma that has been prepared in common with a common programme prepared by multiple stakeholders that then asked for an evaluation of the programme by a quality assurance agency for whom the evaluation was not just taken into account by other MS but also brought a decision to deliver a diploma based on joint programmes

One of the coordinators (Alliance 20) explained that when they had a discussion with alliances that had already tried to set up a joint degree

between HEIs in more than two countries ‘they all said, it was hell’. The coordinator explained that each university has to negotiate a derogation with their ministry in order to set up the degree. The coordinator said that they believed that for as long as there is not a supranational European governance for this issue, it will be difficult to truly implement European degrees. The coordinator explained that ‘it is not in the power of the alliances to resolve this. It has to be the different higher education ministries that sit around a table and decide to open the door to simplified joint European degrees’. An alliance coordinator mentioned that one of the issues with the European degree is that it is stuck between three logics, ‘the Commission, which is very pushy, Member States that are not fully on board because they do not want to lose a competence, and the HEIs who are also not fully on board because they do not want a new entity to deliver degrees above them. A coordinator (Alliance 19) said that ‘University presidents would like the [European degree] label without making an effort, Member States, not all, but probably at least half of them that are not being helpful and don’t want to move things forward, and don’t want to sign a blank check.’

I take two contrasting cases amongst MS to understand the issues with the development of this so called ‘European degree’: one country which was regularly presented by stakeholders as being more cautious with the development of the initiative, Denmark, and one that was presented as showing significant support to its development, Spain. I interviewed policy makers from each national higher education ministry and had access to

either legal documents or communication from the ministries directly concerning their position on the European Universities Initiative. The Spanish Ministry of Universities published a Royal Decree facilitating the establishment of joint degrees at European level, by creating an exception for Spanish HEIs participating in the European Universities Initiative. The report states that any Spanish HEI participating in an alliance trying to set up a joint degree will be authorized to be evaluated by another national quality agency (as long as it is registered in the European Register of Agencies of Quality Assurance in Higher Education). The decree states that the 'report resulting from this evaluation will be valid for all purposes in the verification procedure of an official university degree in Spain.' (Ministerio de las Universidades, 2021, p. 119566). When asked about what motivated the Spanish government to be flexible with its legislation and facilitate the creation of European degrees, a Spanish policy maker told us that they believed it could push member states to implement the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes but also could create more internationally recognized degrees. The policy maker said they saw it as their role to be active in the degree label pilot since they 'have the competence for it (..) and can adopt things on [their national legislation to include some sort of disposition in this regard]'.

On the other hand, the Danish position is much more cautious regarding going ahead and modifying national legislation. In a letter to Mariya Gabriel, the Danish Minister of Higher Education and Science said that the development of European degrees raised some concerns for them as it

seemed to solve current issues by ‘jumping to conclusions and creating additional complexity.’ The Danish position is that degree recognition issues could be resolved ‘by focusing on preexisting commitments to achieving proper automatic recognition at a European level.’ The main fear expressed by the Minister is that the EU should not be granted a degree-awarding and accreditation competence, that a system where European degrees are valued more than national degrees should not be allowed and that ‘EU cooperation in the field of higher education must not in any way prescribe national policy or action plans on individual Member States.’ (Ministry of Higher Education & Science Denmark, 2022). My interview with a Danish policy maker also revealed that it was not clear on their side what a European degree would entail, ‘who would issue such a degree and what it would mean regarding accreditation at a European level.’ My interviews with DG EAC representatives admitted that ‘there were a lot of misconceptions’ about the development of a European degree but said that the degree would ‘be delivered at a national level and it would be fully in line with the Bologna tools. It is not something that would come from the European level that would be granted by the Commission or a national or European agency. It is Member States which remain in the power.’ When asked about the development of a common criteria on which the degree label and then a possible joint European degree could be based on, the DG EAC representative said that it could be based on a variety of factors linked to transnational cooperation such as ‘how many universities are involved, multilingualism, the inclusion of the program, the innovative character of the program, links with challenge

based approaches, transdisciplinary approaches, innovative learning and teaching, etc.'. The DG EAC representative also insisted that the purpose of this European degree label would be for students to be able to make use of its added value, particularly through employers. The label would be a 'guarantee of the skills that would be acquired through such a labelled joint program.' When asked about what the necessity was of establishing this label and then a possible joint degree, the DG EAC representative said that what they were hearing from employers is that one of the issues with existing joint degrees is that the added value of these programmes is not always very clear.

On the co-creation process, the DG EAC representative said that there were first meetings with stakeholders from the higher education sector, and then with Member States. In the call, a certain amount of co-created criteria with minimum requirements are cited that the alliances are expected to test as part of the pilot: The amount of HEIs involved, Transnational joint degree delivery, Transparency of the learning outcomes, quality assurance arrangements, Joint policies for the joint programme (admissions, selection, monitoring), Transnational campus - access to services, Flexible and embedded student mobility arrangements, Multilingualism, Innovative learning approaches, Graduate outcomes, Inclusiveness and sustainability. Alliances are invited to conduct joint reflections in 'cooperation with the relevant national regional and/or institutional authorities (e.g. responsible for higher education, accreditation, evaluation and recognition), as well as stakeholders (e.g.

students, employers) on the optimisation of the proposed set of criteria (...) and on possible scenarios for the delivery of a joint degree at all levels.’ (Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2022, p. 9).

From the Commission’s proposal to the actual Council Recommendation, the word ‘European degree’ has disappeared altogether to be replaced by ‘joint degrees based on a co-created European criterion’. Furthermore, the Commission’s proposal originally suggested that the creation of a ‘European degree label’ would be a ‘first step’ towards creating a joint European degree (European Commission, 2022e). The Council’s Recommendation is much more nuanced in its wording. The policymaker involved in the FPEU explained that when they went from the wording that spoke of a European degree to a ‘joint diploma based on European criteria’, for them and other MS ‘it means exactly the same thing. But for other MS, it means a lot to put the word European next to the word degree. It meant giving a competence to the Union that it does not have.’ The policymaker explained that the power struggle between MS and the Commission is not ‘on the direction of the actions, but on the vocabulary used, and on the method’. The policy maker involved in the FPEU insisted that the main point of negotiation between the MS and the Commission was to shift from a process in two steps, a degree label followed by a European degree, to a process in three steps, starting with co-creating a European criterion for a degree label, possibly leading to a European label for joint programmes, which might ‘later on’ lead to the ‘the possible design and delivery, on a voluntary basis, at national, regional or

institutional level, of joint degrees at all levels, based on these co-created European criteria, could be envisaged, in accordance with the existing instruments of the Bologna Process.’ (Council of the European Union, 2022b, p. 15). The policy maker involved in the FPEU said that what was important is that each step is not conditioned by the other, particularly between the establishment of a label and the creation of a joint degree. The policy maker told us that one of the issues was that the Commission had not offered a roadmap towards the creation of these degrees. Setting up a roadmap was said to be reassuring to MS as it offers them the possibility to ‘give their points of view’ and set up an evaluation. The policy maker said that the power struggle between the Commission and MS was linked to ‘the appellation and the procedure’.

The alliances also had different understandings of what a European degree could mean and what it could be used for. Some were very much against the creation of such degrees. One coordinator (Alliance 7) considered that the forty-one alliances could be split into two separate groups: One that focuses ‘on a joint degree and other alliances who work on micro-credentials’. Although the coordinator confessed this was bit too dichotomous, they insisted that ‘alliances who work on joint degrees have completely different challenges than alliances that work mainly with micro credentials’. The same coordinator considered that the process of creating a European degree could be long and fastidious, which may be a misplaced use of ‘time and energy to make it possible when I maybe think that degrees in general are not for the future’. The point being that the

Higher Education sector should instead be creating a 'toolbox of different skills' for every student, adding more flexibility to the traditional degree structure.

Other alliances (Alliance 2, Alliance 16, Alliance 17, Alliance 4) supported the idea of a European degree label but had different perspectives on its potential uses and what it generally sought to achieve. One coordinator (Alliance 2) started off by considering that the pilot call on the European degree label lacked a certain degree of ambition and that it 'had not been written in the best possible way' which created some disappointment. The coordinator considered that the call did not invite alliances to 'think outside the box' about what European degree could mean, which could lead to re-create an older model of regular joint programme 'without any added value'. The coordinator expressed their wish to have a 'real European degree that adds value to what universities do and that also recognizes the training on skills that are not purely academic. This is not emphasized enough in the call'. The coordinator also considered that rather than having each alliance work on their own on this, it could be worthwhile for alliances to partner up for the pilot phase and develop a joint framework for what this European degree label could be. Another coordinator (Alliance 19) said they were enthusiastic about participating in the pilot because they do not see 'why they should wait for the definition of the European Commission when they can already propose their own vision of things'. The coordinator saluted the choice of the label as it gives them the possibility 'to stay modular' and not be bound to a 'straitjacket'.

Another coordinator (Alliance 4) expressed some relief about the fact that what had been agreed for now was a degree label rather than a traditional joint degree. The coordinator would agree to a label if it meant that in a given subject students would be able to receive classes from 'x percentage of external speakers coming from the alliance, without anyone having moved physically'. The coordinator went on to say that this would at the very least open a bit of European citizenship to all the students in the alliance. However, if a degree label means creating a degree with 'mobility every six months like an Erasmus Mundus (...) then this is nonsense, and it is not inclusive'. The coordinator went on to say that 'it is not because we provide grants and scholarships that we are being inclusive'. What is essential is to provide sufficient support, beyond simply funding, to students, who have not 'bathed in the international or Europe their whole lives'. The coordinator expressed concern that the students in their alliance were 'afraid, and they will not fight with the administration in order to have this European degree'. The coordinator believes that what is at stake with this degree label is to become European. At the very least a student in any given discipline should be able to receive lessons, even on a screen from an academic from at least two other European countries. Another coordinator (Alliance 18) said that a European degree could also be an internship in another country, courses in tandem online with students from other countries of the alliances, learning multiple languages. For an alliance coordinator (Alliance 18), in order to achieve this European criterion, there must be a collaboration between more than

two HEIs. A European degree would mean having the capacity to determine criteria that 'any employer or any students would be able to use to valorise their skills and knowledge'. It would show that students have the capacity to work different European cultural environments. There needs to be an internal and external recognition of the skills and knowledge that this label brings. The coordinator said a strong communication would be essential as what is at stake if for employers to be familiar with the label and facilitate access to both further research and the labour market.

One alliance coordinator (Alliance 16) told us that in a conversation with a student from the European Student Union, they were asked 'what does a European degree mean? Does it mean that the current degrees delivered are not European?'. This is a question which came up regularly with the different alliance coordinators. The coordinator explained the Commission was insisting on the issue of creating a European criterion, whose definition would be one of the main purposes of the pilot. However, the coordinator explained that this would have different implications in regard to the level of study (Bachelors, Masters, PhD). The coordinator told the Commission that although maybe a common ground is needed 'they need to make some difference because it's completely different what you achieve with one of the levels'. The coordinator used the example of a flexible curriculum 'where the student can just make their own path and then their own curriculum', which they judged as 'very nice for the master's but difficult for the Bachelor'. Furthermore, the coordinator

insisted that this label should be created by keeping in mind what are the 'market destinations of students'.

One coordinator (Alliance 17) considered that the definition of what this European degree would mean and how to balance its creation with the subsidiarity principle was a complex affair. To resolve this, the coordinator suggests that a European degree could be geared towards international students rather than European students: 'a hunting tool that could be used to counter brain drain in Europe'. The coordinator suggests that European degrees could be excellence programmes for international students wanting to study in the prestigious institutions that make up some of the alliances and could be granted internships and a residency status after graduation. European degrees could be a tool to harmonize legislation in Europe to welcome the best international students and grant them the possibility to stay and work in Europe. The coordinator added that at the end of the day, 'everyone wants to welcome talents.'

An atmosphere of competition to achieve collaboration

The European Universities Initiative is a disruptive force that has triggered a dynamic of competition within the climate of collaboration that existed between higher education institutions in the EU prior to its launch. Being articulated through a competitive funding call, HEIs wanting to take part in the European Universities Initiative quickly became aware that the budget was limited and that they would not all be successful in this call. Past research has shown the increase in Erasmus partnerships, participation in research programmes such as Horizon2020 or formation of stakeholder groups and more widely university networks (Fumasoli & Rossi, 2021; Vukasovic & Stensaker, 2018). Despite this increase, an alliance coordinator noted when the first EUI call was announced in 2018:

There was a very, very strange period for European University Cooperation (...) Suddenly different groups were trying to set up their own consortiums and there was an atmosphere of firm secrecy, an atmosphere which many of us did not appreciate at all (...) that has an impact on the actual construction of a consortium because there was a great deal of competition - who got to Whom first and so forth (Alliance Coordinator 22)

A policymaker also reflected on the prevalence of competition at this moment, explaining that 'to make it a credible initiative, excellence had to be introduced into the initiative with an evaluation criterion and that brought in the competition angle'. When asked about why there was a need to reconfigure pre-existing collaborative partnerships in the EU, such

as Erasmus Mundus partnerships or cross-border collaborations such as the University of the Greater Region or EUCOR, a European policymaker explained that whatever 'they were doing was not giving results'. The initiative was developed around 4 main commitments: Increasing a) joint programming b) participation in European higher education c) mobility between universities d) international cross-border recognition of programmes. The EC therefore decided to 'bring in the competition angle' in order to achieve these objectives. A European policymaker explained that:

If you start on a landscape of competition, you get the best and then the best can be models for the rest of the European universities to follow. That was the part of the idea. These were supposed to be model institutions. Front alliances, front runners who were going to experiment and test. Then the rest would follow, adapt, adopt, modify, refine, whatever. Because you can't have funding for how many thousand institutions

An alliance coordinator (Alliance 5) explained that many alliances asked for the EUI calls to be competitive. Another option would have been to condition the continuation of funding through a performance-based evaluation with an expectation of results from the alliances. The later was suggested by a number of alliances who were eager to show the results they had achieved (e.g. Alliance 2, 5). Another coordinator (Alliance 2) considered that 'performance progress matters' and that increasing the amount of universities participating in the alliances, either by expanding the amount of participants in alliances, or increasing the amount of alliances, was 'anything other than desirable because the funding is being fragmented (...) [Having 45 alliances] working on innovative models already 4 years after the launch of this initiative does not give the time to

identify a first pool of potentially successful models'. The alliances were originally conceived and presented as having the purpose of 'testing', 'experimenting' and acting as 'models' for transnational cooperation (European Commission, 2020, p. 10). The coordinator found that with the choice of attributing further funding through another competitive funding round and not an evaluation there has been 'no difference made between alliances that have achieved what they had discussed in the first proposal and alliances that have not achieved it'. A coordinator (Alliance 2) noted that whenever the EC discussed the possibility of further funding being conditioned on an evaluation of progress, the alliances were 'at times aggressive to the Commission. (...) the choices made were the result of political pressure.' Between the first and second round of funding, only 2 alliances out of the 41 did not see their funding renewed. The coordinator (Alliance 2) explained that they were not surprised that the wide majority of alliances had seen their funding renewed. However, they explained that 'it has been clear over the years that some alliances have made very little progress or have shown very little progress. And not having this taken into account is, in my view, not the way to go forward'. A European Commission policymaker explained that they had to convince member states to continue funding the alliances prior to any real evaluation. The policymaker explained that normally any form of sustainable funding needs to be approved by Member States in the Erasmus+ Programme Committee. However, going through this mechanism would have implied a funding gap for the alliances waiting for the evaluation results. The policymaker explained this 'would have de facto meant the end of the

initiative because the alliances, or not ready yet to cope with such a funding gap’.

Another coordinator (Alliance 18) explained that the alliances ‘understood that once the activity had been significant and we had made good progress, we were going to be funded in the second stage’. The coordinator added that this reduced the ‘pressure’ but also contributed to not creating a climate of competition for already existing alliances. The pressure and the competition were on the side of alliances that wanted to be created. The number of new applicants was large with a very limited number of new alliances selected (see Table 6). For those new alliances ‘the competitive side was a little exacerbated’ (Alliance coordinator 18).

Table 6 *EUI applications received and alliances selected*

Erasmus+ Call	Year	Application alliances	Alliances Selected
1 (Expansion)	2019	54	17
2 (Expansion)	2020	64	24
3a (Consolidation)	2022	17	16
3b (Expansion)	2022	35	4
4a (Consolidation)	2023	24	23
4b (Expansion)	2023	41	7
5 (Expansion)	2024	56	14

Unfair advantage?

When the European Council gave the European Commission a mandate in 2017 to launch a programme to strengthen collaboration between higher education institutions in the European Union by creating European University Alliances (EUAs) (European Council, 2017). The Commission rapidly formed an 'ad-hoc' expert group with the purpose of co-constructing a competitive funding call to launch these Universities and discuss priorities, expectations and persistent obstacles with transnational collaboration that remained to be overcome. The group gathered key European higher education stakeholders, representatives from member states, higher education stakeholders and interests groups such as the European University Association (EUA), the League of European Research Universities (LERU), The Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities (The Guild), the Young European Research Universities Network (YERUN). While the sector was closely associated to the development of the call, not all institutions were invited to take part, giving the impression for certain participants of the creation of an unfair advantage. A representative of an Alliance (9) explained that they were initially a:

Bit angry since the Commission had established a group of stakeholders to construct the base of the project. For the first call out of the 85 universities that participated in the group 52 were successful. We had to really push people to get any type of information. We did not even know this stakeholder group existed at first, otherwise we would have harassed people who were participating for information. We really went fishing for information. We submitted our proposal for the first call knowing we would not get it... and that is probably for the best

While it is true that a number of institutions represented by groups that took part in the 'ad-hoc' expert group were successful in the first call. Institutions with mainly bilateral links were also successful, and other alliances stemming from pre-existing networks such as The Guild and Circle U. or Coimbra Group and EC2U. As calls continued being published for the creation of new alliances (European Commission, 2021, 2022, 2023), the selection process has remained extremely competitive (See Table 6). A coordinator (Alliance 18) explained that 'the pressure was much greater for the alliances which, on the occasion of this call wished to be created. And there, the number of new alliances is large and the number of those elected will be small'. On the other hand, calls for the consolidation of the alliances have shown almost all applicants receiving the funding. only one alliance of the first 17 was not retained (eu4art) and only one alliance of the second 24 was not retained (ATHENA). A coordinator (Alliance 18) considered that the alliances 'all understood that once the activity had been significant and we had made good progress, we were going to be funded in the second stage. So that reduced the pressure'. With the first two calls, coordinators also criticized the short amount of time they had to develop these consortiums from when the call was released to its deadline (Alliance coordinator 4 and 9). This created a rush which had an impact on finding the 'right' partner for developing. A coordinator (Alliance 4) that what was problematic is that the HEIs were expected to agree to 'marriage' after a first date. The coordinator went on to explain that the 'internal dynamic of a partner is sometimes difficult to feel. Europe probably pushed us to go too quickly and to not take the time

to be sure that the partners had a common project, which can pose a certain number of problems further down the line’.

One of the coordinators (Alliance 4) reflected on the rapidity of the process at which HEIs were asked to form these alliances. The coordinator reflected on the alliance formation process saying that they only had ‘three months to apply, which was very short’. The coordinator considered that the European Commission was not very good with this and asked us to form these partnerships too quickly. It didn't leave partners the real time to think about this calmly to see what participating in the alliance really implied. Partners they thought might be problematic ended up being a positive surprise and some they thought they could really count on ended up being problematic. One coordinator compared choosing partner HEIs as an interaction on dating website. The same coordinator said that what was problematic is that the HEIs were expected to agree to marriage after a first date.

Evolution in alliance membership

Despite a short existence, the components of the university alliances have not remained static with membership having considerably evolved. This evolution has taken a variety of forms. The first type of evolution is based on the shift in membership status of certain partner institutions within alliances from ‘full member’ to ‘associate member’. This shift in

membership is most often due to political reasons. My interviews, and the call results showing the funding of alliances from one funding round to the next show reveal a variety of specific national contexts that have pushed towards this evolution. Of these political contexts, three main ones stick out: Denmark, United Kingdom, Hungary.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the evolution of national legislation in Denmark has made it more difficult for HEIs to promote internationalization strategies due to the decrease of courses offered in English. My interviews revealed that this general context has pushed Danish HEIs participating in alliances to switch their membership from full member to associate member. This is notable the case of Aalborg University (ECIU) and Roskilde University (ERUA). In 2022, on the basis of breaches to the principle of the Rule of law in Hungary, the Council of the European Union made a decision to restrict access to the EU budget to public interest trusts established through the Hungarian Act IX (2021), which can concern certain higher education institutions (Council of the European Union, 2022a). As a result, certain Hungarian HEIs were unable to benefit from the Erasmus+ budget and saw their status shifted from full to associated partner. This is notable the case of the Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences (E3DRES2) and Semmelweis University (EuniWell). Similarly, following Brexit, and the United Kingdom's decisions to cease being a contributor to the Erasmus+ programme, UK institutions had to shift from full partners to associate partner status. However, different arrangements have been found amongst certain alliances, to

keep such institutions fully involved in the governance and activities of the alliance, despite not being able to receive any money from Erasmus+.

Beyond these contextual circumstances however, I witnessed another process at play within the structuration of the alliances. While there was an atmosphere of competition between European HEIs prior to the first EUI calls, with each alliance trying to structure itself by associating partners as quickly as possible, often in an atmosphere of secrecy. My interviews and a closer look at call results and alliances websites revealed that this atmosphere of competition prevailed beyond the original selection of the alliances. What I witnessed appeared as a ‘dance’ of higher education institutions shifting from partners to the next – I was unsure however, if I was observing should be best associated to a ‘waltz’ or a ‘mosh-pit’ (See Table 7).

Table 7 *Shift in alliance membership*

Original Alliance	Year funded	Departing HEI	Destination Alliance
ARQUS	2019	University of Bergen	CHARM-EU
YUFE	2019	Universita Degli Studi Di Roma Tor Vergata	UNIVERSEH
ERUA	2020	University of Konstanz	EuniWell
EuniWell	2020	University of Leiden	Una Europa
STARS EU (prev. ENGAGED)	2023	Tampere University of Applied Sciences	UNINOVIS
STARS EU (prev. ENGAGED)	2023	Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi	EC2U

**NEOLALIA Alliance
EMERGE**

2023 University of Crete
2024 Universidad de
Burgos

**INGENIUM
RUN-EU**

A coordinator (Alliance 27) explained that since the alliances 'are competing for the same funds. There is lots of competition'. The coordinator revealed that one of the founding HEIs of the alliance had joined another alliance, mentioning that 'alliances stretch out and ask existing member of alliances to join other alliances, and we know we are not the only ones'. Losing a member poses additional challenges considering the alliances are still in the midst of creating joint activities. For this specific alliance, since the departing HEI had been involved in developing a 'highly ambitious joint programme', they have remained involved in it, despite now being part of another alliance. The alliance therefore has to adapt in a way for the HEI to still be part of the programme and contribute to its effort which poses a significant 'challenge'.

Some HEIs have publicly explained their decision to leave their original alliances and join a new one. The University of Leiden was originally part of the EuniWell alliance after its original selection in 2019. In the second funding round, the university can be seen to now belong to the Una Europa alliance. In a public declaration, the university explain that the shift has been made mainly due to a better strategic alignment with the Una Europa on internationalisation, research and teaching. The alliance

explains that they initially explored ways of maintaining a role in both alliances, but that limited resources and ‘limited synergy’ do not make this possible (Leiden University, 2022). Furthermore, the alliance explains its decision to be transparent about this decision to not damage EuniWell’s ‘ambitions, expansion strategy and positioning for future funding’. In its communications, the University of Leiden mentions that this move is a response to an ‘invitation’ from Una Europa. On the receiving end, Una Europa justifies how welcoming Leiden is an important move forward for the alliance considering that Leiden is:

One of Europe’s leading research universities, a sector leader in educational innovation, and deeply international in its outlook. These qualities and values align perfectly with Una Europa and our existing university partners and will further strengthen Una Europa’s position as one of Europe’s leading university alliances and push us to raise our ambitions and extend our horizons still further (Una Europa, 2022)

We observed a similar dynamic regarding the University of Bergen’s choice to move from the ARQUS alliance to Charm-EU. A Norwegian Ministry official explained that they were surprised at how quickly Norwegian HEIs ‘jumped on the initiative’, considering that maybe some went too quickly before fully exploring the alignment with the university’s priorities. The coordinator explained the case of the University of Bergen opting out of the ARQUS alliance. The Ministry official mentioned that they believed that this was fine considering the original funding phase was only a pilot. An HEI realising that the activities of an alliance within the original pilot not ‘fitting their priorities is okay’. On its side, CHARM-EU mentioned

that the University of Bergen was being included in the alliance due to shared values and a common vision in building a university alliance. The alliance's communication mentions that the 'European Universities Initiative, as proven by success stories such as the one we are developing in CHARM-EU, is proof that the collaboration between universities is feasible and the best way'. The reports on the success of the initiative and the collaborative dynamics it has established do not make note of this process of 'waltzing' that has occurred throughout the different funding rounds of the initiative. It also highlights that, while the alliances are acting as novel institutions, the processes of experimentation still occurring, and the speed at which they have formed themselves make them facing break-ups, disintegration or shifts in partners still possible.

An alliance coordinator (Alliance 27) mentioned that with the second phase of funding conditioned on expansion and the Commission saying, 'go out and look for new partners', a new feeling of competition emerged which reminisced the sensations 'of 2018 of whom is working with who and who can I talk to'. The coordinator mentioned that while the situation had evolved since the early days of the initiative, particularly thanks to the development of FOREU1 and FOREU2, the experience had not been 'pleasant on some occasions'. The coordinator insisted on the importance 'to be careful to respect the other alliances'.

While this evolution in alliance membership can be observed from one funding round to the next, it can also be witnessed prior to the selection of

the alliances. Looking at the archives of alliance's websites, a shift in alliance membership can be observed from when they were initially announced, to the point where they have received funding. It has been common for alliances to officially form themselves, announce their application for the EUI Erasmus+ call, and set up a website to already start communicating on their actions, prior to any confirmation of having been selected to receive the funding. The evolution and movements of the alliances can be traced back to years prior to any sort of any funding attribution, which also indicates that a number of alliances have spent years existing as such and leading activities without any assurance that they would day be officially part of the Erasmus+ call.

Unfunded alliances

Many alliances have made the choice to stay established as alliance with the hope of receiving funding for ulterior funding rounds. This has given rise to a phenomenon of 'unfunded alliances', that is alliances that exist within the frameworks of what was intended to be funded by Erasmus+, but without the actual funding. A coordinator (Alliance 27) mentioned that while most of the time, alliances who were not selected under the Erasmus+ call ceased existing, others 'have been functioning as alliances without the seal of excellence or funding but have looked for other funding'. The coordinator raised the question of what it is that actually makes an alliance. Most of these alliances that have continued existing

without the funding, were usually only 'one point away from the cut-off point' to be successful under the Erasmus+ call. The coordinator claimed that these 'unfunded alliances' have felt much more of a 'competitive pressure' than those already selected.

While these alliances are not represented in the FOREU1 and FOREU2 forums, some interaction does exist at national level between HEIs part of funded alliances and those that still belong to unfunded alliances. An alliance coordinator (Alliance 27) explained that in Spain, the conference of rectors has a committee on internationalisation which is in charge of following the developments of the European Universities Initiative. The unfunded alliances have been using this space in order to lobby the Ministry to receive national funding so that they can seek to continue existing without the national funding, with the hope of receiving Erasmus+ funding through one of the ulterior calls. The coordinator explained that following the first funding round 'three unfunded alliances received national top up funds because they were so close to the cut-off point some that the Ministry felt they should be supported'. The coordinator went on to say that despite not all being successful in following funding rounds, they have been very 'vocal in saying why should a European funding programme determine what is an alliance and what is not an alliance'. HEIs in unfunded alliances in Spain feel that since the Spanish Ministry has passed legislation to grant HEIs participating in funded alliances 'special status' (e.g. for the implementation of joint programmes) there is a risk to 'divide the system'. This also resonated

with my interview with the Spanish Ministry of Universities who very much advocated for the European Universities Initiative to be more geared towards inclusivity rather than just excellence, in order to avoid creating a two-tier national higher education system, with those institutions that have received the 'seal of excellence' and the 'funding' and those that have not.

To not lose the motivation and interest for alliances who came close to being selected, the European Commission issued 'Erasmus+ Certificates' considering that the proposal was of 'high quality (over 80 points in the evaluation process). The certificate, signed by Commissioner Mariya Gabriel, guarantees that the proposal meets key objectives of the European Universities Initiative: achieving synergies between education, research, innovation and service to society, promoting European values and strengthening European identity, and increasing the attractiveness and competitiveness of European HEIs. While the certificate mentions that funding could not be attributed due to limited resources, the certificate acts as a recommendation 'by the European Commission for funding by other sources' (European Commission, 2022c, 2022d). My interviews revealed that alliances that were not selected in the first round of funding

Some alliances chose not to apply in the 2019 call (Alliance 6, 26, 27, 30) in order to see what would happen with the first wave of alliances. A coordinator (Alliance 26) told me that the partner institutions felt they 'were not exactly ready and we wanted to see how the program operated

to then apply for the second wave'. However, many alliances also attempted to be selected from the first call but were initially unsuccessful. Some alliances were unsuccessful as they did not respond to certain criteria desired by the Commission such as achieving geographical balance by including partners from the East, West, South, and North of Europe therefore having to reorganize themselves entirely (Alliance 12). However, my interviews also revealed many instances, where alliances that were initially not selected had nevertheless come very close. To evaluate the proposed alliances, the European Commission set up a marking scheme out of 100, where alliances needed to score at least 81 points. Certain coordinators mentioned scoring 80, (Alliance 4, 13), 80.5 (Alliance 3). One coordinator (Alliance 13) explained that coming so close, was 'a bit difficult to digest, with certain criticisms that were legitimate and others not'. These alliances were all selected in the second round after 'minor improvements to the project' which then created a sufficiently high score 'without ambiguity'. Others (Alliance 9) felt that the evaluation process was a 'learning experience' which gave them the opportunity to 'improve the project'. A coordinator (Alliance 4) explained that alliances led by or with participating French institutions that had scored so highly in the first round of applications but were not successful, received sums of money ranging from €200.000 to €400.000. 4 alliances were in this situation - ATHENA (University of Orléans), EC2U (University of Poitiers), eut+ (University of Technology of Troyes), INCLUSU (University of Lille) - and 3 ended up being successful in the following bid. These unsuccessful alliances initially discussed what could be done with these amounts, with

one possibility discussed being resorting to a consulting firm (SIRIS Academic) that had helped alliances that were successful in the initial application. I found that HEIs forming alliances who were not successful in the EUI calls usually had a series of options available to them: disband and join already existing alliances, take the Commission’s comments into account and apply again as such or under a different ‘brand’, and finally renounce in taking part in an alliance altogether.

Table 8 *Shift in alliance Membership - INCLUSU (unfunded alliance)*

Original alliance	Departing HEI	Destination Alliance
INCLUSU	University of Minho	ARQUS
INCLUSU	University of Wrocław	ARQUS
INCLUSU	Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca	EUTOPIA
INCLUSU	Mykolas Romeris University of Vilnius	ERUA
INCLUSU	University of Lille	NeuroTechEU
INCLUSU	Malmö University	UNIC
INCLUSU	Università degli studi di Roma Tre	EUST

The University of Lille applied to the INCLUSU alliance applied for the 2020 Erasmus+ call but was not successful with the application. After this failed attempt, the members of the INCLUSU alliance, decided to disband completely, joining a series of existing alliances (See Table. 8). While some of the members of the alliances stayed together, such as Minho and Wrocław, both joining ARQUS, most all joined entirely different alliances. Each of these HEIs, having invested time, energy and resources in the

initiative, found themselves 'on the market' once more to join an already existing alliance. However, while some made the choice of joining alliances selected as part of the first (2019 call) wave, others chose to join alliances formed as part of the second (2020 call) wave. The subsequent calls for the consolidation of the alliances, saw the alliances receive funding, respectively, in 2022 and in 2023. For example, the University of Lille, only received funding from 2023 when the NeuroTechEU alliance received its consolidation fund. Between the original formation of INCLUSU alliance, likely some time in 2019 in order to be able to apply for the 2020 Erasmus+ call, and the reception of the funding, the Université of Lille had to exist for five years unfunded but investing its own resources into an unsuccessful alliance. This shows the determination of many HEIs to take part in this initiative. While most of the members of the original INCLUSU alliance, like Lille, chose to join alliances that had already received the initial Erasmus+ funding from 2019 or 2020, Università degli studi di Roma Tre, decided to join an alliance that was still being created: EUST. However, the EUST alliance, was short lived, and metamorphosed itself into the EUList alliance to apply for the 2022 call, without Università degli studi di Roma Tre, which is no longer part of any selected European University Alliance. The EUList alliance only received funding in 2023 after having initially been unsuccessful for the original 2022 funding call and being attributed the Commission's certificate of high quality.

Table 9 *Shift in alliance Membership – EUST (unfunded alliance)*

Original alliance	Departing HEI	Destination Alliance
EUST	National Technical University of Athens	EUList
EUST	Brno University of Technology	EUList
EUST	Slovak University of Technology Bratislava	EUList
EUST	Leibniz University Hannover	EUList
EUST	Lappeenranta-Lahti University of Technology	EUList
EUST	Jönköping University	EUList
EUST	Universidad Rey Juan Carlos Madrid	EUList
EUST	Università degli studi di Roma Tre	N/A
EUST	Technische Universität Wien	EUList

The European Commission’s Strategy for Universities (2022b) announced the desire to create sixty European University Alliances. After two consolidation calls for the first and second wave alliances, joint with the possibility for a few new alliances to be created, the Commission had funded 51 alliances by 2023. An additional call therefore had to be launched for the creation of additional alliances by 2024 in order to meet the target. A decision was made to include more new alliances than initially planned, now bringing the number of total alliances to 65 in 2025. Despite an atmosphere of competition, which has forced HEIs to persevere in their efforts to take part in the European Universities Initiative, by either creating new alliances or joining existing ones, the Commission has also shown a more inclusive stance by enlarging the pool of alliances receiving funding.

The role of past links in the formation of the European university alliances

As the European Commission launched the initiative after mapping the state of transnational cooperation in the European Union (Karvounaraki et al., 2018), this section shows the anatomy of alliance formation in the European Universities Initiative to try to better grasp the higher education landscape the initiative is seeking to 'transform' (European Commission, 2020c), and what it is being built on top of. The European Universities Initiative was set up as a competitive call that aims to fulfil several objectives set out by the wider European Education Area strategy, with an emphasis on developing cooperation between the wider higher education sector in the European Union. The Erasmus+ call states that the initiative can both be used for 'setting-up new cooperation partnership or enhance existing ones' (European Commission, 2019, p. 126). While opening the door to existing partnerships, the call makes it clear that the European Universities Initiative must show a stronger degree of ambition than past collaborations. The European Commission therefore set out a series of criteria to condition what these new forms of cooperation should look like, which has created a situation where past collaborations between European higher education institutions have had to evolve in order to meet all of these conditions to be selected. The HEIs that make up the alliance must be from an EU member state or other programme country (Erasmus+; Horizon 2020). There is a minimum of 3 HEIs from at least 3 different Member States (or programme countries), although the call also

states that the alliance should be 'ideally composed of 5 to 8 partners' (p.126). Additionally, the alliances need to include HEIs from different geographical areas and guarantee 'wide geographical coverage' (p.128).

The alliances missions must be committed to the wider objectives of the European Education Area such as developing excellent education and new innovative education models, as well as increase mobility of students staff and researchers. The missions of the alliances need to include a strong European dimension with transnational practices that are beneficial for students, contributes to regional development, and foster ambitious and innovative dynamics in terms of what is proposed in terms of cooperation for education, and also creating 'synergies' to other missions of the university (research, societal impact etc.). Finally, the alliances need to have a clear long-term strategy for the alliances showing the potential for the structural and financial sustainability of the alliance. They need to demonstrate their possibility to work well, by showing how the alliance members will complement each other, what each HEI's role will be in the alliance, and a functioning governance model where the decision-making processes are explicit and workable. The alliances are expected to show a plan on how administrative barriers will be removed and how resources will be shared in terms of human and financial resources, databases management and scientific infrastructures.

As it is clear from the start that not all HEIs applying to the call will be selected, the Commission highlights that those selected will have the

responsibility to show the potential to have an influence on other higher education institutions that are not selected through the call, by 'driving excellence' (p.128). The alliances are expected to disseminate their results and good practices so that they can be shared with a wider range of stakeholders.

The role of bilateral links in the formation of the alliances

During my interviews, I explored the past collaborations between the HEIs that decided to form a European University alliance together. I found that most of the time, there were some sort of past link, either bilateral or multilateral. I explore these past links in the following section that has been split in two different categories: past bilateral links and past networks. This section shows how a competitive call as re-organised past cooperations in the European Union in the higher education sector, through university alliances formed based on the criteria of the Erasmus+ call discussed above.

Institutional bilateral and multilateral links

The ERUA alliance started from a discussion between Paris 8 and the University of Roskilde. Both universities belonged to a common network

that had been started by Roskilde – the Critical Edge Alliance – which re-groups HEIs from around the world that had a history of ‘radical’ institutional building. This was one of the pillars of the formation of the alliance when looking for additional partners that had to be relatively young HEIs, created since the 1960s, and known for a reformist tradition. Despite having two HEIs part of a global network the alliance is essentially built upon strong bilateral links both at institutional and faculty level. The EUniWell alliance was also the result of common values and visions as well as past collaboration between three HEIs. The universities of Cologne, Florence and Birmingham. These HEIs looked at past links with other HEIs to determine which would be a right fit, partly based on research but mostly based on a good working relationship with Erasmus contacts as well as joint degree programs that already existed with some of the partners. Mobility history also played an important role in alliance formation. Similarly, EURECA Pro was born out of strong relationship between the universities of Leoben and Freiburg had lots of past collaborations such as joint projects and student exchanges due to close geographical proximity. With the remaining HEIs however, I found there was no long-standing past links and many linkages had to be built up from zero.

The formation of the partnerships reveals how strong existing bilateral links created the basis for submitting a bid for the European Universities Initiative. However, other alliances like FILMEU are the result of EU funded collaborations in research and education between the HEIs for 15 years. The partners previously participated in the 'Knowledge Alliance' Erasmus

programme and set up an Erasmus Mundus, strategic projects together in FP7 research funding programme. The alliance is the first time all HEIs are working together at the same time. Participating institutions were chosen based on the existing agreements for cooperation (Erasmus mundus and research agreements) to guarantee some sort of funding on the short/medium term.

We noticed that it was common for alliances to be built on top of a common nucleus of universities that had a long-standing history of cooperation and a common desire to response to the 'European Universities' call. The CIVIS alliance was formed from three core HEIs, Madrid, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Aix-Marseille Université and La Sapienza Roma who had already been discussing the creation of a Mediterranean university network since 2008. When the Commission spoke of the geographical balance the three HEIs looked beyond the Mediterranean region. The idea was to invite universities that were interested in the African and Mediterranean region. HEIs started to agree but without really knowing each other, as within each HEI only two or three people knew each other. The case of CIVIS shows how a core set of universities found partners based on a common interest to foster a university alliance that could act as a bridge between Europe and Africa through the Mediterranean. The RUN-EU alliance started with the Polytechnic of Leira that received a grant from Portuguese government in 2018 to build contacts with other Polytechnics in Europe. Through this

process, Leria started making some contacts in Finland, Ireland and the Netherlands. Prior desire to create a European university, there was a will for wider cooperation between Polytechnics in Europe. Once this first link was established, discussions started at the level of rectors and presidents who assumed the institutional decision to establish a regional university network and then the regional university network applied to be a European University. Both cases, show not only the importance of past links, but also a past desire to build a cooperation project with a specific objective. These past collaborative objectives both necessitate a long-term plan, which past EU cooperation projects (e.g. Erasmus Mundus) could not offer due to their short-term nature. The EUI appears as a solution to enact past cooperation ambitions for certain HEIs who had pre-existing links and expand them to other partners due to the geographical and number of HEIs criteria set forward by the Commission.

Importance of joint degrees in building the alliances

UNITA started from a long history of joint degrees between the University of Turin and Université Savoie-Mont Blanc, with the first joint degree dating back to 1979, as part of the Franco-Italian University partnership. UNITA, started out between the universities of Turin and Savoie Mont-Blanc who had joint degrees since 1979 and as part of the Université Franco-Italienne partnership - Savoie Mont Blanc had relationships with university of Pau. Pau had a relationship with university of Zaragoza, on

the other side of Pyrenees. There were some relationships with the University of West-Timisoara, and university of Covilha in Portugal - HEIs of Romance languages and in mountain regions. CIVICA is also the result of a long-standing history of joint programmes between all the members of the alliance (Charret and Chankseliani, 2022). In the EDUC alliance the nucleus was the result of a joint degree programme between the University of Potsdam and Paris Nanterre. Five of the six partners had already existing links and Erasmus agreements at least or other forms of more intensified cooperation such as a dual degree program. Similarly, with EU-CONEXUS interviews revealed the importance of a degrees the University of La Rochelle had with the Universities of Bucharest and Valencia. Furthermore, past cooperations existed at a faculty level, but the rectors of each HEI met the first time when signing the grant agreement that acted the creation of the alliance. This reveals that while joint degrees and past cooperation between faculty was foundational in creating the links required to find a university alliance, the EUI was a way to transcend the academic level and get the senior leadership of the HEIs involved in the creation of the alliances. This is a condition put forward by the European Commission in its call which expects 'organisational commitment at highest institutional level' (European Commission, 2019, p. 126).

Individual links

While past cooperation through Erasmus partnerships, joint degrees, or common cooperation projects have been fundamental to the development of the alliances, others are the result of pre-existing links at faculty level between individual academics. The NeurotechEU alliance is only the results of individual contacts at faculty level. The alliance is focused on neuroscience and relied on the pre-existing links between the departments of neuroscience in all participating institutions. The alliance was originally started by the University of Radbound that made a list of 50 possible institutions to form an alliance with whom they had some sort of individual link. They found that 30 were already in an alliance which narrowed down the list considerably. The alliance started out with some HEIs Radbound had links with academics at the Universities of Helsinki and the University of Oxford, whilst others were completely new like Karolinska Institute, Miguel Hernández University and Turkey or Boğaziçi University. The ATHENA alliance Started as a conversation between colleagues from Polytechnic Porto and the Hellenic Mediterranean University. Both institutions had long standing links between academics that were used to work together through Erasmus and research projects. Both institutions also had worked together in creating a platform for 'academic internships.' Similarly, in the eu4art links were built on Erasmus partnerships but mostly through informal links between professors and teachers.

The UNIC alliance, was born out of a common desire of a group of academics to work together towards creating an alliance with HEIs

situated in post-industrial cities deeply rooted in its local communities. The alliance was not built with the issues of disciplines, rankings, amount of student exchanges between the HEIs, or joint publications between academics in the HEI. The selections of the HEIs in the alliance was driven regarding the links with the student population and the territory in each region the HEIs are situated in was presented as a key building block. Despite not having any strong past links at institutional or faculty level, a participant presented the alliance as a 'natural alliance' due to the common characteristics of the HEIs. This said, a participant confessed that not having any pre-existing connections between the HEIs is also a challenge, being universities with different histories and national legal settings.

From the University of the Greater Region to Transform4Europe?

The University of the Greater Region (UniGR) is a higher education cross-border cooperation initiative between Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg and Switzerland that was launched in 2008, originally as part of the INTERREG IV programme (2008-2013) and that possesses a legal entity since 2013 as an association (a.s.b.l) under Luxembourg law (*Historique*, n.d.) . UniGR is made up of the University of Kaiserslautern, University of Liège, University of Lorraine, University of Luxembourg, Saarland University, Trier University. The University of the Greater Region

initially applied to the first pilot phase as the EURCrossBorderAlliance. This alliance was meant to include the six universities of the University of the Greater Region. In order to achieve larger geographical breadth, the alliance would have been composed of an HEI in the Baltic region, Vytautas Magnus University, and the Balkans, St Kliment Ohridski of Sofia. Fedler (2020) reveals that the alliance was rejected by the Commission in the first call due to a lack of geographical balance. The alliance could be said to have been much more cross-border than transnational, despite the addition of two HEIs from other part of the EU. This is a case of a pre-existing network not being successful in the European Universities Initiative, despite being a pre-existing experience of European higher education cooperation, and having been involved in the consultation phase that led to the creation of the first call (Felder, 2020).

The University of Saarland was meant to be coordinator of the EURCrossBorderAlliance (*EURCrossBorderAlliance - European University Alliance without Borders | Uni-Gr.Eu*, n.d.). When the alliance was not selected, the University took another direction to build a new alliance. This one would be built independently from UniGR, but did associate the two additional partners to what would have been the EURCrossBorderAlliance: Vytautas Magnus University, St Kliment Ohridski of Sofia. My interviews revealed that there were personal connections at the senior management level of the Saarland and Kaunas which facilitated the partnership. The University of Silesia was already an associated partners of the EURCrossBorderAlliance, which made the association of the HEIs quite

natural. The remaining institutions, the University of Trieste, the University of Alicante, and the Estonian Academy of Arts were brought into the alliance to further achieve the geographical balance that lacked the original application, but also to reinforce the thematic preoccupation of the alliance: transformation. The University of Trieste was chosen as it experiences significant regional transformations and share the experience of being a border region (Italy-Slovenia). The University of Alicante was chosen due to being in a region that has undergone big economic transformation. The Estonian Academy of Arts was also brought into the game in order to strengthen this idea of transformation. Of the remaining HEIs of UniGR the University of Liège has joined the UNIC alliance, the University of Luxembourg joined the UNIVERSEH alliance, and the University of Lorraine recently became a full member of EURECA-PRO. Finally, the Universities of Kaiserslautern and Trier have not joined any of the 44 selected alliances.

The case of EPICUR and EUCOR

While interest groups like the League of European Research Universities played an important role in the formation of EPICUR alongside a cross-border network - EUCOR - the European Campus. EUCOR is a cross-border higher education partnership between universities of the Upper Rhine region, which possesses a legal identity as a European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC). EGTCs are a legal instrument that have

regularly come back up in Communications from the Commission discussing the possibility of giving the European university alliances a legal entity (European Commission, 2020, 2022). EUCOR could therefore have been imagined as a model for what the European Universities announced could like, prior to the criteria having been narrowed down. EUCOR even published a concept paper shortly after Macron's speech announcing European universities detailing its vision of a European university.

As EUCOR is a cross-border initiative it did not meet the criteria set by the Commission in terms of geographical balance and transnational mission. EUCOR, much like UniGR into an alliance was not successful. However, four of the five members of EUCOR managed to join forces in order to establish the EPICUR alliance. The fifth member, the University of Basel, was not originally allowed to take part, as Swiss universities were not eligible to take part in the European Universities Initiative. To reach the objective of geographical breadth the four EUCOR universities added the Universities of Amsterdam, Poznan, Thessaloniki, Vienna, with which they already had 200 bilateral cooperation agreements as well as partnerships at faculty level. The alliance therefore offered the possibility to create a deeper partnership.

The EUI call may have solidified certain past examples of transnational collaboration in the EU, with both interest groups and disciplinary networks that had the opportunity to 'enhance' existing partnerships by

transforming them into university alliances funded Erasmus+. However, the initiative also disturbed previous examples of collaboration by setting out clear political objectives such as number of partners, localization of partners and geographical balance. This therefore had an impact on past collaboration efforts such as those discussed with UniGR (established as the Transform4Europe) and EUCOR (established as the EPICUR alliance).

Eut+: From no links to a fusion of higher education institutions on a European scale

The eut+ alliance: the European University of Technology is an example of an alliance made of HEIs that did not have any strong past links, but which is aiming to push the alliance formation process to one of the deepest levels, as it seeks to truly create a transnational institution through a merger of participating HEIs. This means that the identity of the alliance will surpass the original identity of participating HEIs. The institutions that make up the alliance, are not presented as 'partner institutions' but as 'campuses' of the European University of Technology (eut+, 2025). The alliance was initiated by the University of Technology of Troyes, that had some difficulty participating in national excellence initiatives that rely on HEI collaborations. UTT attempted to take part in the excellence initiative first as part of the University of Bourgogne Franche Comté (Université de Technologie de Troyes, 2012), and then the University of Champagne (Journal Officiel, 2019). However, both

experiences failed, leaving the UTT without the promise of long term and sustainable funding from the government. One of the original ideas of the alliance was to attempt to ‘resolve on a European scale, what could not be achieved on a local scale’. UTT started out with an ambition to create a European university of technology and looked for partners that could respect the disciplinary focus (universities of technology) being institutions of similar sizes, whilst achieving geographical balance.

The role of past networks in the formation of the alliances

We found that participation in past networks played a significant part in the establishment of the EUI alliances. Out of the 31 alliances I interviewed, 15 stemmed directly from past networks (Table 10). When discussing the process through which the alliances were formed with the interviewed alliance coordinators, I realized that it was common for a core group of HEIs (usually 2-3) to have been the solid basis and driving force in the construction of the alliance. These ‘pillar’ HEIs for the alliance formations usually knew each other from participation in university networks.

Table 10 University Networks that were at the origin of the alliance’s formation (Made with data from the interviews, alliances’ and university networks’ websites, internationalization documents from HEIs)

Name	Phase	Network	Alliance Members Participating in Network	Ratio
CHARM-EU	1	LERU: League of European Research Universities and Coimbra Group Universities	University of Barcelona (ES) Trinity College Dublin (IE) Utrecht University (NL) Eötvös Loránd University (HU) University of Montpellier (FR)	100,00 %
ECIU	1	ECIU network	Lodz University of Technology (PL) University of Twente (NL) Aalborg University (DK), Institut Nationale des Sciences Appliquées (FR), Dublin City University (IE) Hamburg University of Technology (DE) Kaunas University of Technology (LT) Linköping University (SE) Tampere University (FI) Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (ES) University of Aveiro (PT) University of Stavanger (NO), University of Trento (IT)	100,00 %
UNA Europa	1	Coimbra Group Universities, LERU: The League of European Research Universities, The Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities	University of Helsinki (FI), Freie Universität Berlin (DE) Alma mater Studiorum Università di Bologna (IT) University of Edinburgh (UK) Uniwersytet Jagielloński w Krakowie (PL) KU Leuven (BE) University of Leiden (NL) Universidad Complutense de Madrid (ES) Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne (FR)	100,00 %
UNITE!	1	Cluster - Consortium Linking Universities of Science and	Aalto University (FI) KTH Royal Institute of Technology (SE) Institut Polytechnique de Grenoble (FR) Politecnico di Torino (IY) Universitat	83,33 %

		Technology for Education and Research	Politecnica de Catalunya (ES) Universidade de Lisboa (PT)	
YUFE	1	YERUN: The Young European Research Universities Network	Maastricht University (NL) University of Antwerp (BE) University of Bremen (DE) University of Cyprus (CY) University of Essex (UK) University of Eastern Finland (FI), University of Rijeka (HR), Nicolaus Copernicus University (PL), University Carlos III Madrid (ES), University of Rome Tor Vergata (IT)	90,00 %
ARQUS	1	Coimbra Group Universities	University of Granada (ES), University of Graz (AT), University of Leipzig (DE), University of Lyon (FR), University of Padua (IT), Vilnius University (LT)	66,67 %
EUGLOH	1	LERU: League of European Research Universities, CESAER: Conference for European Schools of Advanced Engineering Education and Research, Sgroup Universities Europe	Paris-Saclay University (FR) Lund University (SE) University of Szeged (HU) University of Porto (PT) Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich (DE)	100,00 %
EPICUR	1	EUCOR - The European Campus	University of Southern Denmark (DK) Adam-Mickiewicz University of Poznań (PL) Aristotle University of Thessaloniki	44,44 %

			(GR) University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences (AT) Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (DE) University of Haute-Alsace (FR) University of Freiburg (DE) University of Amsterdam (NL) University of Strasbourg (FR)	
AURORA	2	AURORA network	Copenhagen Business School (DK), Palacky University Olomouc (CZ), University Duisburg Essen (DE), University Of East Anglia (UK), University Of Iceland (IS), University Of Innsbruck (AT), University Of Napoli Federico II (IT), University Rovira And Virgili (ES), Vu University Amsterdam (NL)	100,00 %
EC2U	2	Coimbra Group Universities	Alexandru Ioan Cuza University Of Iasi (RO), Friedrich Schiller University Of Jena (DE), University Of Coimbra (PT), University Of Pavia (IT), University Of Poitiers (FR), University Of Salamanca (ES), University Of Turku (FI)	100,00 %
ENGAGE. EU	2	ALEUESS	Luiss University (IT), Norwegian School Of Economics (NO), Tilburg University (NL), University Of Mannheim (DE), University Of National And World Economy (BG), University Toulouse 1 Capitole (FR), Vienna University Of Economics And Business (AT)	57,14 %
ENHANCE	2	Alliance4Tec	Chalmers University of	57,14

	h and IdeaLeague		Technology (SE), Norwegian University Of Science And Technology (NO), Polytechnic University Of Milan (IT), Polytechnic University Of Valencia (ES), Rwth Aachen University (DE), Technical University Of Berlin (DE), Warsaw University Of Technology (PL)	%
EuroTeQ	2 Eurotech Universities Alliance		Czech Technical University In Prague (CZ), École Polytechnique (FR), Eindhoven University Of Technology (NL), Tallinn University Of Technology (EE), Technical University Of Denmark (DK), Technical University Of Munich (DE)	100,00 %
Circle U	2 The Guild of European Research- Intensive Universities		Aarhus University (DK), King's College London (UK), University Of Belgrade (RS), University Of Humboldt Berlin (DE), University Of Louvain (BE), University Of Oslo (NO), University Of Paris (FR), University of Pisa (IT), University of Vienna (AT)	66,67 %
FILMEU	2 GEECT – – The European Grouping Of Film And Television Schools		Dún Laoghaire Institute Of Art Design And Technology (IE), Luca School Of Arts (BE), Lusófona University / Cofac (PT), University Of Theatre And Film (HU)	100,00 %

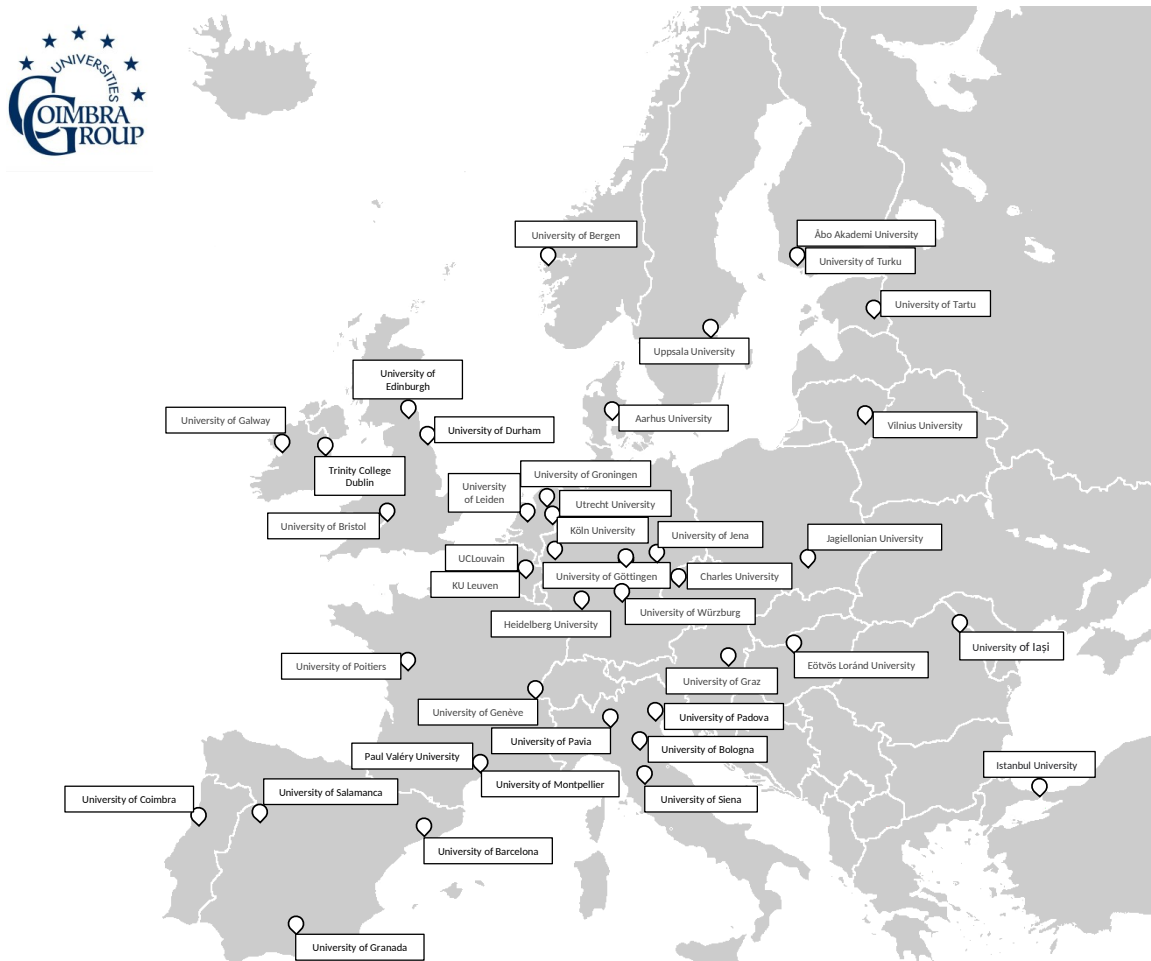
Importance of participation in research networks

Interest groups: Coimbra Group, LERU and The Guild

Coimbra Group Universities is a university network set up in 1987, which is currently made up of forty higher education institutions spread throughout the entire European continent (see Map 1). The network's purpose is to strengthen the ties between member HEIs in the domains of 'internationalisation, academic collaboration, excellence in learning and research, and service to society.' It is also the purpose of the group to have an impact on European education and research policy, leading Vukasovic and Stensaker (2018) to consider it as an 'interest group'. The Coimbra group has been a 'major actor of the co-design of the European Universities Initiative since the earliest stage of its development and remains fully engaged in its roll-out' (*Coimbra Group Statement on the Rolling out of the European Universities Initiative after the Pilot Phase | Coimbra, 2021*). As such, I explored how membership in the Coimbra Group may have influenced the formation of the European university alliances. I realized that of the forty Coimbra group universities, only six do not belong to an alliance, and eight alliances are represented within the group. Furthermore, apart from the University of Köln who is in the EUniWell alliance with no other Coimbra group members, I noticed that members had a tendency to participate in common alliances (see Map 2).

The most notable examples being, UNA Europa, ARQUS, EC2U, CHARM-EU, ENLIGHT. Although 4EU+ and Circle U also have multiple of their members being part of the COIMBRA group, I found that participation in other networks, respectively LERU and The Guild, was more significant.

Figure 1 *Universities part of the Coimbra group of Universities*



EC2U and ARQUS have a similar relationship to the network in the sense that their current coordinators, are respectively the current and former Chair of the Coimbra Group. All of the HEIs have been part of the Coimbra group since its foundation (or joined a few years after). The participating

HEIs also participate in common Erasmus programmes and new projects each year. My interviews revealed that in order to form the network, the University of Poitiers did a cartography of research links with other HEIs using SciVal which revealed 1121 common articles over a 10-year period between at least two but often more HEIs. With all these Erasmus and research partnerships they knew they had the capacity to set up an alliance that would work straight away. ARQUS started with a core of three universities which were all in the Coimbra group. The three HEIs reached out to other close partners some of which in Coimbra group, but not all. ARQUS is currently composed of four Coimbra group universities out of six participating HEIs in the alliance. The remaining two universities approached the alliance directly because of past ties. All partners had either very close multilateral (networks) or bilateral ties with the core three institutions.

formation of the alliance. Founded in 2002, LERU, is a network of twenty-three research-intensive universities located in the North and West of Europe (see Figure 3). Additionally, the network the CE7, Central European Universities Network in order 'to improve the framework conditions for research and education across a broad front in Europe, to stimulate collaborative research and education between talented people, and to show policymakers that there is more that unites research universities than divides them' . The goal of the LERU network is to 'advance the understanding and knowledge of decision makers, policy makers and opinion leaders about the role and activities of research-intensive universities, and [to have a] significant impact on research, innovation and higher education policy in Europe.' (*Mission*, n.d.). Like the Coimbra Group, LERU was involved in co-creation process with the Commission that led to the creation of the first European Universities call.

Figure 3 *Members of the League of European Research Universities*

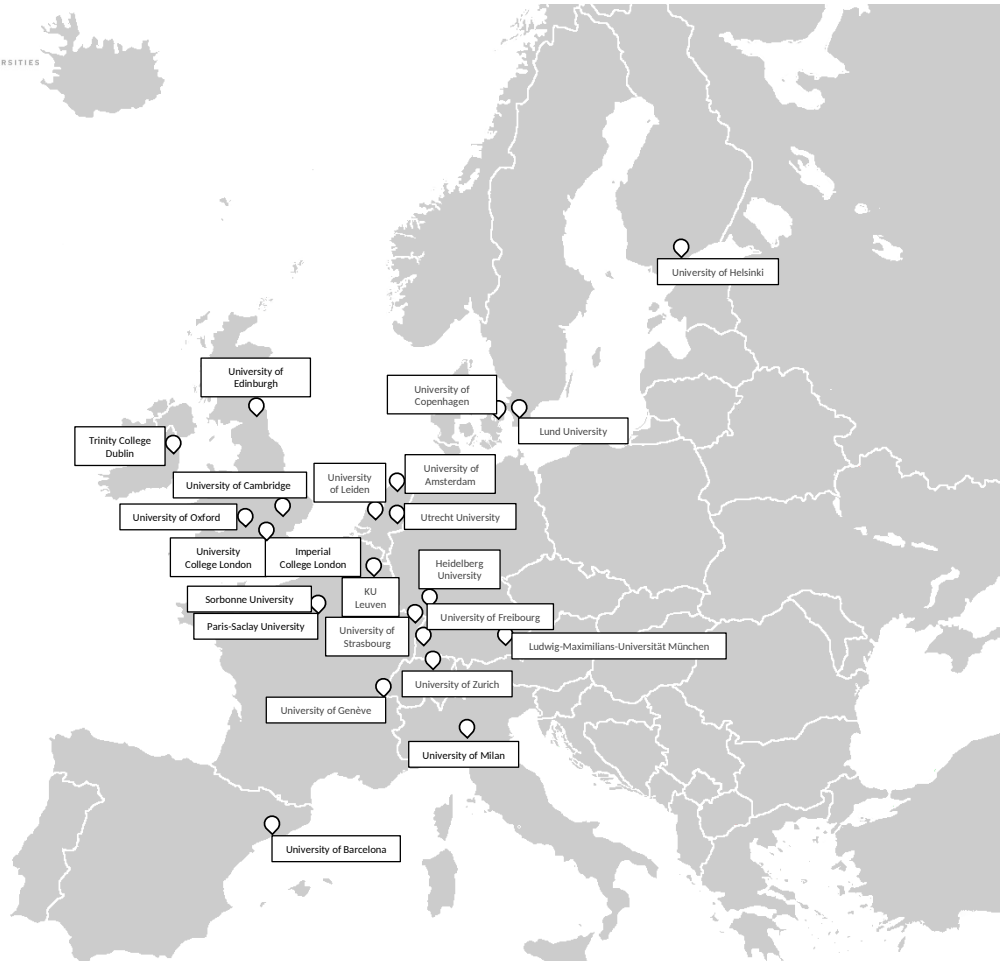


Figure 4 *Alliances that have stemmed from the League of European Research Universities*

Provost of Trinity College Dublin, and the Rector of the University of Barcelona considered that this was an important and interesting initiative in which to participate. Both universities have both membership to LERU and the Coimbra group. They decided to speak to the University of Utrecht who was also part of LERU but not Coimbra at the time. The University joined the Coimbra group in 2020, after CHARM-EU had been launched as a European University alliance. The alliance felt they needed a French partner, so Barcelona suggested to associate the University of Montpellier which is also a member of the Coimbra group. The alliance was approached by several German universities but ended up turning again to the Coimbra Group with the University of Wurzburg. Eötvös Loránd University was added as it is also a Coimbra group member but also one of the universities that make up the CE7 network. UNA Europa has a similar case in the sense that its formation was widely impacted by participation in the Coimbra Group, LERU, and the Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities. Each HEI of the alliance is a member of at least one of these three networks (See Figure 2, 4 and 6). Finally, The Guild of European Research Universities, is a university network also widely represented in the alliance (See Figure 5). The Guild was founded in 2016 with 2022 members. The Guild is at the core of the formation of the Circle U alliance. The alliance started with three institutions (Aarhus, UCLouvain, Oslo), who are all part of the Guild. Out of the nine HEIs that make the alliance six are part of The Guild (See Figure 6). Remaining institutions were brought through strong bilateral links. The University of Oslo invited Belgrade; KCL invited Humboldt University, while Pisa had

strong links both with KCL and Belgrade. I discovered that the network also played an important role in the formation of the ENLIGHT and EUTOPIA alliances (See Figure 6).

Figure 5 *Members of The Guild of European Research Universities*

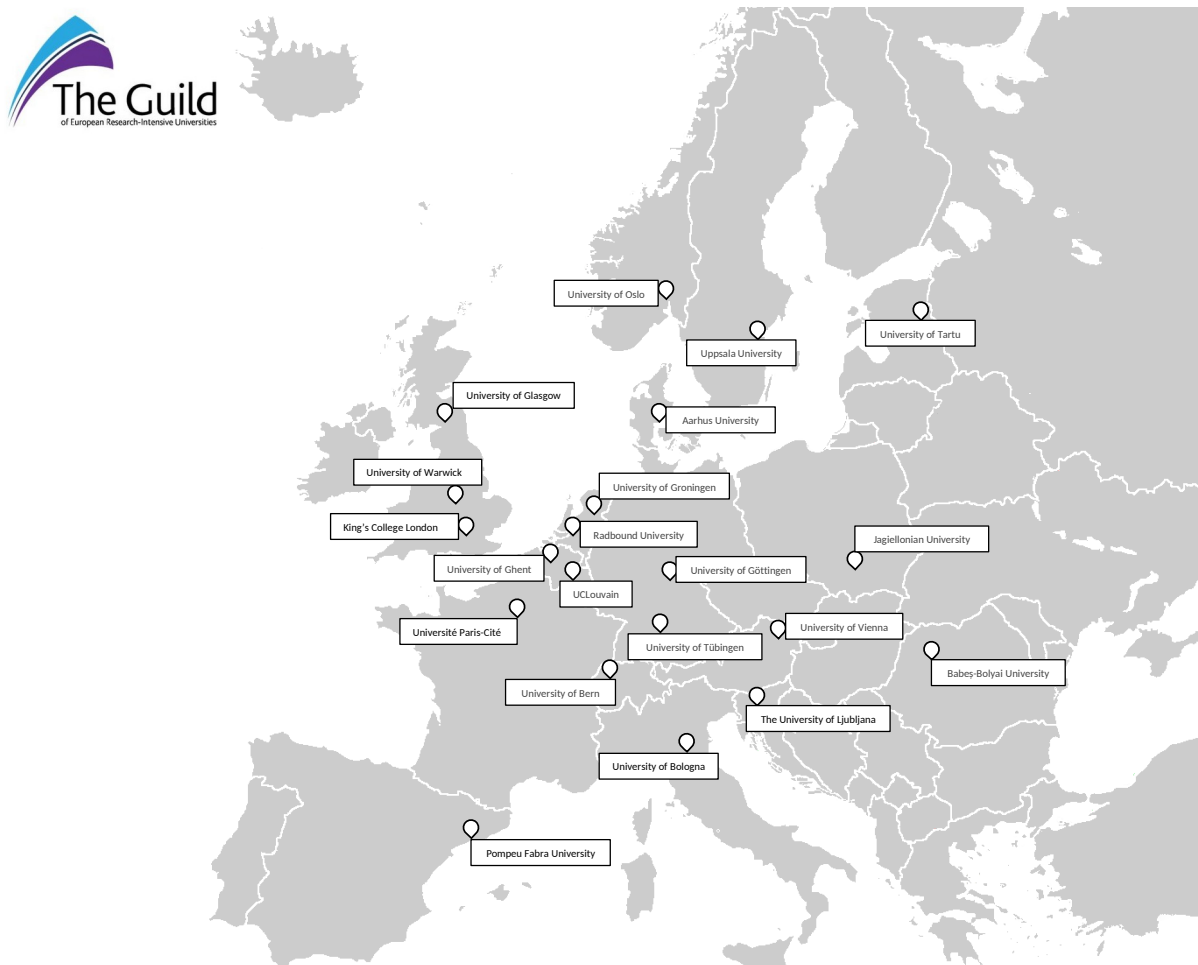
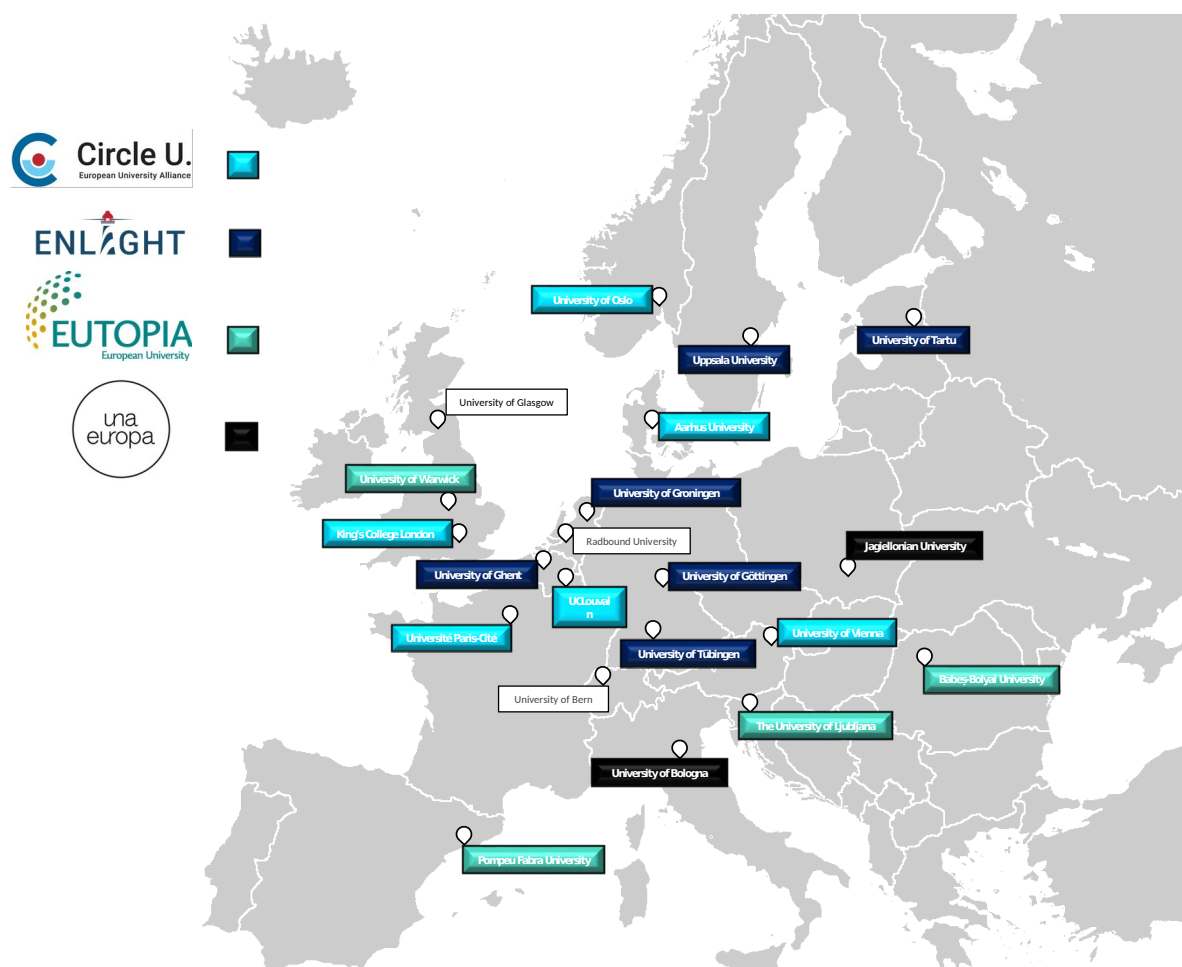


Figure 6 *Alliances that have stemmed from the Guild of Research-Intensive Universities*



Disciplinary networks of higher education institutions

AURORA was already established as a network in 2016 as ‘a consortium of research-intensive universities deeply committed to the social impact of their activities.’ . The alliance started with three institutions (Amsterdam, East Anglia, Iceland). there have been some 'coming and goings' such as Gothenburg University that used to be part of the alliance (before joining EUTOPIA) and Grenoble had to leave because they merged with another university in France (to become Université Grenoble Alpes - Grenoble INP UGA was already part of UNITE! during the 1st call, so a choice had to be made. Aberdeen (part of the AURORA network) decided not to join the alliance because of Brexit. Although past networks are important in the formation of these European university alliances, the experience shows that alliances do not always mirror the pre-existing networks as national realities can constrain participation in the European Commission’s initiative. This is perfectly illustrated by this ‘coming and going’ process that has impacted the Aurora network in the formation of the Aurora alliance. Similarly, the ECIU and EuroTeq (est. 2011) networks were set up as research networks that saw the European Universities Initiative as an opportunity to develop the education aspect of a long-standing cooperation. All members of both networks are part

They are also both dedicated to transitioning to a network to creating a European University.

The ENGAGE.EU started with the ALLEUS alliance which the Universities of Mannheim, Vienna, Tilburg, and Toulouse all participate in. Similarly, the

ENHANCE alliance started out of common membership in the Alliance4Tech + IdeaLeague amongst three of its partners. UNITE stems from the Cluster network. All universities are part of Cluster apart from Warsaw, Graz and Lisbon which were added as part of the enlargement process for geographical distribution. HEIs part of Cluster had the choice to join other alliances and now all cluster members are part of a European University alliance. All YUFE members were part of the YERUN network. When the first EUI call was announced, the University of Maastricht sent out a letter to all the members of YERUN to ask members if they wished to form an alliance. Seven HEIs replied positively to the letter. Maastricht then proposed to YERUN that YUFE would be the first alliance coming out of the network and that others could learn from their experience in order to help build other alliances coming out of YERUN. Nevertheless, this proposition was refused by YERUN. Other examples of similar university networks with disciplinary focuses that have evolved into alliances are ECIU and EuroTeQ.

FOREU the rise of new actors in the governance of higher education in the European Union

From competition to increased collaboration

The European Universities Initiative has created a dynamic competition amongst the higher education sector while also setting the conditions for

renewed cooperation leading to the emergence of a new actor in the governance of the EUI: FOREU1 and FOREU2. FOREU, the Forum of European Universities, is a group of all European university alliances. FOREU1 is the group of the first 17 alliances launched in 2019 and FOREU2 of the 24 subsequent alliances launched in 2021. The forums were set up as bottom-up informal meeting groups for the alliances to exchange on common challenges faced, reflect on possible solutions, and has progressively emerged as a way for the alliances to have a unified voice when interacting with the Commission or other relevant stakeholders. FOREU1 was founded and is presided by the head of the ECIU alliance's Brussels office, Olga Wessels and FOREU2 by the EC2U alliance's coordinator and former Coimbra Group Chair, Ludovic Thilly. ECIU and EC2U are examples of two alliances that are built on top of pre-existing networks that have extensive experience in the domain of European cooperation. ECIU university was born out of the ECIU university network, with all of its members having been members of the network. Most of EC2U members are part of the Coimbra group (seven out of eight). Both alliances are in privileged positions regarding the development of the European Universities Initiative. Both, the Coimbra Group and ECIU were invited to the consultation meetings organised by the European Commission in order to co-construct the EUI call. There have been and continues to be privileged links with the Commission. EC2U through the Coimbra group has access to a Brussels office to facilitate meetings with European stakeholders. Since establishing itself as an alliance, ECIU has set up a Brussels office for the same reason.

Table 11 *Coimbra Group participation in EC2U Alliance*

Friedrich-Schiller-Universität (Coimbra group)	Jena
Universidad De Salamanca (Coimbra Group)	
Universidade De Coimbra (Coimbra Group)	
Università Degli Studi Di Pavia (Coimbra Group)	
Universität Linz	
Universitatea Alexandru Ioan Cuza Din Iasi (Coimbra Group)	
Universite De Poitiers (Coimbra group)	
University Of Turku (Coimbra Group)	

My qualitative network mapping exercise with participants revealed the prevalence of the forums in the ways in which the alliances function. They were discussed both by alliance coordinators, local administrators in charge of the development of the alliances and policymakers at national and European level. While competition drove the reconfiguration of the higher education sector in Europe, as informal spaces of cooperation and discussion between the alliances, these forums have emerged as renewed spaces of collaboration between higher education institutions. A coordinator (Alliance 22) considered that ‘trust is the basis of all international cooperation’ and that this feeling of trust has been indispensable in the development of the alliances. The coordinator considered that since the alliance have been selected, there is: ‘now a

very good atmosphere amongst the alliance. To some extent there is a feeling of solidarity. Not a feeling any longer that we are competing amongst each other'. An alliance coordinator (Alliance 28) explained that in a first instance FOREU was created so that the alliances could meet and share best practices and problems faced to be able to speak the European Commission 'in a unified voice'. A coordinator (Alliance 13) explained that 'the alliances have understood that they need to structure themselves independently in order to freely discuss what works and what does not' which led to the creation of both FOREUs. Alliances generally found FOREU as a useful space for 'general exchange and information'. However, some coordinators mentioned that participation in the forums could become a full-time job due to the volume of meetings and specific morning groups. FOREU has since become the main point of contact for the Commission 'every time it seeks the opinion of the alliances'. Both forums have been described by coordinators as 'informal' but 'very well structured'. A coordinator (Alliance 1) said they were valuable to get information on 'important and crucial topics and streamline views to see where a policy paper can be signed by all the alliances which tends to help'.

A coordinator (Alliance 22) explained that once the alliances had been selected and received funding, the climate of competition significantly diminished and 'a very, very positive atmosphere of cooperation emerged amongst the alliances, and FOREU has been very important for that'.

Another coordinator (Alliance 15) considered that the all the alliances 'want to collaborate, which makes things so much easier'. A Coordinator (Alliance12) considered that the forums ending up being 'therapeutical moments' for the alliances who have the opportunity to 'share the daily difficulties and the things that we really feel'. Despite the climate of competition that existed since the launch of the calls, and occurrences of alliances trying to attract members from other alliances, a coordinator highlighted that the alliances have become novel actors, and 'despite the fact that the call is competitive, the alliances are conscious that [they] are working for the whole of the Union and for the universities that are not in alliances as of today' (Alliance 18). A coordinator (Alliance 16) explained that while the alliances are 'of course competing' they are now 'collaborating more than that'. The coordinator explained that through the forums the alliances meet once a month a can 'speak openly of everything, exchange experience, questions to the commission, answers, and any document that circulated informally'. A coordinator (Alliance 22) did mention however that while collaboration has become prevalent in the alliances through the forums, there is still some competition 'perhaps in one issue. And I think, again, inadvertently, the commission has led them to this with the idea of expansion strategies'. The coordinator explained that part that amongst the alliances, there are different perspectives about what the alliances are and should be, very much mirroring the debates that have taken place amongst Member States. Some of the alliances consider that they are 'a school of excellence and perhaps looking more at it as a more elitist approach.' On the other hand, the

coordinator believed that 'there is considerable support for the idea that the initiative has to be inclusive if it is to have a systemic impact'. The coordinator considered that most of the alliances would have been more in favour of opening up the funding to additional alliances rather than asking existing alliances to expand, considering that 'seven institutions is complicated enough, the challenge is complex enough. So, bringing new people and institutions and adding this complexity is difficult'.

A coordinator (Alliance 23) explained that the forums were spaces where each alliance could explain what struggles they were facing with a collegial exchange of solutions' with everyone 'there to help each other out'. The coordinator discussed how there was a competitive dynamic at the time of each alliance's competition, however they believed that this does not

'spill over in the relationships that you have with the various alliances, which is good'. The coordinator considered that with the EUI alliances are 'essentially all working on something together, developing the European Education Area, with our own alliances'. Despite the dynamics of alliances attracting institutions from other alliances discussed earlier, the coordinator very much considered that the alliances are not 'trying to take over' other alliances, with each alliance having the capacity to exist on their own. The coordinator believed that it is by working together more closely that 'the European education area can benefit from the initiative'. Not collaborating would go 'against what this initiative stands for. The networking aspect is about bringing all of these organizations together'.

The European Universities Initiative is not just about 'brining universities together under one alliance, it also means the alliances working together'. The coordinator expanded on this explaining that 'when you look at it from a networking aspect, essentially what we're doing is weaving a network. In order to weave a network, you have to build clusters, and those clusters have to also communicate with each other'. Another coordinator (Alliance 18) also considered that 'while all the call is competitive, all of the alliances are conscious that they are all working for the good of the EU, and for the universities that are not in alliances'. The same coordinator did give a warning considering that the alliances had to be careful to not be too 'patronising, hegemonic, and condescending' to HEIs that are not in alliances.

Mechanisms of FOREU

The structures of the FOREU meetings are mainly divided in 1) plenary meetings 2) thematic working groups. Alliances can send a variety of representatives to represent them in these forums ranging from administrative staff such as heads of international offices, professors, senior managers such as vice-rectors for internationalization, or students. While all alliances have different, but comparable governance structures, the main point of similarity is the organization of work packages (WPs) to

tackle the main topics to be developed by the alliance - association of external partners, student involvement, research etc. Each work package is coordinated by one of the participating HEIs of the alliance. The thematic working groups mirror the structure of the alliances working groups. The thematic working groups of FOREU work in a similar manner, working groups are organized on a variety of issues faced by the alliances - legal entities, IT, research, joint degrees, student involvement etc. Each alliance sends a representative from a partner HEI to participate in each (most) working groups. can be someone from the overall coordination of the alliance to a senior leader, academics or a more local administrator who may have an expertise in a certain domain or be a coordinating a specific work package. One coordinator explained, that in their (Alliance 28) explained that in the legal entity subgroup of FOREU, they send one of the members of the senior leadership of their partner institution that was in charge of establishing their very own legal entity. An alliance coordinator (Alliance 17) considered both forums to be 'very powerful coordination tool that have made the alliances emerge as the preferred points of contact of the Commission' while also being 'very powerful spaces of exchange that work very well'. The coordinator explained that the thematic subgroups are spaces where the Commission can meet with all of the alliances at once. For example, on the subgroup on digitalization, the Commission can come discuss other Erasmus+ initiatives such as Erasmus without papers or the European student card.

The different thematic groups around which the forums are organised include education, innovation, multilinguism, digital platforms, cooperation with non-EU partners. The Forums are now also organized in sub-groups that share common themes across both FOREU and FOREU2 that 'keep themselves informed of their progress'. FOREU1 and FOREU2 have been working in parallel to each other, as participating alliances are at different stages development having been launched at two distinct times. A European Commission policymaker mentioned that the Commission wondered why 2 groups were useful instead of one, but that the alliances decided to keep it like this. For the moment the Forums have remained separate (17 and 24 alliances) due to the fact that there is a shared position that a group of 41 alliances would be too large. Additionally, a coordinator (Alliance 22) taking part in FOREU1, considered that the first wave alliances were 'all guinea pigs' for the second wave as they 'always have to face up to the issues before anyone else. FOREU2 are all looking to us to see what happens now'. This also had an impact on the application process for the next funding round.

The qualitative network mapping exercise showed the variations in participation in these forums. This also reveals differences amongst alliances who do not necessarily have the same identities, priorities, 'levels of development' or 'same perspectives'. A coordinator (Alliance 8) explained that due to their heterogeneous nature, the alliances do not always have the same interests and there can be a 'clash between their

needs'. When this happens, the alliances just decide to act individually. One coordinator (Alliance 24) mentioned that the choice of which topics the alliances collaborate on usually depends on whether they 'see [they] can have the most influence and [they] can move the quickest to have influence'. The forums are therefore a space where the alliances feel they can push the rest of the alliances in a certain direction and gain influence over the others to push their own priorities. A representative from ECIU explained that there is an advantage in coordinating FOREU1 as it gives the possibility to 'set the agenda and gain other alliances support'. The Forums have a consensus-based approach in regard to how positions are agreed upon and decisions moved forwards. However, one of the alliances coordinators (Alliance 8) explained that all the alliances understand that they will become 'stronger' actors if they act together, and that overall, the alliances are '80% all aligned'. The coordinator mentioned that in instances where the alliances approach the European Commission where all alliance coordinators 'agree on a priority, they cannot ignore us'. Some alliances (Alliance 8, 10, 13) compared the actions of FOREU in Brussels to the lobbying actions of pre-existing networks such as AURORA, ECIU, The Guild, Coimbra, LERU, EUA, with the possibility to organize meetings with the Commission. However, the fact that the forums are mainly coordinated by alliances formed in large part by research intensive universities poses certain issues. A coordinator (Alliance 17) explained that while both forums are 'wonderful for representation', the voice of large research-intensive universities is predominant which do not always 'take on board the specifics' of other types of institutions. A policymaker

from the European Commission also mentioned that some alliances 'do not find the forums fully efficient'.

A coordinator (Alliance 13) detailed how both forums are organized around a main group of coordinators 'where the alliances can really discuss politics and lobby the commission, and more and more towards member states'. This main group of coordinators is called the Bureau. A coordinator (Alliance 12) explained the Bureau (a group of five institutions in the forum) is there to oversee how the forum functions. It is also the main space where the alliances can 'discuss things more openly and more closely'. While FOREU2 is coordinated by the EC2U coordinator who is a sort of 'global coordinator', they are not the only one to make decisions. When there are sensitive topics or questions all the decisions are made within the Bureau with all 5-alliance coordinator, after having launched a 'common action with all the other alliance coordinators'.

The coordinator mentioned that the five alliances of the Bureau have a closer relationship with the Commission as 'everything that is discussed by all of the subgroups passes through the bureau before it's sent to the Commission and everything from the Commission passes to the bureau before it is distributed through to the rest of the alliance'. Usually in discussion with the Commission, both forums are invited through their respective chairs (Olga Wessels and Ludovic Thilly). When one of the chairs cannot attend a meeting with one of the directorate generals, it will be a coordinator from the bureau that will attend in their place. There are

therefore different levels of communication with the Commission through the Forums, which can be either direct communication with the coordinators, direct invitations, to university rectors and presidents participating in alliances for strategic discussions.

The Bureau was presented as a space where there is a 'lot of room for conversation' and where the Commission 'listens'. A coordinator (Alliance 12) detailed one of the recurrent issues that was widely shared by the alliances: the relationship between alliance coordinators and policy officers at DG EAC in charge of supervising multiple alliances at once from the first and second wave, as well as being in charge of the selection process of new alliances. In addition to this, these policy officers are also in charge of preparing the policy notes, and suggestions for the Commission's communications. The coordinator recognized that this is a 'crazy amount of work and they are extremely receptive and available when they reply to us. But sometimes this communication doesn't happen as quickly and fluidly as we would hope. It takes them forever to reply to simple things which blocks a lot of our implementation capacity'. This widely shared feeling was mentioned as a regular topic of discussion in the forums. When the Bureau took this to the Commission, 'then all of a sudden all of our demands were answered'. A European Commission policymaker said that from their side they have found the meetings 'very useful' and a way to complement the stakeholder meetings that they were already organising, considering that it was a way for them to 'avoid being policymakers somewhere on the top of the tower, not hearing and

listening what is going on in the field'. The policymaker explained that while the forums were something the alliance had set up in a bottom-up manner 'from their side', responding to what they considered was a 'need for cooperation' amongst the alliances, they attended meetings whenever they were asked to and whenever the alliances found this useful.

A coordinator (Alliance 25) said that for 'bigger political issues' it is more efficient to go through FOREU' as the Commission 'seems to be really interested in to get the feedback and input from this group'. Through the forums the alliances can produce joint statements which have more weight and is 'considered differently by the Commission' than when an issue is raised by an isolated alliance. There have been examples of joint statements regarding the new call, particularly on the new budget that was seen as insufficient. A coordinator (Alliance 25) explained that the expectation from the European Commission that the alliances to 'change the whole European research and education area' and 'coming up with something completely new and a new level of collaboration' is high. The coordinator explained that it was difficult for them to imagine how the EU will evaluate the collaborative dynamics that have been set up as 'you cannot change the world in four years, and you cannot change any kind of organization and institution within three years. But this is exactly what they expected us to do.' While the FOREUs have been noted to work well when it comes to interact with the Commission and discuss challenges, a coordinator (Alliance 4) considered that they are still however 'useless

when it comes to having an influence on the position of Member States'. The FOREUs were presented by the coordinator as a good way to discuss every topic, to jointly 'work on them, to share information and to have ideas'. The forums are a way to 'avoid continuously asking the same questions'. The coordinator considered that this has been useful to work well and exchange with the Commission. However, when it comes to Member States, the coordinator considered that there was a higher chance for individual HEIs participating in alliances, to have a national influence through the national networks that have been set up for national HEIs participating in alliances to exchange, such as in France, Romania or Germany. Beyond the Bureau, there can be different alliances that coordinate some of the working groups. EC2U also coordinates a forum of coordinators called the 'global forum'.

While the EUI has the ambition to transform the higher education landscape in the European Union, through this structure of university alliances, there are 'other very interesting things that are happening in universities beyond our 'rich club', with other types of structured networks'. The coordinator considered that the alliances 'would be wrong to believe they are the best. Additionally, the coordinator mentioned that the nature of the call also limited cooperation beyond the EU with, the association of Swiss and UK HEIs made difficult, but also in North America and East Asia. Despite having 'entered the time of geopolitics, we might be tempted to close ourselves upon our own continent, but with all the barriers to transnational cooperation we are trying to break down, it would

be a shame to not use this progress to open ourselves even more and shine’.

Institutionalising the forums

In 2023, the European Commission launched a call in order to offer the possibility for the forums to be institutionalised for launching a call ‘for European Universities alliances is to create a collaborative and supportive environment where European Universities alliances can come together to share good practices and experiences within the community of European Universities alliances, as well as for the benefit of the wider higher education sector’ (European Commission, 2023, p. 8). The call is also meant to fund closer cooperation for the alliances to achieve common goals and to increase the efficiency of the skills and actions of the alliances for it to have an impact on the wider higher education sector. My interviews with European Commission policymakers prior to the launch of the Community of practice call indicated that the Commission had not initially planned to institutionalise the forum and wanted to keep the resources they had for the alliances themselves for the time being.

While the forums are not named in the call, it seems to be designed specifically for them. The purpose of the call is:

Setting up and running an interactive forum and thematic working groups (...) Initiating and managing discussions on relevant topics, challenges, or emerging trends (...) Encouraging

alliances to share their ideas, experiences, and perspectives (...)
Providing direct input to the Commission services on possible solutions to encountered challenges, based on the experience of the European Universities alliances (European Commission, 2023)

These objectives were already all the purposes of both FOREUs as discussed previously. Additionally, of the 4 projects received by the Commission for the Community of practice, 3 were deemed inadmissible, which quickly led to only the FOREU proposal to remain on the table for funding. The proposal proposed by the forums, FOREU4ALL, was funded for a 4-year proposal with a budget of €1.5m. Finally, the call emphasises the fact that the lessons learnt through the Community of practice should not only be destined for the European university alliances, but also 'boost dissemination of reusable results and models within the wider higher education sector' (European Commission, 2024b).

Conclusion and discussion

Structure of findings

Anatomy of a European Union (higher) education policy

The language found in both policy documents and in my interview data often refers to the European Universities Initiative as ‘unprecedented’ and displaying immense levels of ambition. In this section I outline what has led to the development of the EUI, and if it is really a unique moment in the development of European higher education.

This chapter argues that there are specific conditions linked to historical developments that have shaped a favourable contexts and terrain for the development of the initiative. Crises have served as a catalyst to justify the rapid development of the initiative, which was presented as having the potential to offer solutions by growing with the crises rather than being hindered by them. In EU policy documents, the creation of ‘European Universities’ emerged in a Communication on ‘Strengthening European Identity’ (2017). This communication appears in a context marked by Brexit and the rise of populist nationalisms throughout the entire European Union. These political developments are capable of being an ‘existential threat’ to the EU, and education is highlighted as way to overcome this. While it is this specific crisis that sparked the formation of

the initiative, two additional crises have heavily shaped its development: The COVID-19 Pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Simultaneously, the initiative at the right institutional moment with the Commission having the capacity to propel it to the forefront of its policy agenda. When discussing what sparked the development of the initiative, the departure point which is initially mentioned is Emmanuel Macron's speech at the Sorbonne, where he briefly mentioned his desire to see 'European Universities' and 'European Degrees' being established. This section looks past this speech and examines where Macron may have initially gotten this idea, as well as the process through which the European Commission has pushed it forward whilst also incorporating its own policy agenda. I also explore the role of policy entrepreneurship in shaping the European Universities Initiative and how it has been promoted by key individuals within the Commission.

To make this possible, the initiative was developed alongside and as part of a wider EU education strategy, the European Education Area. From its inception, the European Universities Initiative has been presented as the flagship programme to build a European Education Area. Both initiatives were announced in parallel, both displaying a high-level ambition to transform (higher) education in the European Union. This section explores in what ways the EUI was designed to meet the key objectives of the European Education Area. Rather than only understanding the EEA as a space, it is presented as a strategy which key objectives that build on

previous EU level higher education strategies, whilst addressing their limitations and offering novel developments.

The EUI and the EEA have appeared as a way for an EU education policy field to emerge and go beyond past intergovernmental policies such as the Bologna Process and European Higher Education Area. The European Commission's policy documents regularly referred to the role of the European Universities Initiative in shaping a higher education dimension of the European Education Area. Apart from the fact that the EEA was designed as an EU led policy as opposed to the EHEA that is intergovernmental and derived from the efforts of the Bologna Process, it was unclear if both spaces were in competition, complementarity, or even if one was meant to replace the other. This section explores how a two-tier space had come to exist within the EHEA, between EU countries who were more effective in putting Bologna reforms in place and non-EU countries who were slower at adopting reforms. The EEA and EHEA divide is therefore something that pre-dates the launch of the EEA, which in turn recognises it as a reality and offers the EU a wider policy setting capability and an ability to act quicker and with more ambition than before.

Proposing new structures for the governance of higher education in the European Union

While the EU governance mechanisms used to develop the European Universities Initiative are not new, it uses three of them jointly for it to be

able to meet the scale of the ambition announced. The combined use of these mechanisms enhances the European Commission's capacity to implement its policy agenda as many aspects and priorities of the initiative were viewed differently by Member States. The combination of this governance mechanisms to 'do' (higher) education policy in the European Union is a way of resolving the puzzle posed by the framework of a supporting competence. The question of the emergence of higher education as a policy field at EU level has existed ever since the creation of the European Community and the original Treaties of Rome (Corbett, 2005). However, since the Treaties of Maastricht and Lisbon, education was established as a supporting competence of the European Union, meaning that Member States remain fully sovereign over their education systems, and EU institutions can only supplement their action and encourage collaboration between education institutions. Reaching the levels of ambition displayed by the initiative requires incorporating the different visions member states about the development of such an initiative, and for the Commission to use a variety of governance mechanisms at its disposal to attempt and reach a consensus. For an ambitious education policy is to be developed in the European Union within the realm of a supporting competence, the governance mechanisms used to deploy the policy must both be a way to bypass member states by targeting higher education institutions directly whilst involving them in shaping the policy. While this combination may appear as a paradox, it also draws on the lessons of how higher education policy has been done in the past, which must go through a redefinition of how

the policymaking process is done between EU institutions and Member States, at times seen as a 'tug-of-war' but which ultimately must evolve into a 'three-legged race' to be efficient.

The European Universities Initiative was designed as an incentive-based funding programme. Whilst having to abide by the subsidiarity principle, EU institutions can fund actions directly targeting national HEIs. This offers the possibility for EU institutions to bypass member states and making use of its 'power of the purse' (Batory & Lindstrom, 2011). The European Commission can promote its own policy agenda and attract HEIs to participate in specific programmes in exchange for funds, which has proven to be more and more successful due to chronic funding cuts in national higher education and research. This is the 'tug-of-war' component of the governance of the initiative.

Policy coordination is a well-known and much discussed education policymaking at EU level. It is usually the governance mechanism that the EU must make use of to make all concerned actors at local, national and European level involved in the development of the initiative. The development of the European Universities Initiative has been closely linked to policy coordination since its inception, this time with the Commission labelling it as a co-construction process. This co-construction has involved representatives from all national ministries of higher education as well as key stakeholders at national levels including, rectors' conferences and student unions. Additionally, the Commission invited

influential stakeholder groups, and university networks to gain insights on their experiences. By including all relevant stakeholders in the initiative, the Commission hoped to give everyone the opportunity to express themselves while taking on board some of their ideas for the development of the initiative.

The final governance mechanism discussed in this chapter is perhaps the newest regarding higher education policymaking in the EU, or at least absent from most of the literature on the topic. This section discussed how the Commission has made use of its agenda setting capacity through non-binding legal acts to push ambitious policy ideas forward (Alexiadou & Rambla, 2022). Pushing these policy ideas through Communications and through Proposals for Council Recommendations ignites a dialogue between the Commission and Member States through the Council of the European Union. This section explores how certain ideas are retained, modified or suppressed by member states and the evolution in language used throughout these policy documents which in turn has an effect on the implementation of these policies. Both policy coordination and the mechanisms through which non-binding legal acts are adopted require a strong collaboration between member states and EU institutions. While these may appear in the form of tense negotiations, it opens a dialogue for the policies to reach a consensual common direction. This is the 'three-legged race' component of the governance of the initiative.

Pushing the European Universities Initiative through a balance of competition and collaboration

The European Universities Initiative has been designed as a competitive call to reconfigure collaboration between higher education institutions through the entire EU. This section explores how the EUI has been a disruptive force within past long standing collaboration efforts in the higher education sector. Since its launch, the EUI alliances have also established themselves as novel higher education actors that collaborate amongst each other and are able to lobby other higher education stakeholders at European and national level through the FOREU forums.

From the moment it was decided that the European Universities Initiative would be articulated around a competitive funding call, an atmosphere of competition emerged in a European higher education landscape that had been more recently marked by a strong spirit of collaboration through Erasmus partnerships or participation in university networks. The launch of the EUI distilled a sentiment of competition and secrecy amongst higher education institutions that were trying to establish themselves as university alliances and trying to find the appropriate partners. The timing was also short for HEIs to find the right fit with only a few months to find the right partners. I also found that while the feeling of competition dissipated once alliances were selected, it also reappeared with successive calls, with the Commission expecting for alliances to expand and find new partners. This created a phenomenon of alliances trying to attract institutions from one another past the initial pilot phases. This

section also examines the case of unselected and therefore unfunded alliances that have decided to remain formed as such or that have had to reimagine their partnerships over the course of the different calls. While the alliances formed as part of the European Universities Initiative, are often the result of past links between higher education institutions, either through bilateral links or common membership in university networks and interest groups, the formation of the alliances is not entirely a tracing of these past partnerships. Additionally, while there can be a tendency to imagine that an unfair advantage has been given to institutions that have a strong history of past links, the EUI has also entirely forced past collaborations to entirely reconfigure themselves to meet the precise objectives of the initiative.

The formation of these alliances has made them emerge as novel actors in the European higher education landscape with which EU institutions are now interacting with. While competition between higher education institutions is at the premise of the European Universities Initiative, once the alliances have been selected and funded, they started interacting with each other. Initially these interactions were informal, but the alliances quickly established themselves in forums, bringing together in one forum, the first 17 alliances selected, and in a second forum the following 24 alliances selected. These forums exist to share best practices, and for the alliances to express themselves with others that may be facing similar issues and may have found ways to overcome them. These forums have also started functioning as interest groups for the alliances to share

common declarations and be more influential when in discussion with the European Commission and member states. Since 2024, these forums have been institutionally formalised by receiving funding from the Commission through an Erasmus+ community of practice fund (€2m) and now gather the 65 alliances selected under the initiative.

Discussion of main findings

This thesis does not attempt to evaluate the impact of the alliances or their transformative potential on the European higher education landscape due to the actions that they have been developing. Additionally, this thesis does not seek to discuss if the alliances themselves have been successful in their actions. By examining how the initiative has been launched and developed this thesis shows how a novel policymaking process has been deployed for European (higher) education policy. This policymaking process relies on a dynamic articulated around 3 main forces that exist simultaneously:

- Embedded policy ideas - The development of one pushes the other forward: European Education Area → European Universities Initiative → European Degree
- Alliances in all their forms: Alliances of stakeholders for the co-construction of policy ideas; Alliances of governance mechanisms used jointly to push the initiative forward;

Alliances of higher education institutions to embody the objectives of the initiative

- A disruption to reconfigure the higher education landscape in the EU through competition by disrupting existing forms of collaboration to confer a new meaning to higher education institutions

Table 12 *Polycymaking framework of the European Universities Initiative*

European Universities Initiative Polycymaking Framework		
Embedded policy ideas	Alliances	Disruption to create new meaning
Multiple policy ideas can be developed at the same time and embedded in one another:	Alliances are developed at all levels within the initiative	Competition is used to disrupt existing higher education collaborations in the European Union
European Education Area European Universities Initiative European Degree	Alliance of stakeholders Alliance of governance mechanisms Alliance of higher education institutions	These novel collaborations carry with them a new meaning for the participating higher education institutions and are impregnated by past and future policy strategies and direction
The development of each policy idea pushes the develop of the other		

Blends past policies, embeds novel policies together

The European Universities Initiative has not come entirely out of the blue. The objectives put forward by the Commission that the alliances are meant to achieve can all be found in past published higher education strategies and in Erasmus+ programme reports, highlighting objectives, and obstacles that remain to be overcome. This thesis argues that the initiative has been effective in repackaging old ideas and putting tremendous effort in contaminating all other policies, no matter how vague or ill-defined it was.

With the European Universities Initiative, it is not just old policy ideas that are contained within novel policy ideas. The novel policy ideas are also interwoven and embedded within one another. The European Education Area and the European Universities Initiative were launched simultaneously, with the EUI embedded within the EEA. My data has also revealed that the EUI was added in all policy documents, reports, and higher education policy developments with the hope of pushing it forward by any means possible. By contaminating all other policies with 'European Universities' it means that there is a possibility for all other policy developments to in one way or another help the development of the European Universities Initiative. Furthermore, By embedding the EUI in the EEA, it means that the developments of the EEA can push the EUI forward. Similarly, the achievements of the EUI gave unparalleled visibility to the EEA and its objectives. The same process is now repeating itself with the

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development of the European Degree. Initially, the European Degree was a policy idea embedded in the development of the EUI. While this policymaking process is still ongoing it shows some great resemblances with the policymaking processes of the EUI. It is now its own policy idea, but embedded both within the EUI and the EEA.

The embedded nature of the policy developments of the EEA, EUI and now the European Degree, give it a quasi-infinite cyclical nature. The policymaking process established through the European Universities Initiative has the potential of becoming the default of European education policymaking:

- Start with an ambitious but vague policy idea
- Invite the entire higher education sector and national policymakers to reflect and shape this policy idea
- Work towards the adoption of these policy ideas by member states through non-binding legal acts
- Launch an incentive-based funding programme asking higher education institutions to experiment with this policy idea
- Stemming from this experimentation add an additional ambitious but vague policy idea
- Invite the entire higher education sector and national policymakers to reflect and shape this policy idea
- Work towards the adoption of these policy ideas by Member States through non-binding legal acts

- Cycle starts again

A new governance framework for European higher education has been created – an alliance of governance mechanisms

The initial research for this thesis was only on the topic of alliances. I thought that this research would be used to grasp the form of the university alliances emerging out of the European Universities Initiative. I therefore explored:

- Business Alliances: Strategic alliances for mutual benefits
- Poetry Collections: Gathering poems to foster transformation through an overarching whole
- Coalition Governments: Collaborations between parties and institutions as a game
- Military alliances: Built on trust and a common identity

However, I realised that alliance formation in the EUI is not limited to HEIs. The implementation of the EUI as a policy has relied on building alliances throughout its development. While the success of the alliances on the mid to long run is still to be determined, the speed at which the initiative has developed itself is a policy success. This success largely rests on the capacity to have formed alliances of key higher education stakeholders at local, national, transnational and European level from the premise of the initiative. There are a lot of different words that can be used to discuss the

processes at play: alliances, coalitions, assemblages, collections, agencements etc. While these are different names and can take different forms, the result is the same – different actors/components brought together for a common purpose – in this case co-constructing a higher education policy at European level.

The European Universities Initiative is articulated around alliance formation:

- Alliance of policies two policy initiatives developed jointly - Development of an ambitious initiative and European scale with a transformation agenda
- Alliance of governance mechanisms
- Alliances of stakeholders to agree on these policies - Combining different national visions to promote a European (higher) education policy agenda
- Alliances of higher education institutions to enact the policies

Alliance of relevant stakeholders - Policy coordination is the most widely used governance mechanism for the development of a European education policy field. It gives the Commission the possibility to fully endorse its role conferred by the treaties to ‘supplement’ the action of member states and encourage ‘cooperation’ (TFEU, 2009). The Commission designs formats to bring all relevant stakeholders around the table to gather ideas, exchange on best practices and most importantly

make each of them feel involved in the policymaking process. The language used regarding the policy coordination mechanisms involved in the European Universities Initiative are however novel with:

- The structuration of an 'ad-hoc expert' group which emphasises the 'bottom-up' nature of the initiative
- The development of a process of 'co-construction' of the initiative which highlights a desire for horizontality in how the policy is being developed

While the interviews conducted shows the idea for 'European Universities' predates these 'horizontal' processes, they did serve a purpose in defining what the content of the initiative would be like. In a way, while the shell was already decided upon, its actual content was more open ended. These horizontal processes were also a way to get the entire sector involved. A condition for the success of the initiative was in a first instance, getting the approval from member states in going forward with it by presenting a specific vision of what 'European Universities' would look like, and getting higher education themselves to take part in an incentive based- funding programme.

Alliance of governance mechanisms - The European Commission's reliance on incentive-based programmes to push a policy agenda targeting directly national higher education institutions is not new. While the literature explains how the Commission makes use of the 'power of

the purse', also filling a growing void due to increased cuts in national higher education and research budgets, the money promised for participation in the European Universities Initiative is scarce compared to the height of expectations and the number of objectives the alliances have committed to deliver. The element of prestige in forming or participating in these alliances should not be undermined. The co-construction process that came before it was able to succeed in making the sector recognise this potential for achieving additional prestige with this seal of excellence that comes with participating in the initiative. Once there was an overwhelming enthusiasm from the sector in participating, the Commission had some legitimacy in promoting these policy ideas by triggering debates between member states and push for the adoption of non-binding legal acts.

The publication of a European Strategy for Universities, accompanied by a proposal for a Council Recommendation sets forward additional ambitious future directions for the initiative particularly with the desire to give the alliances created merely a few years ago, the capacity to establish themselves as legal entities, by possibly creating a tailor-made legal entity to meet their needs. Additionally, the idea of establishing a European Degree to be delivered by the alliances was pushed forward. Like when 'European Universities' were announced in 2017, what these two potential instruments could look like remains vague at this stage.

Disruption

Throughout the thesis, the European Universities Initiative is referred to as a disruptive force in the way in which it has reconfigured collaboration in the European higher education landscape through collaboration. The European Universities Initiative has been designed to give a new meaning, a European meaning, to higher education institutions through juxtapositions. An alliance is a montage of fragments, each individual institution carries with it a meaning, that when associated with another creates a novel whole. Despite limited legal competence which would normally limit its legitimacy in a policy field like education, EU institutions find legitimacy in conferring a new meaning to higher education institutions participating in the collaborative dynamics of the European Universities Initiative. This new meaning is not entirely new as it recycles old policies which were themselves legitimized in the past.

Conceptual Contribution

This thesis was mainly developed with the intention of providing a strong empirical contribution on the European Universities Initiative as an emerging phenomenon in European higher education. I initially made the choice of focusing the present thesis on displaying the abundant empirical data that I had collected. However, I believe it does also provide a conceptual contribution to the debates on European higher education. While they are never mentioned in this thesis, I owe my conceptual thinking to the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. My master's

dissertation, which served as the pilot study for this thesis, experimented with the concept of rhizomes to analyse the alliances of the European Universities Initiative. At the time of my application for this doctoral study, the original title and topic of the thesis was: 'thinking regionalism through assemblage theory'. I had the intention to take rhizomes to the next conceptual level and experimenting with the overarching conceptual lens of 'assemblages'. While I decided to not use their work explicitly in this thesis in the end, their way of thinking concepts and theories is present throughout my work. Both philosophers consider that:

Every concept always has a history, even though this history zigzags, though it passes, if need be, through other problems or onto different planes. In any concept there are usually bits or components that come from other concepts, which corresponded to other problems and presupposed other planes. This is inevitable because each concept carries out a new cutting-out, takes on new contours, and must be reactivated or recut (Deleuze and Guattari, p.18, 1994)

Concepts travel through the history of their disciplines and have different meanings and uses for different authors over time. More importantly, concepts are malleable entities, like clay that can be moulded, reappropriated and reworked to fit a different purpose and answer a different set of problems.

While I did not prioritise conceptual experimentation in this thesis, I drew on existing theoretical approaches to extract key concepts as guiding ideas, and initially as structuring devices for this overall research. I specifically engaged holistically and critically with three concepts to get a better grasp of the dynamics at play in the development of the European Universities Initiative. The findings chapters are therefore informed by a conceptual triad: regionalism, governance, networks. However, this conceptual triad is in no way a conceptual framework for the research, it is the background of this research. Originally, this thesis sought to organise each findings chapter around one of these concepts. The first on the construction of a European higher education space deploying regionalism. The second discussing governance through the various governance instruments and mechanisms the European Commission has made use of to rapidly upscale the initiative. Finally, networks, was to be used to analyse how the alliances function in practice and illustrate the emerging findings from the qualitative network mapping exercise. Structuring the thesis in this way showed its limits, as rather than separate, these three concepts are embedded together when it comes down to analysis European higher education policy: EU institutions are building a regional higher education through governance mechanisms that have enabled the creation of transnational university networks. Regionalism is the 'for what purpose', governance is the 'how', and networks is 'with whom'. It was therefore impossible to separate these three concepts together, as the triad is essential to grasp what is at stake in each of the findings chapters. All chapters speak of what is at stake

with the formation of a regional higher education space in the European Union, different governance mechanisms used, and how networks are formed and developed. I also consider that this conceptual triad can travel more seamlessly across national and disciplinary boundaries.

Deploying this conceptual triad is used to answer a set of problems that are specific to European higher education policy. The literature in comparative and international higher education encourages the development of new concepts that can seamlessly travel across cultural and disciplinary borders (see Rose & Mackenzie, 1991; Antonucci, 2013; Bleiklie, 2014; Seeber, 2020; Oleksiyenko et al., 2021). While new concepts are not here developed, deploying them continuously as a triad to address this specific phenomenon is new.

This research advances the three concepts used by situating them in the wider higher education literature. The most recent literature on higher education drawing from the field of comparative regionalism are from the mid-2010s, they do not consider the successive crises that have shaped EU developments since then: Brexit, Covid, the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This thesis explores the ways in which these events have triggered not only an unprecedented and rapid development in European higher education policy, but also in fostering a European higher education space. Additionally, regionalism works in complementarity to our exploration of the governance mechanisms at work between the European Commission, Member States, and the wider higher sector to deploy the

initiative. Comparative regionalism explores the processes of 'bottom-up' processes, regionalisation, involve non-state actors, in this case the alliances and the universities. Additionally, the 'top down' processes, regionalism, offer a lens to explore the dynamics of both Member States and EU institutions, in shaping and implementing this initiative. The careful balance between regionalism and regionalisation is what is explored throughout the second findings chapter of this thesis which presents the 'puzzle' of European higher education policy between the limited competence of the Commission in education, the reluctance of Member States of conceding some of their sovereignty over their education systems and yet doing so more and more. While the EUI is an example of multi-level governance, what is explored in the second findings chapter is the combinations of governance instruments and mechanism to deploy a higher education policy while resolving some of the existing tensions across the multiple levels. Regarding networks, I built on this concept to embrace the image of 'alliances' more widely as described in the previous section. The empirical core of this research gave me the possibility to apply and explore these concepts within the framework of the policymaking processes of the European Universities Initiative, as well as more widely exploring the development of these European university alliances. It is specifically through this conceptual triad that I was able to develop the policymaking framework of the EUI described above articulated around: Embedded policy ideas; alliances in all their forms; disruption to create new meaning. This conceptual triad does not just present the European Union as a setting for regionalism, but

also as a supranational actor that creates and coordinates governance mechanisms and assembles coalitions letting emerge new forms of cooperation that reconfigure a supranational higher education space. This conceptual triad is therefore used as a clarifying tool to grasp how the EU governs and 'does' higher education policy. The triad is a tool to not just explore transnational cooperation but also how EU institutions are constructing a policy space in which it has a limited competence mobilising alliances to generate legitimacy, participation, and policy traction.

While the main objective of this thesis was to fill an empirical gap for the study of the European Universities Initiative and its university alliances, concepts were mobilised to reflect the complexity of the dynamics at play in this space between national, supranational, state and non-state actors in further developing European higher education. In parallel to this thesis, I developed papers that built on this empirical data, while 'playfully' experimenting with concepts from the arts and humanities to offer another perspective on this emerging empirical phenomenon. Rhizomes, palimpsests, fractals, dancing, are all metaphors that have been used in the social sciences before. I attempted, with my co-authors, to move beyond the metaphor and deploy them as analytical concepts that could enhance our understanding of the EUI and European higher education policy more widely. I considered that journal articles, gave the possibility to experiment with all these concepts in more depth, rather than

attempting to bind them all in this thesis by inventing a hybrid conceptual framework for this study.

Future Directions, policy implications, an emerging research field

Setting a precedent for an EU governance for education policy

The findings of this thesis suggest that the policymaking processes at work in the European Universities Initiative may have set a precedent for how higher education policy in the European Union is made.

If the attention from 2017-2022 has been focused on the development of 'European Universities' initiative, the years since have found another flagship project: The European Degree. At the time of my data collection, the European Degree was still very vague, appeared as a distant prospect and was just presented as one of the 'experimental' governance tools for the alliances, much like the European legal statute. This is therefore how both instruments are presented in Chapter 2 of this thesis. However, 2024 saw a growing importance for the European Degree, which now appears as an additional policy embedded within the development of the European Education Area, alongside the European Universities Initiative. In 2019, Ursula von der Leyen's Mission letter to Mariya Gabriel, Commission for Education and Research stated that one of her key missions was to achieve the full rollout of 'European Universities'. Since then, it is no

longer a Commissioner that oversees education, but a Vice-President, Roxana Mînzatu. In her mission letter to Mînzatu, Von der Leyen outlines that the European Universities Initiative should continue being developed, however, one of the key objectives that now appears is achieving a European Degree. Additionally, the mission letter setting up the objectives for the Commission for the 2024-2029 period also expands on what has been achieved through the policymaking processes of the European Universities Initiative to other policy domains: Secondary education and Vocational Education and Training (VET). Regarding secondary education, the term of 'alliances' has been suggested. While this is not defined at this point, the term of alliances has transpired from higher education into other educational domains, which can make us imagine imaginary alliances of secondary schools with more ambitious mobility programmes, and a further strengthening of European curricula. For VET, the Commission seems to want to inspire itself from the policymaking process of the European Strategy for Universities, with its consultation phases (policy coordination) and its reliance of non-binding legal acts. While VET programmes have grown under Erasmus+, particularly with the launch of the vocational centres of excellence, there is not a clear policy direction or strategy. Consultations for the development of a European strategy for vocational education and training have started in early 2025 with the hope of publishing a first communication by the start of 2026. While Vice-President Mînzatu no longer has research as one of her portfolios unlike her predecessor. However, she does oversee the Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion alongside the Directorate

General for Education and Culture which can make us imagine a stronger collaboration between both DGs and an emphasis on the link between education and employment through the VET strategy. As highlighted by Felder (2024), while education at large is a supporting competence of EU institutions, vocational education and training is a shared competence which should give the Commission more flexibility to develop this domain. While discussions are at their very start, they do offer some promising perspectives on future research on European education policy which will need to build on the literature currently being produced on the European Universities Initiative to grasp the policymaking processes that worked well in its development and that could be applied to additional education policy domains at European level.

One of the central aspects of the success of the EUI has been a combination of factors. It is difficult to know if there will be a similar institutional and policy window like in 2017. However, the publications of the Letta and Draghi reports, as well as the election of Donald Trump have reignited debates on European sovereignty which could overlap to education policy. In his recent report for the European Commission on the possible scenarios for the future of the single market, former Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta, builds on Jacques Delors idea of adding an additional, fifth dimension to the European single market. The single market has is currently articulated around four freedoms: the free movement of people, goods, services and capital. Letta proposes a fifth freedom to be developed 'to enhance research, innovation and education

in the Single Market' (Letta, 2024, p. 7). If this idea was pushed forward it could give education policy an unprecedented role in the future of the European construction. 'Sovereignty' and 'autonomy' are words that have been recurrent since the launch of the initiative and have grown even more considerably since the re-election of Donald Trump. With growing debates and decisions being made on a common defence and other strategic priorities, as well as a possible additional wave of enlargement of the European Union to additional countries, a Treaty change is not out of the question. If education is to become a fifth freedom, then an evolution of the EU's competence in education could very well be transformed as well.

Some emerging findings from this thesis have also highlighted that the development of the initiative shows cases of re-Europeanisation. The European Universities Initiative is born out of a response to crises that affected the European Union since the 2008 economic crisis, the eurozone crisis, migration crisis, Brexit and the rise of populist nationalisms. These crises have the potential to fragilize and potentially break the European Union. The successive crises faced by the European Union have led to an increase in the literature focusing on the shift from Europeanisation processes to dynamics of de-Europeanisation (Müller et al., 2021; Rivera Escartin, 2020; Rosamond, 2019). Switzerland and the United Kingdom, both being out of the Erasmus+ programme do not have access to the funds that would normally be distributed to the alliances. Their institutions can only participate in alliances as associate partners and cannot receive

any Erasmus+ funding. However, many UK and Swiss institutions have decided to take part in alliances, despite having to face additional challenges to be able to effectively participate in the European Universities Initiative. The situation between Switzerland and the UK is very different, as the Swiss federal government has decided to offer Swiss HEIs participating in alliances the equivalent amount of money that they would have normally received from the Commission if Switzerland had been an Erasmus+ programme country (Lambrechts & Charret, Forthcoming). In the UK however, participating HEIs have received very little moral support, or even any encouragement to take part in the alliances from the UK government and no financial support (Charret & Lambrechts, Forthcoming). Despite, this HEIs have continued to take part in the activities of alliances with many considering themselves as full partners, with equal governance rights as other HEIs from Erasmus+ programme countries.

European Universities Initiative as an emerging field of study

Since its launch in 2019, the European Universities Initiative has started to become its very own field of study within European higher education scholars. As there was a wave of scholars who accompanied the development of the Bologna Process, the EUI has generated a large amount of scholarly interest due to its rapid developments and its growth in size. So far, the literature has explored in what ways it has attempted

to reach its objective to transform the higher education landscape in the European Union (Brooks & Rensimer, 2023; Cino Pagliarello, 2022; Gunn, 2020; Hartzell et al., 2023; Marques & Graf, 2024). Other studies have detailed the formation processes of the alliances, their origins and what role previous links have played in their development, such as bilateral links or participation in university networks or interest groups (Charret & Chankseliani, 2023; Lambrechts et al., 2023; Stensaker et al., 2023). Some of the research has also explored the societal impact of the alliances with some of their mission being geared towards strengthening European identity and contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). (Frame & Curyło, 2022; Martín Bautista-Cerro et al., 2023). With the ambitious goals displayed, many studies have also highlighted the persisting challenges that the alliances must overcome if they are to be successful (Maassen et al., 2022; Pina Stranger et al., 2023). With the alliances having grown in numbers, and the future policy perspectives discussed above, it is likely the EUI will continue being central in the literature on the development of European higher education.

The spread of the Bologna process to other parts of the world has been well documented in the literature as a way for Europe to expand its reach beyond its borders. While no regional project quite resembles the European Union, particularly in terms of its governance, political ambitions, funding and means of actions, cooperation programmes making use of alliances to promote collaborations between higher education institutions is not unimaginable, even if it does not carry the

range of political objectives of the European Universities Initiative. It will be interesting to monitor if the European Union attempts to push for this in other 'world regions' such as ASEAN, MERCOSUR, all African Union sub economic regions. This strand of research on the European Universities Initiative and the European Education Area could be situated within the field of comparative regionalisms through concepts such as inter and trans regionalism.

Future of the initiative

The impact of the alliances on the transformation of the higher education landscape and whether they are capable of delivering on the many objectives that have been assigned to them will be a topic that will be determinant on the future of the initiative. The submission of this thesis coincides with the start of the new round of negotiations for the next multi-annual financial framework that will determine the budget allocated to Erasmus+. While the Erasmus+ budget has continuously grown with each new MFF, the geopolitical context in Europe and the sudden rise of defence spending across member states alongside wider security concerns and strategic priorities may have a significant impact on budget allocations.

The Commission has already announced that there will be a new funding round for the European Universities Initiative once the next MFF has been

agreed upon. However, the nature of this funding is still to be determined. There were still much more alliances that applied in the (currently) final funding round than those that were selected. It is therefore unclear if the Commission will choose to encourage new alliances to form, or if instead, it will encourage existing alliances to expand with the expectation that new higher education institutions will join their cooperation actions. The decision on next steps will most likely be heavily dependent on the evaluation of the actions of the alliances and the overall impact that they have had.

Concluding Remarks

2017 is a pivotal year in the development of European higher education policy. It is too early to know if the alliances launched as part of the European Universities Initiative will become sustainable on the long run, become the gold standard for cooperation in European higher education, and even less certain if they will transform the higher education landscape in the European Union. It is a pivotal year because it embodies what is necessary not only for the EU to 'do' higher education policy, but to launch an initiative that has the capacity to grow at the pace and magnitude it demands. The development of the EUI exceeded the initial announcements linked to its development. Initially, there were only meant to be 20 European Universities supported, and any funding past the initial pilot phase was more than uncertain. Very quickly, 41 alliances were selected with a budget of €205m to test and experiment new collaborative

structures . Six years after its initial launch, 65 alliances have been selected with an overall budget of around €1.4bn.

It has been a laborious route since the launch of the Lisbon strategy in 2000, with its relaunch necessary as 2005 to try to regain momentum. This relaunch did trigger the development of a specific strategy for universities in Europe, the modernisation agenda, that, despite some significant achievements also needed a reboot in 2011, with a second modernisation agenda. In this period the EU gained in experience in leading higher education policy, through policy coordination that took a real turn with the consultation phase leading up to the launch of the 2017 renewed agenda, which was even more enhanced with the launch of the ad-hoc expert group for the co-construction of the European Universities Initiative, as well as the immense consultation phase that led to the launch of the European Strategy for Universities. Additionally, the EU has become more skilled in making use of an increasingly large budget, recognising the limitations of its past actions having the time to reflect on possible directions for the future. Since the appearance of a single funding mechanism, with the lifelong learning programme (2006-2013) and both subsequent Erasmus+ programmes (2014-2020; 2021-2027), the Commission has been able to identify the limits of the programmes it initially conceived and saw the necessity to counter the fragmentation of programmes (and funding) by a streamlined initiative that reflects the objectives set forward in its (higher) education strategies. With the development of the initiative, the Commission has also demonstrated its

capacity to grasp institutional and policy windows, whereas it had been less successful in doing so in the past. Through policy entrepreneurship, the Commission fully embraces these opportunities and fully unlocked the windows that had only been partially opened by member states.

The European Universities Initiative has also been a way for the Commission to shift the focus of its strategies from a strong emphasis on competition, mobility, skills and employment to enhance the centrality of transnational cooperation to achieve a higher education dimension of a European Education Area. The simultaneous launch and nested nature of the European Education Area and the European Universities Initiative have created a dynamic where each policy feeds into the other. The successes of one pushes the other forward, creating a development process that is constantly in motion.

Finally, while limited to the realm of a supporting competence, the Commission has been able to actively work towards the adoption of non-binding legal acts, that, with the agenda setting capacity that they bring, have triggered unprecedented debates with member states, which, despite caution have conceded a lot of demands.

The European Commission has successfully placed the EUI at the forefront of national higher education and research agendas, as well as in the strategies of higher education institutions. This is due to certain contextual factors but mostly to the way in which the initiative was designed and governed. This process has transformed the higher

education governance puzzle from successive tugs of war to a three-legged race. What may have initially seemed like a laborious path toward a European higher education policy field can now be seen as a necessary maturation process - one that enabled the European Commission to implement a programme as ambitious as the European Universities Initiative.

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society and other provisions (Issue One No. Sheet 141; Newspapers

Of The Government Of The Greek Republic).

Annex 1 – Interview Templates

Coordinators

- Their background and how they came to their current position in the initiative
- How they see the Commission's role in letting the alliances experiment whilst accompanying them throughout the way, and how they find a balance with this dynamic.
- The internal structure of the alliance and its governance and organization in work packages.

- How the alliance is built as a network with the different HEI structures: senior management, academics, students
- The interaction between the Commission and different actors in the initiative to get a sense of the policy network: FOREU1, FOREU2, EACEA, Commissioner's Cabinet, RTD, French Presidency, Parliament, Working group on EEA, transnational stakeholders (COIMBRA, Guild etc.)
- The process through which the Commission negotiates with the council on the points presented in the Council recommendation
- The establishment of a legal statute for the alliances
- What EU instruments exist that could help towards the development of these alliances
- What form the pilot call for experimenting with legal instruments could look like
- Differences between the EHEA and the higher education dimension of the EEA
- What the European degree label could look like and the process through which it could be implemented
- Whether and how the initiative could evolve from project funding towards more sustainable/long term funding.

EU institutions

- Could you tell me a little bit about the role of [name of institution] in coordinating initiative in practice?
- How many people are working on the EUI in your institution and what does the hierarchy look like? How is each team structured?
- How do you deal with the workload of having more and more alliances to look after?
- What is your relationship with the alliances?
- How do you find your role in this between letting the alliances, having the space to experiment and not intervening too much and actually being there for them?
- How do you interact with Member States?
- Is there some plans of the European Universities Initiative moving beyond sole project funding in the near future?
- How do you play a role in convincing Member States to remove some of these legal barriers?
- What are potential European legal tools that could be used for these legal entities?
- What would a European degree label look like in practice and who would deliver it?
- How do negotiations between the Commission and the Member States look like during Council meetings?
- What is your relationship with other organs of the Commission and other EU institutions – DGs, Executive Agencies, Parliament, Council
- How has having one Commissioner for research and education improved the relationship between DG RTD and DG EAC?

- What has been your perspective on the impact of rotating Council presidencies on the initiative?
- What was your link with the different transnational stakeholder organizations like Coimbra Group, the Guild?
- How have you found it to interact with the FOREU forum and to work with them.

Member States

- Could you tell me about your exact position and role in the ministry.
- When did you first hear about the European Universities Initiative?
- What was the original ministry's reaction to Macron's speech at the Sorbonne and [country]'s position at the Guttenberg summit that that followed?
- What inputs did the Ministry give the Commission towards the creation of both the Erasmus Plus call but also the horizon call?
- Did you feel the calls responded to the positions of the ministry and to your ambitions?
- What is your view on the latest call's incentive to get alliances to expand themselves for extra funding? What about opening up the initiative to new alliances?
- Can you tell me a little bit about how you interact with (country) universities?
- How do you support your higher education institutions participating in alliances? - Funding? Change in national legislation?
- [If change in government]. How has the position on the European Universities Initiative changed since the change in government?
- What's your view on the commission's role in the in the initiative?
- Can you tell me a little bit about what was the atmosphere during the debates that took place at the Council on the European Universities Initiative? And did you feel that the [country] position was heard?
- What do you think will be the implications of the initiative on the (country) higher education landscape?
- What do you feel could be improved in how the initiative is being deployed?
- Do you feel there's enough instances where both the Commission, the different member states and the different alliances get together in a room and moving initiative forward?
- What's your perspective on the research dimension of the initiative and the future of the research dimension of the initiative?

Senior Managers - In depth alliances

- Were you involved in the discussion the Commission organized to co-construct the first EUI call?

- What were the links with the other institutions that make up the alliance?
- What strategies have you used to get students involved in the initiative?
- How did you develop a network of associated partners and what was the strategy behind it?
- How did you get regional and municipal authorities involved in the alliance?
- What form(s) of support do you receive from your national higher education and research ministry?
- Do you have links with other national HEIs participating in other alliances?
- What is your role in the governance of the alliance?
- What do you feel is or should be the role of research in the initiative?
- Why do you view the creation of a legal entity as essential for the further rollout of the alliance?
- What are your plans for participating in the legal entities pilot call?
- What has been your experience in working with your counterparts in the other HEIs for developing the alliance?
- Does each HEI management consider the successful rollout of the alliance as a strategic priority?

Local coordinators - In depth alliances

- What is your background and when did you first become involved in the initiative?
- How much percentage of your time do you dedicate to the alliance's activities?
- Who is your main point of contact in the university for your work on the alliance?
- Could you describe your relationship with the senior management of the university?
- Is the development of the alliance a strategic priority for the university?
- How many people are working with you on the alliance in your university?
- How have you involved academics of your university in the development of the university?
- How have you involved students of your university in the development of the university?
- What has been your relationship with your local authorities in the development of the alliance?
- How is your relationship with the your national higher education and research ministry?
- Are you the person in charge of developing the network of associated partners?
- How is the cooperation with the other local coordinators of the alliance?

Students - In depth alliances

- Can you tell me about what your background and what you study?
- When did you first hear about the alliance?
- Who usually communicates on the activities of the alliance to students?
- Do you feel a lot of students are aware of the existence of the alliance?
- How did you become involved in the alliance's activities?
- What did you do as part of the alliance's programmes?
- Who was your main point of contact from the alliance when you participated in the programme?
- What was your experience of interacting with this main point of contact?
- How often did you interact with students from other institutions of the alliance?
- Are you asked for your opinion on the development of the alliance?

Annex 2 – CUREC Approval Letter

Re: DPhil Education CUREC application for Antonin Charret

Sandra Mathers <sandra.mathers@education.ox.ac.uk>

Jeu 24/06/2021 09:42

À : Student CUREC <student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk>; Antonin Charret <antonin.charret@education.ox.ac.uk>; Maia Chankseliani <maia.chankseliani@education.ox.ac.uk>

Dear Antonin and Maia

European Universities: Building the future of higher education in the European Union through transnational "knowledge alliances" - approval reference CIA-21-257

The above application has been considered on behalf of the Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the procedures laid down by the University for ethical approval of all research involving human participants. I am pleased to inform you that, on the basis of the information provided to DREC, the proposed research has been judged as meeting appropriate ethical standards, and accordingly, approval has been granted.

Please continue to follow all current guidance issued by CUREC during the pandemic, notably COVID-19: CUREC guidance on research involving human participants, and on internet-based research: <https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/coronavirus>

If relevant, please also check the CUREC website for their best practice research guides: <https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/resources/bpg>

Should there be any subsequent changes to the project which raise ethical issues not covered in the original application you should submit details to research.office@education.ox.ac.uk for consideration.

Good luck with your research study.

With kind regards,

Sandra

Dr. Sandra Mathers
Senior Researcher
Department of Education
University of Oxford

From: Student CUREC <student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk>

Sent: 01 June 2021 13:41

To: Sandra Mathers <sandra.mathers@education.ox.ac.uk>

Subject: FW: DPhil Education CUREC application for Antonin Charret

CIA-21-257

From: Student CUREC

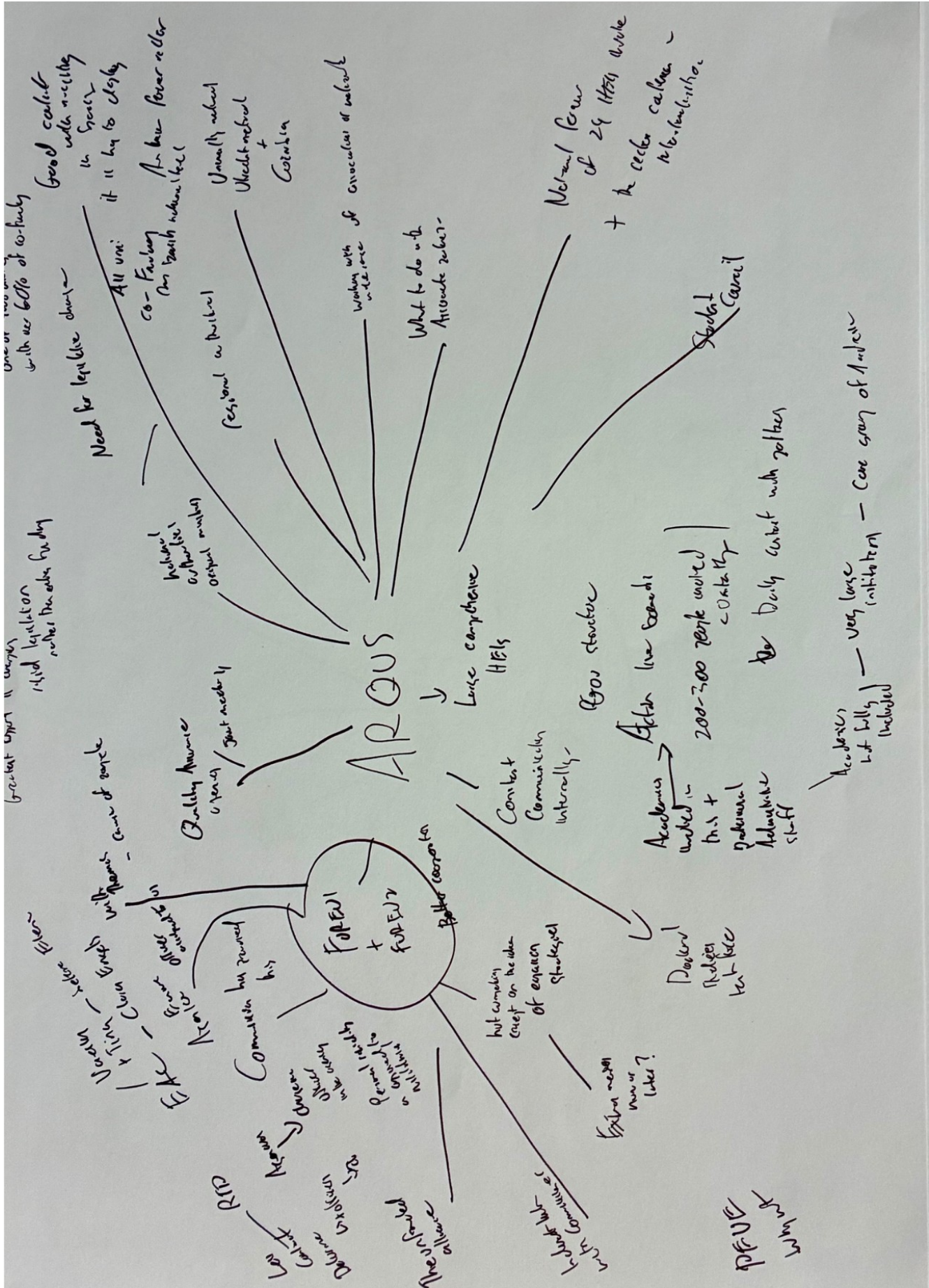
Sent: 27 May 2021 18:25

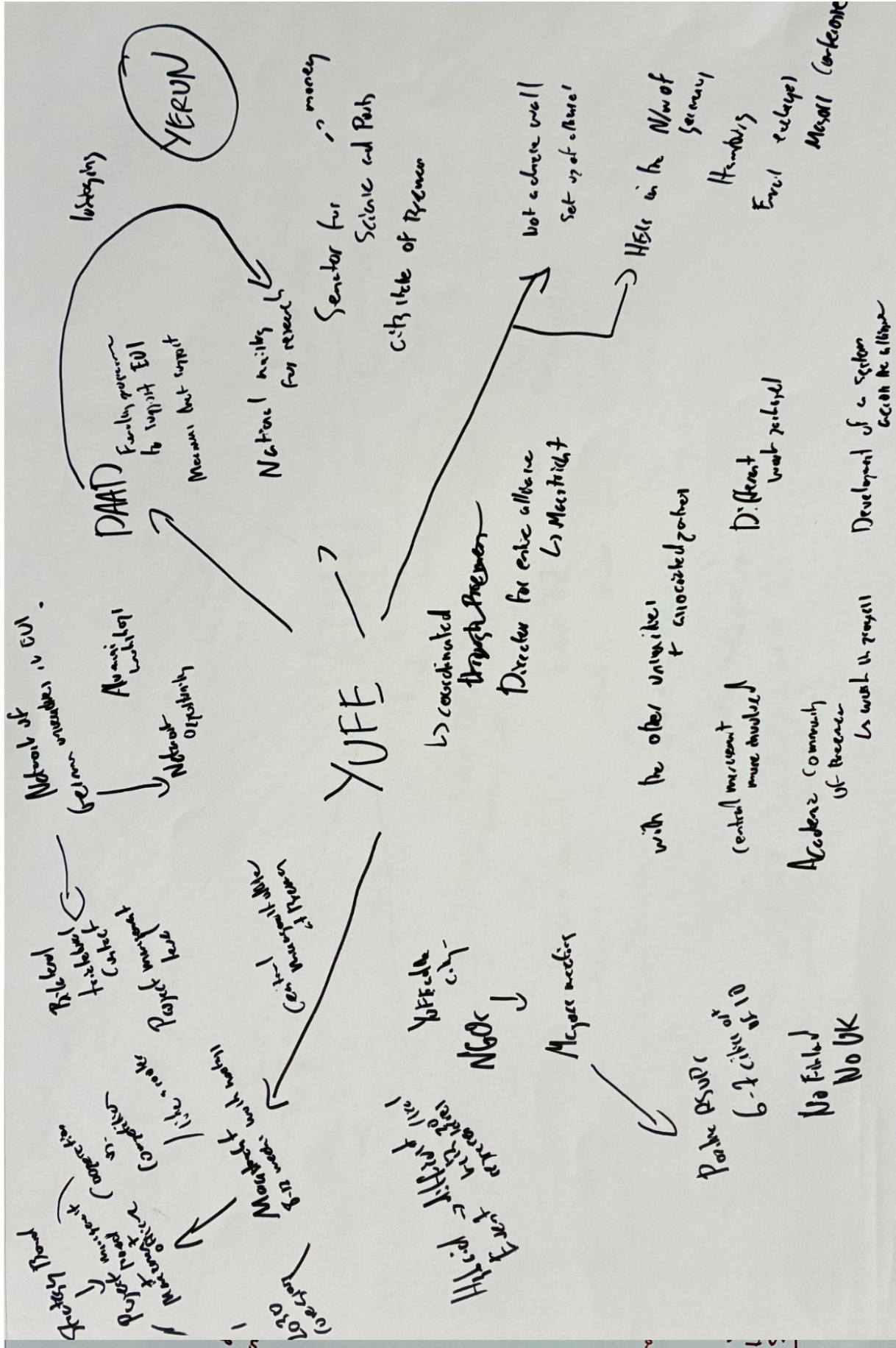
To: Student CUREC <student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk>

Subject: DPhil Education CUREC application for Antonin Charret

Importance: Low

Annex 3 – Examples of configurative network maps





HE Association
 Austria
 Denmark
 Finland
 France
 Germany
 Greece
 Ireland
 Italy
 Netherlands
 Norway
 Portugal
 Spain
 Sweden
 Switzerland
 UK
 USA

