EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY ASSOCIATION

BRIEFING

The governance models of the European University Alliances

Evolving models of university governance I

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1 Introduction

In the past decade, the university sector has found itself at a transformation tipping point, driven by multiple factors, such as globalisation, climate change, rapidly evolving digitalisation, different labour market expectations, economic and societal pressures. This has now been further accelerated by the recent pandemic.[1] University governance has never been more important for strategic choices on how to develop, shape and respond to these challenges. Yet, there has been little provision on the transformation processes that refer directly to the variety of challenges and reforms involved.

Europe hosts a significant diversity of framework conditions, regulations, decision-making and implementation processes that govern the way in which Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) operate. However, the development of institutional governance models in many systems has only revolved around the question of different groups' participation in governing bodies and the appointment of external representatives, with a specific focus on who is responsible for such appointments. The question of competencies and links to institutional transformation processes has not been given particular attention.

EUA characterised the different governance models used in Europe using Autonomy Scorecard data and has since been involved in reform discussions and change management projects in numerous systems.[2] These activities demonstrated that governance is a key factor in the efficient achievement of institutions' missions. And this is all the more important in a period of transformation and change. To deliver on their missions, universities must develop an internal governance model that includes the diverse university community and leads to structures and processes that support efficient decision-making and flexible, sustainable management.

1 European University Association (2021). *Universities without walls – A vision for 2030,* February 2021, Brussels, available at: https://eua.eu/resources/publications/957:universities-without-walls-%E2%80%93-eua%E2%80%99s-vision-for-europe%E2%80%99s-universities-in-2030.html

2 Bennetot Pruvot, E. and Estermann, T. (2017). *University Autonomy in Europe III: The Scorecard.* Brussels, available at: https://eua.eu/resources/publications/350:university-autonomy%C2%A0in-europe-iii-%C2%A0the-scorecard-2017.html.

EUA addresses this issue from different angles, exploring both formal and informal governance models developed in various ways, across different systems and higher education structures. This analysis focuses on partnership governance, and delves more specifically into the governance of university alliances established recently under the European Universities Initiative (EUI). The EUI aims to strengthen strategic and in-depth transnational collaboration through the development of networks involving universities from several European countries. To date, 215 EUA member universities are part of the 41 alliances selected under the two pilot calls, with more willing to take part.

Expectations for these alliances tend to be quite high, because - as part of the broader European Education Area (EEA), the European Commission (EC) placed them at the forefront of the university transformation agenda. Thus, the question of these partnerships' governance is highly relevant in terms of structures, inclusiveness and processes. This analysis aims to provide an initial overview of these structures and to analyse relevant governance challenges.

The evidence collected will benefit the wider university sector, by sharing good practices and will contribute to current discussions with recommendations on sustainable, efficient, and autonomous governance models for the diverse types of strategic institutional partnerships found in Europe.[3]

EUA will further explore university governance trends and governance's contribution to the institutional transformation agenda, in connection with its ongoing work on university leadership and institutional transformation supported by the Erasmus+ programme through the NEWLEAD project.[4]

3 Claeys-Kulik, A.-L., Jørgensen, T., Stöber, H. et al. (2020). *International strategic institutional partnerships and the European Universities Initiative: Results of the EUA survey. EUA Report.* Brussels, available at: https://eua.eu/resources/publications/925:international-strategic-institutional-partnerships-and-the-european-universities-initiative.html.

4 The topic of leadership development and institutional transformation is a NEWLEAD project focus point. In it, the EUA and other partner institutions examine how university leadership initiate governance reforms and steer transformation processes.

2 Strategic relevance of EUI governance

2021 is an important year in which to explore current EUI alliance governance and management developments, because of the forthcoming mid-term review.

EUI was piloted under the Erasmus+ programme. Two pilot calls in 2018 and 2020 resulted in 41 alliances, each with a three-year project duration, clearly defined project deliverables and pre-defined financial provisions. During the three-year pilot phase, each alliance will receive €5 million from the Erasmus+ programme, topped-up by €2 million from Horizon 2020 to develop their research and innovation capacity.[5] The Erasmus+ programme Guide description of the alliances reveals the broad scope of their assigned objectives.

As a pilot, the initiative was implemented to increase cooperation and share an integrated long-term joint EU strategy for education with, where possible, links to research and innovation, and society at large. In discussions and public consultations, the Commission suggested that alliances use the three-year project horizon as a testbed to develop concrete action plans and set priorities for long-term strategic institutional transformation. The Erasmus+ programme highlights long-term goals like establishing a European higher education inter-university campus with seamless student and staff mobility and joint flexible curricula, and the formation of European knowledge-creating teams, to address social and other challenges using a multidisciplinary approach. In addition, "European Universities should progressively build their capacity to act as **models of good practice** to further increase the quality, international competitiveness and attractiveness of the European higher education landscape and should become key elements of the European Education Area by driving excellence".[6]

5 European Commission, Press Release. 24 new European Universities reinforce the European Education Area. (9 July 2020). Brussels, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1264.
6 European Commission. (2020). Erasmus+ Programme Guide. Version 3 (2020): 25/08/2020, p.132, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/resources/documents/erasmus-programme-guide-2020_en.

Zooming in more specifically on governance provisions, alliance member institutions are invited to go beyond existing higher education cooperation models and test different innovative and structural models for implementing and achieving this ambitious long-term vision of "European Universities". The joint strategy pursues a high level of enhanced and sustainable cooperation across various levels of the organisation (e.g., management, academics, professional/support staff and students), and across different areas of activity.[7]

Regarding implementation, the initiative requires that the joint activity work plan be supported by the design of relevant and efficient shared management structures, such as joint boards, a shared pool of physical and virtual intellectual and administrative resources, shared resources, joint provision of infrastructure, data and services such as student, researcher and staff support, administration and international relations, and joint digitalised processes where possible.[8]

European university alliances have developed different governance structures based on the criteria provided in the guidelines (innovation, sustainable and inclusive collaboration and pooled resources) to achieve these goals. Given the recent nature of the initiative, these structures were evolving and subject to future adaptations at the beginning of 2021.

Against this background, a core issue is **the extent to which the governance arrangements designed in the context of the three-year EUI project are sustainable for the implementation of the ambitious vision of European Universities and more long-term, intensified university collaboration**. Other key questions include the degree of mirroring between such structures and members' institutional governance models; **how EUI governance maps onto institutional governance**; and whether new forms of governance are emerging to capture new and evolving trends and global challenges.

This analysis presents the different alliance governance models, drawing on a survey of institutional partnerships and the EUI conducted by EUA in January 2020.[9] The survey involved an open question that asked respondents to describe university alliances' governance structures. The results of this survey provide data on 20 out of the 41 alliances selected so far by the European Commission. Supplemented with further research, data collection and validation, this paper provides a descriptive analysis of the governance architecture of those 20 alliances. In addition, it will examine the characteristics and challenges of those alliances before offering concluding remarks on the sustainability of their governance models.

7 *Ibid*, pp. 132-133.
8 *Ibid*, 133.
9 Claeys-Kulik, A.-L., Jørgensen, T., Stöber, H. et al. (2020). *International strategic institutional partnerships and the European Universities Initiative: Results of the EUA survey. EUA Report*. Brussels, available at: https://eua.eu/resources/publications/925:international-strategic-institutional-partnerships-and-the-european-universities-initiative.html.

3 Characteristics of the EUI

3.1. DESCRIPTION OF BASIC FEATURES

The call requirements naturally shaped the university alliance profiles. The two EUI calls published to date (first in 2018 and second in 2020) include specifications on the number, profile and geographical coverage of the institutions participating in an alliance. These consortia must comprise at least three HEIs from at least three EU Member States and other Programme countries; they can be public/private institutions and must be active in the area of higher education, research and innovation. These institutions can apply as full or associate partners and/or affiliate entities.[10]

In practice, the institution's academic profile is very diverse and includes different HEI types, from universities of applied sciences, universities of technology and film and media art schools to comprehensive and research-intensive universities. The 41 alliances selected so far involve more than 280 institutions from all EU member states and beyond[11] and each alliance includes an average of seven institutions.[12]

The alliances are formed by members with diverse legal statuses, including public and private institutions, foundations, and other non-university partners. Alliances have also made different strategic choices regarding their focus, with some favouring a topic-oriented approach, focusing on sustainable development, health and well-being, digitalisation, art, engineering and space.[13]

The sample extracted from the EUA survey on inter-institutional partnerships includes EUI alliances established between 2016 and 2019. Some of these established cooperation structures existed before the emergence of the EUI (such as AURORA and Una Europa), while others built on more informal multi-level collaborations to become an EUI.

10 European Commission. (2020). Erasmus+ Programme Guide. Version 3 (2020): 25/08/2020, pp.133-134, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/resources/documents/erasmus-programme-guide-2020_en.
11 Non-EU member participating in the EUI include Iceland, Norway, Serbia, Turkey and the United Kingdom.
12 European Commission, Press Release. 24 new European Universities reinforce the European Education Area. (9 July 2020). Brussels, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1264.
13 *Ibid*.

In line with the EUI alliance average, half of the alliances in our sample comprise seven to eight members (See Figures 1 and 2).

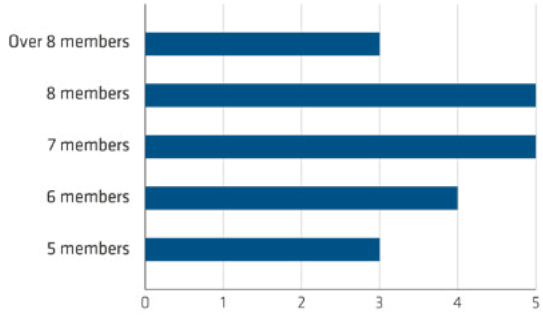


Figure 1 *Size of EUI alliances in number of members (n=20)*

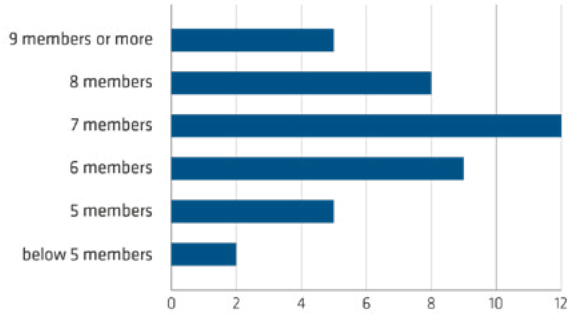
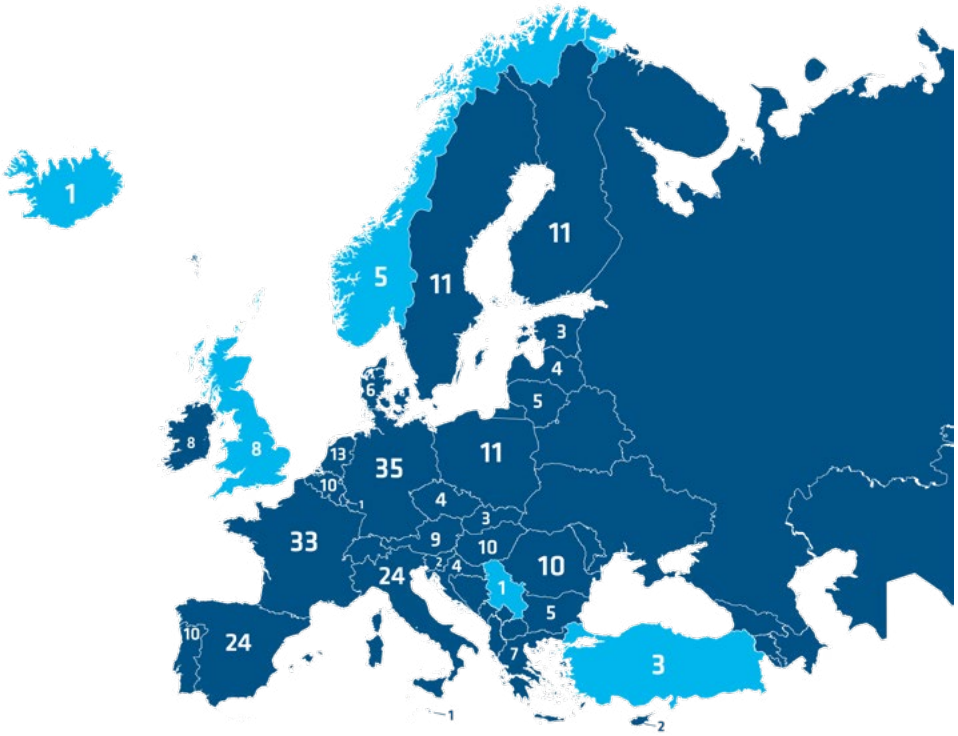


Figure 2 *Size of EUI alliances in number of members (n=41)*

The geographical distribution of the EUI members in the EUA sample (n=20) reveals that most are from Western Europe - France (20), Germany (19), Spain (13) and Italy (12). The map below illustrates the overall picture (n=41) and broadly shows the same tendency, although with some differences, when it comes to smaller member institutions' representation.[14] The map includes non-EU Erasmus+ programme countries, such as Iceland, Norway, Serbia and Turkey, as well as the United Kingdom (UK).[15]

EUI member representation per EU country (n=41)



Disclaimer *The European University Institute has been added to Italy and Central European University to Austria to comply with their geographical attachment.*

14 At this stage it is worth mentioning that regulatory frameworks may differ within some countries, in particular those with several higher education systems, such as Belgium, Germany and the UK, accounting for different institutional governance models.

15 Both EUI pilot calls were launched under the previous Erasmus+ programme (2014-2020), which included the UK. UK institutions belonging to alliances selected under these pilot calls will continue to receive financial support until the end of the pilot phase (2022/2023). On January 1st 2021, the UK decided not to be a part of the EU Erasmus+ programme. More information on future EU-UK relations: "*EUA Briefing: EU-UK relations after Brexit: what the deal means for universities*" (Feb 2021), is available at: https://www.eua.eu/resources/publications/956:eu-uk-relations-after-brexit-what-the-deal-means-for-universities.html?utm_source=social&utm_medium=Twitter&utm_name=Twitter-social-28-01-2021.

3.2. GOVERNING BODIES

Governance and organisational structures are an evolving matter and vary from one alliance to another. The governing bodies designed under the Erasmus+ call project logic can be distinguished from the ambitious long-term vision of European Universities, which aim to achieve enhanced and sustainable cooperation at various levels.

Most alliances use a step-by-step approach, testing different settings, structures, and operational models, while looking beyond the three-year EUI project horizon to establish a sustainable model.

It is worth noting that alliances may define their bodies in a particular way, but this analysis is based on an evaluation considering the characteristics and composition of their governance bodies, the distribution of responsibilities and their dynamics.

The governance structure usually includes a long-term strategic development and oversight body, responsible for defining the general policy, long-term strategies, and policy priorities; and a steering and coordination body more focused on achieving progress. It is not always possible to draw a clear line between these two, as governing bodies often have responsibilities connected to both aspects, but focused on one or the other. Day-to-day alliance management and project implementation is then usually undertaken by a dedicated management team or a Secretary-General. Bearing these functions in mind, it is possible to differentiate between several types of governing bodies in the current sample (Figure 3).

Visual representation of alliances' governance structure

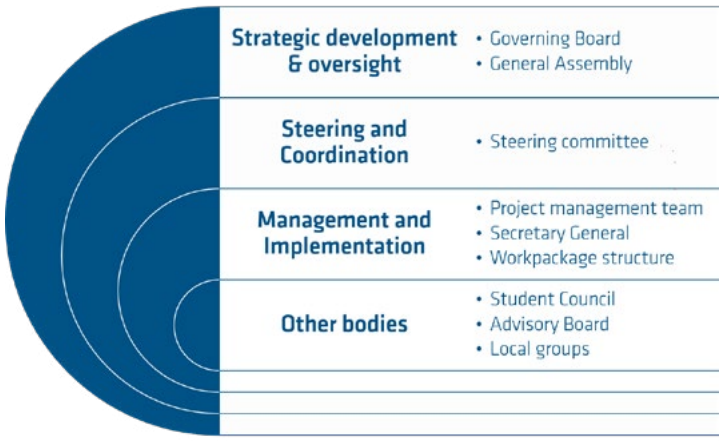


Figure 3 Source *own elaboration, based on consultation of publicly available information about alliances' governance structures*

➤ Strategic development and oversight

All alliances in the sample set up a top governing body (General Assembly/Rectors' Assembly/ Presidents Committee, Governing Board, etc.), which is usually in charge of the general policy, vision and long-term strategy of the alliance. This typically includes the executive leaders from each member institution (e.g. rectors, presidents, vice-chancellors); while some alliances include additional members, such as student representatives, the Secretary General, or associate members. This top decision-making body decides on major project changes, accepts new members, proposes alterations and advises the project management team. Meeting frequencies vary from once every four to once every six months, and extraordinary meetings can be convened at any time.

➤ Steering and coordination

The top body is followed by the Steering Committee (or Executive Committee/Board), which is responsible for steering and coordinating alliance activities and objectives. Its members are usually vice rectors (or vice-presidents) or other senior representatives. This body is most frequently known as the Steering Committee (among the 20 EUI alliances in the sample), and coordinates and implements the alliance's strategic priority agenda as defined by the alliance and/or top governing body. Some alliances join strategic oversight and coordination responsibilities into a single body.

➤ Management and implementation

The implementation of the alliances' aims, and day-to-day management is led by a management team (project management team) or secretariat/office set up especially for this purpose. This team often comprises managerial staff from the different universities, such as heads of administration, directors of services and departments, for whom the alliance represents an additional activity. In other cases, these posts are fully detached from their university roles.

The secretariat/office may be led by a secretary-general who oversees project activity coordination, while in other cases their role is to liaise with the alliance's different strategic and operational bodies. A project coordinator may also be in charge of project activities and liaise with the member institutions and the funding authority. Some alliances choose to go down the route of a network, where a team of senior staff from each member institution regularly liaise about project activities, instead of there being a single contact point.

The shorter-term aims of the project and concrete activities are implemented by project managers and coordinators at the member institutions, work package (WP) leaders, thematic mission board members and other academic and non-academic players.

➤ Student involvement

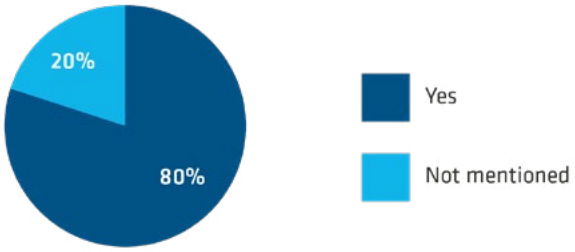


Figure 4 *Student involvement in the alliance governance structure (n=20)*

As stated in the requirements of the two European Commission calls, student involvement in all levels of governance is highly valued.[16] Most of the alliances in the sample (16/20) report student involvement in their strategic governance, while four did not provide any information.[17]

The form of involvement ranges from observation of strategic governing body meetings to participation in the decision-making bodies and/or involvement in the implementation of the work packages. In most cases, a specific student body ("Student Board/Council") has been set up to include student representatives from each member institution. They often, although not always, take part in the Steering Committee. In some alliances (such as YUFE and EUTOPIA), student involvement is deeply embedded in the governance structure, and elected student representatives also take part in the highest decision-making body. In these cases, students help steer the project, together with the executive leadership and operational management teams.

16 European Commission. (2020). Erasmus+ Programme Guide. Version 3 (2020): 25/08/2020, p.135, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/resources/documents/erasmus-programme-guide-2020_en.

17 The fact that some alliances did not explicitly report student involvement in the governance structure does not preclude their actual involvement.

➤ Other bodies

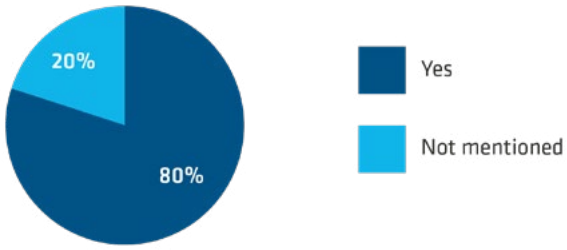


Figure 5 *External members' involvement in the alliance governance structure (n=20)*

Almost all of the sample respondents (16/20) reported that their alliance governance structure includes advisory bodies, although these are subject to different formulations (Figure 5).[18] This number also includes those that declared being in the process of developing such bodies. Advisory bodies are positioned at different levels to provide expertise to the alliance governance. Some alliances have set them up in response to the Erasmus+ project logic and include a quality assurance component (such as ARQUS), while others simply account for diverse stakeholders' representation. The composition varies and reflects the alliance's approach or focus. It may include non-academic representatives; representatives of associate partners; regional or local authorities; citizens' representatives (such as CIVIS and CONEXUS); or national accreditation bodies, among others. Some alliances hired international independent higher education experts, not directly affiliated to any of the alliance institutions, to provide external policy and project advice.

3.3. CASE STUDIES

It is worth zooming in on some of the alliances' governance models to illustrate the diversity of their governing bodies, their composition, and the complex interactions between them.

The first case study (Box 1) is an example of a pre-existing university network, for which the EUI alliance project is one of the two main flagship initiatives for institutional transformation.

18 The fact that some alliances that do not report such advisory structures does not preclude their existence.

Box 1. Una Europa Alliance : 1Europe project

The Una Europa Alliance was set up in 2019 and involves eight HEIs. The alliance is a platform for permanent collaboration that connects different project-based structures, one of which is the '1Europe project' selected under the first EUI call.

Una Europa is registered as an Association under Belgian law, and therefore follows the governance architecture prescribed by its national legislation (see box below in orange). The project delivery line (in light pink) shows the EUI project governing structure, which has significant overlaps with the overall governance.

The decision-making at the level of the Association is carried out by the Una Europa General Assembly and the Board of Directors, supported by an office, led by a Secretary-General. The General Assembly includes the executive leaders of all of the member institutions and one university-related member per member institution. **The General Assembly** appoints one director per university member to constitute a **Board of Directors**. The Board of Directors appoints a President, a Treasurer, and a Secretary-General. The **Secretary-General** is entrusted with the daily management of Una Europa and supports the work of the various projects. Una Europa also has an Advisory Board comprising nine socio-economic and academic representatives.

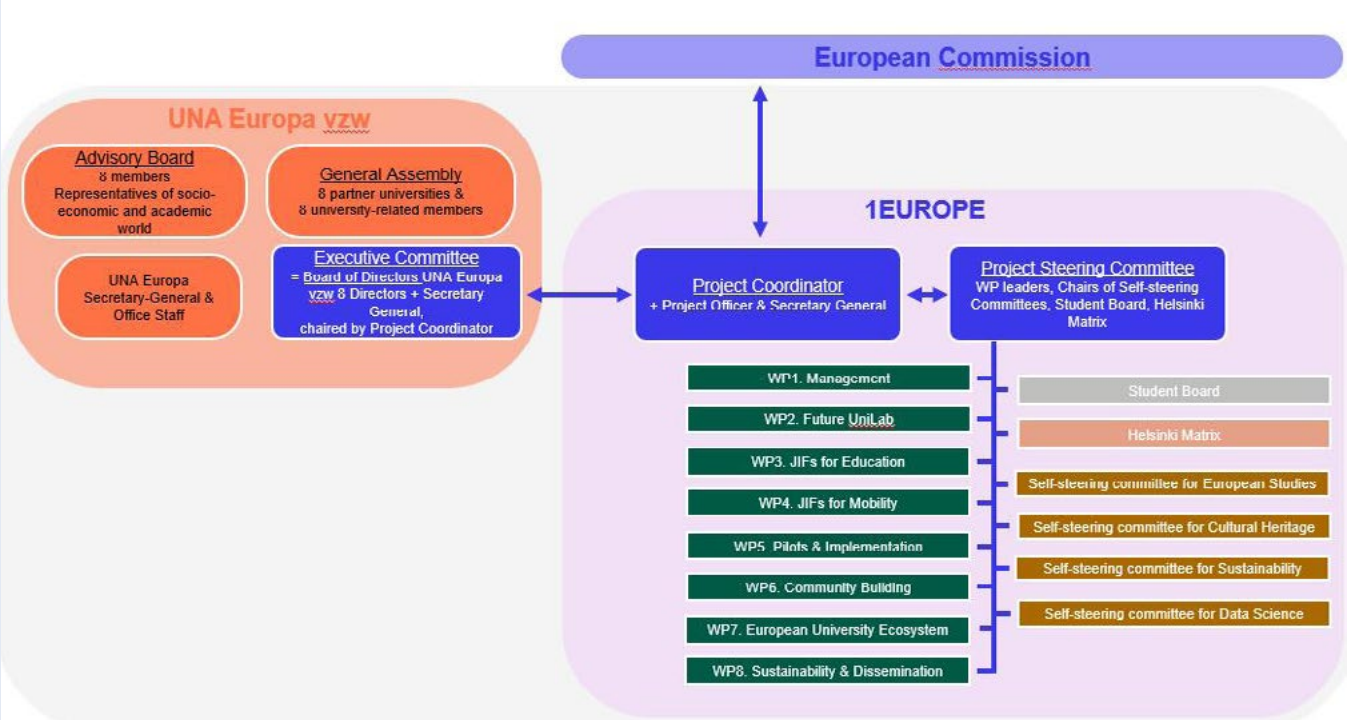
Project delivery management comprises three bodies: a 1Europe Executive Committee, a 1Europe Project Steering Committee and a Project Coordinator. The Una Europa Board of Directors, including the 1Europe Project Coordinator, acts as the **1Europe Executive Committee** and is responsible for ensuring connection and synergies between the two frames. The Executive Committee liaises with all the actors in the Una Europa partner institutions on project activities, milestones reached, and outcomes delivered. It meets at least every four months but typically every six weeks.

A **Project Steering Committee** is the first point of interaction between the member institutions. It was set up to run and implement the daily project activities. The Project Steering Committee is chaired by the Project Coordinator or, in his absence, by the Project Officer, and comprises the following bodies: one Self-Steering Committee of academics for each focus area; Student Board; eight Work Package Leaders; one representative of the University of Helsinki; the president in charge of the Una Europa Board of Directors; the current or outgoing president of the Una Europa Board of Directors (depending on the role of the 1Europe Project Coordinator), the Una Europa Secretary General. The Project Steering committee meets once a month.

The Coordinator (KU Leuven) is the legal entity acting as the liaison between the members and the funding authority. It is responsible for overall supervision of the project activities and reporting, and entrusts daily coordination tasks to a Project Coordinator (the KU Leuven Vice Rector for International Policy), and the Project Officer, with the support of the Una Europa Secretary-General. Project coordination meetings are held twice a month.

Student representation is ensured through a **Student Board**, comprising one student representative per partner university. It elects a president and a secretary, who are members of the Project Steering Committee. The Student Board monitors and evaluates the activities and outcomes of the project, it acts as the first line of quality control.

Box 1.1 *1Europe governance within Una Europa*



The second case study (Box 2) provides another example of a pre-existing university collaboration, this time featuring a unique core body (Alliance Board Committee), at the Alliance executive leadership level.

Box 2. Aurora Universities Network: Aurora University Alliance

The Aurora Universities Network was established in 2016. Their project, the Aurora University Alliance, was selected under the second EUI call in 2020.

The Alliance is headed by the **Alliance Board**, which comprises the member universities' chief executive officers (president, rector) plus two student representatives appointed by the Aurora Student Council. Each president is assisted by an Institutional Coordinator appointed by that president. The Board oversees alliance steering and profiling, and defines its structure, composition and strategic direction. In principle, decisions are reached by consensus.

The Aurora Alliance Board appoints a core team, the **Alliance Board Committee**, which comprises four presidents and one student representative. The Committee is responsible for instructing and guiding the Aurora Alliance Management Team, and for reviewing and deciding on its proposals, agreeing on press releases and joint publications and deciding on all-budget related matters. The Alliance Board Committee reports to the Alliance Board.

Daily management of the Alliance is entrusted to the **Alliance Management Team**, which reports to the Alliance Board directly and through the Alliance Board Committee. The Management Team includes a full-time **Alliance Programme Director**, responsible for the operational and strategic management of the Alliance programme and its designated ECAS portal "Coordinator"; the **Aurora Secretary General (50%)**, who is responsible for the alliance's strategic management and for strategic coherence between the Alliance Erasmus+ programme and other Aurora Alliance and Aurora Universities Network activities; plus the **Aurora Office Manager (50%)** and the **Aurora Communications Officer (50%)**.

The Secretary General, Office Manager and Communications Officer are part of the existing Aurora Universities Network governance structure. These functions are now 50% assigned to the Alliance programme. This is a shift in function for the Secretary General, and an extension for the Office Manager and Communications Officer.

The next governance layer comprises three substantive and three technical **Work Package (WP) teams**, each led and co-led by two distinct Alliance members. WPs monitor and guide the work in their work packages and supervise their management by the Alliance Management Team.

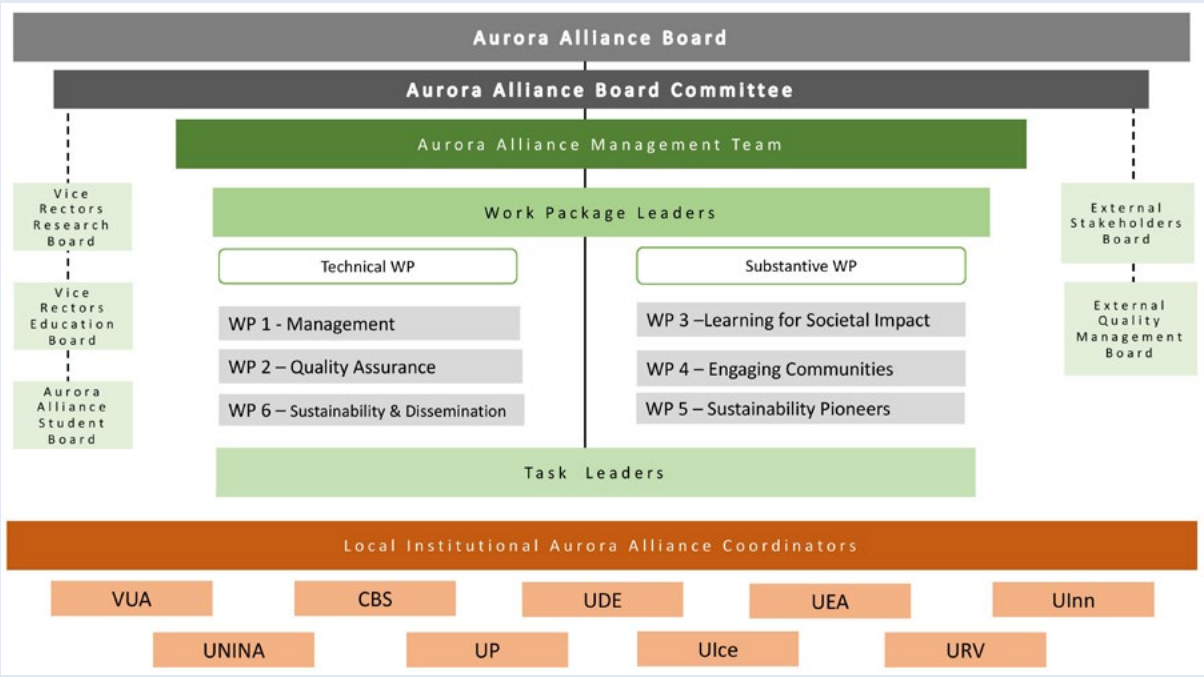
Aurora hired three external independent experts to be the **External Quality Board (EQB)**. The EQB is mandated to advise the Alliance Board and technical WP teams and has direct access to the work of individual task teams.

The **Vice Rectors (VRs) Education group** and the **VRs Research group** are part of the Aurora Universities Network standing structure. They advise the Aurora Alliance Board. The VRs Education group focuses on WP3 Learning for Societal Impact. The VRs Research group focuses on the synergy between the Aurora European University Alliance Erasmus+ programme and the expected Aurora Alliance SWAFS programme for research & innovation support.

The Aurora Alliance **Student Board** comprises student representatives from all of the member institutions. The Student Board advises the Alliance Board.

Activities to produce the programme outcomes and impacts are organised into the **Task Teams** – all of these are inter-institutional and all rely on active student involvement. Task Team members and leads/co-leads are nominated by the member universities. Student members are recruited through the Aurora Student Champion scheme.

Box 2.1 *Aurora University Alliance governance*



The last case study (Box 3) shows how alliance governance can be embedded within the institutional governance of a member institution.

Box 3. UNIC University Alliance

The **UNIC Management Board** is the alliance's decision-making body. It comprises one representative from each member university (executive leaders i.e., rectors and presidents) and is responsible for overall alliance steering, including membership, finances, content and changes to the Alliance plan. The Board meets twice a year and decisions are taken by a two-thirds (2/3) majority of the votes cast.

The **Coordinator of the Alliance** (Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR)) is the intermediary between the **UNIC University Alliance** and the funding authority. This role includes preparing meetings, transmitting documents, monitoring partners' compliance, administering finances, etc.

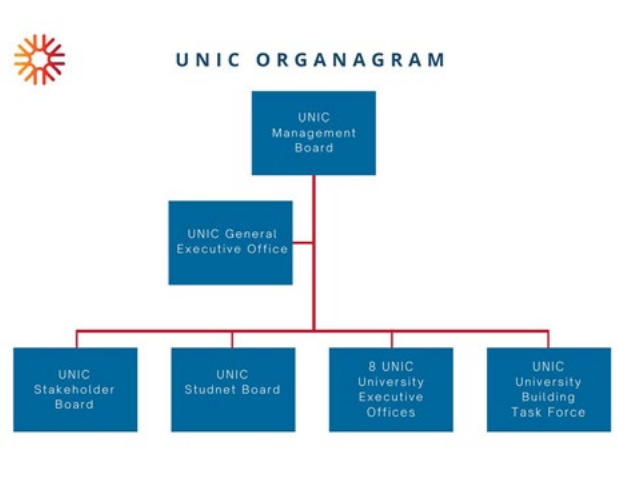
The **UNIC General Executive Office** (based at EUR) oversees the everyday management and organisation of UNIC. This includes daily management activities; meeting support; financial and technical reporting support; support for communication and dissemination activities; IT support and providing other administrative assistance where needed. The UNIC Executive Office is accountable to the UNIC Management Board. The UNIC General Executive Office comprises the Alliance Coordinator, two Programme Managers and one Project Manager.

The **UNIC Student Board** is responsible for student representation and the integration of the students' perspective in UNIC activities. Every UNIC university has a student representative on this Board, who is also a member of each University's Executive Office. The board discusses, advises and consents on UNIC university-wide plans. The Student Board selected two students to represent the UNIC Student Board on the UNIC University Building Taskforce.

The **UNIC Stakeholder Board** provides the Management Board with input and continuous feedback from the relevant stakeholders on the need, relevance, and impact of UNIC activities and outcomes and also on the evolving opportunities from their perspective. The Stakeholder Board elects one chair and includes representatives from three domains of the associated partners: city administrations; businesses, enterprises, and private agencies; and NGO's and other public bodies.

The **UNIC University Building Taskforce** comprises representatives from each member institution, to ensure that all UNIC activities and the actual structure of the UNIC University are co-created by a core-body with clear and shared distribution of tasks and responsibilities.

Box 3.1 *UNIC University Alliance governance*



To ensure alignment with the governance of each individual institution, each partner established a **UNIC University Executive Office**. Box 3.2 shows how University College Cork (UCC), Ireland populated its Executive office to govern and manage the implementation of UNIC, to embed the concept of a European University within the overall institution, and to organise and coordinate the other member institutions' involvement in the alliance. The UCC University Executive Office includes participants from across the University in areas ranging, for example, from the Offices of the President, the Registrar, Academic Affairs, European Relations and Public Affairs, International Education, Social Sciences, ICT, Research and Innovation, Diversity and Inclusion, ICT, Corporate and Legal Affairs, Marketing and Communications, Civic and Community Engagement, etc. as well as from the city partner: Cork.

Box 3.2 *UNIC University Executive Office at University College Cork*

These case studies demonstrate the multifaceted nature of alliance governance structures, which is a reflection of different cooperation needs and policy expectations. The synergies between existing cooperation frameworks and the EUI project has led to shifts and extensions of university positions (Aurora) or established legal structures to support an evolved governance model (Una Europa). The institutional diversity of members (UNIC) and alliances' ability to pursue major, long term institutional transformations will play a key role in the evaluation of the challenges described in the following chapter.

4 Challenges

The interplay between project governance and the notion of more long-term collaboration has added both structural complexity and diversity in the details, creating unique models of cooperation. It has also opened some fundamental questions that deserve attention: can governance models support the initiative beyond its project horizon? Is the EUI about project logics, or a new way of supporting institutional trajectories? How far do these new set-ups intertwine with institutional governance and management, both in terms of processes and those involved? How does governance ensure the scheme's continued relevance for members, and hence its alignment with institutional strategies?

➤ Conflated objectives

Challenges around EUI governance relate to the various objectives that they aspire to achieve. The aim of institutional transformation, and the creation of unique cooperation models overlap with more concrete actions such as promoting student and staff mobility, the creation of a European degree, or a fully virtual campus.

The European Commission's long-term EUI goal of being at the forefront of the European university transformation agenda is so broad that it allows for various interpretations. It signals both internal and external dimensions: internally, ever-closer collaboration should generate (perhaps via institutional isomorphism or the socialisation of the communities involved) an impetus to transform processes and practices at the member institutions. While attractive to a certain degree, this vision tends to underestimate both the strength of institutional cultures and the relevance of funding and regulatory frameworks. Externally, the alliances should act as frontrunners, opening new paths for collaboration that would eventually benefit the higher education sector as a whole. It is too early to assess the transferability of the experience, but several players subscribe strongly to this narrative, considering themselves 'format' builders. The alliances who work to overcome obstacles to joint action (for instance in the field of curriculum design) can inform others, whether engaged in alliances or in different collaboration structures.

These two dimensions are strongly supported by policymakers. But are these objectives central to participating universities' strategies? At birth, the EUI received various blessings, in the form of multiple objectives, which is one of the reasons for confusion. Alliances have different views of what they should transform and how these transformations should come about, as is evident in the description of some of their short and long-term goals (see excerpts in the boxes below).

The Una Europa alliance **1Europe project** aims "to use the three-year period to develop Una Europa from an incubator of ideas to a truly European virtual campus.
(Una Europa website, ref. in bibliography)

For **ARQUS**, the principal goal is to design, test and implement an innovative model for deep inter-university cooperation by creating a joint governance structure.
(ARQUS website, ref. in bibliography)

FORTHEM strives to become a reproducible model for both European and non-European universities that wish to develop similar new alliances.
(Forthem website, ref. in bibliography)

AURORA's goals are more wide reaching, trying to tackle major global challenges by equipping students with the skills and mindsets to make them future entrepreneurs and innovators; to lead by example and inspire others as pioneers of sustainability.
(Aurora website, ref. in bibliography)

The principal objective of **UNIC** is to drive an ever-closer union of its member institutions, driving seamless mobility of staff and students. The alliance puts an emphasis on contributing to the urban resilience of post-industrial cities by achieving a societal impact.
(UNIC website, ref. in bibliography)

➤ From project governance to sustainable collaborative governance

As mentioned earlier, the European Commission EUI falls under the Erasmus+ programme. The project duration for each alliance under the pilot calls is three years, and each project has clearly defined deliverables and pre-established financial provisions. The requirements also stipulate the presence and participation of certain governance and organisational features, such as WP leaders, Project Officers/Managers, thematic mission members, students, etc. Alliances must comply with these rules in order to be selected.

As a result, some alliances set their aim as the consolidation of a joint governance structure to facilitate the development of consensual joint policies and action plans (such as ARQUS), while others (such as FORTHEM) added another transformative agenda, wishing to overcome legal barriers that hamper cross-border cooperation, such as student and staff mobility and exchanges.

To adapt to the long-term sustainability of the evolving governance model while being equipped to overcome legal barriers, some alliances have established new legal entities or reported being in the process of establishing them to better anchor the collaboration structure. Una Europa, for instance, is an association registered under Belgian law, whose creation predated that of the current EUI project - 1Europe. This legal entity allows the consortium to hire staff members and channel funding through its legal structure, in addition to staff hired and seconded by the member institutions. However, this concerns very few staff members. It is entirely different from setting up large staffing schemes under which staff are hired jointly by the member institutions. That notion is currently at odds with the European universities' varying degrees

of staffing autonomy.[19] Establishing a legal entity in one of the member institutions' countries of operation is still a delicate task and requires full understanding of the corresponding legal obligations. In this context, there is now a discussion about a possible 'European statute' for transnational university alliances. This discussion goes beyond the issue of governance and involves questions about financing, accreditation, quality assurance and infrastructure management. In its Communication on achieving the European Education Area of September 2020[20], the European Commission announced that it would explore the need for and feasibility of such a statute, which has attracted the attention of some of those involved. It remains to be seen how such a statute would help address challenges that are primarily related to national frameworks and competences.

Overall, it is still an open question as to whether and how far the EUI will become a more long-term, sustainable form of collaboration and governance that captures the different rationales. This looks to be an important question to address in the evaluation of the pilot phase.

➤ Complexity vs. sustainability

The examples described in Chapter 3 provide an idea of the variety and complexity of governance models. Nevertheless, they share common features, not only due to the requirements set in the EUI calls, but also because they are inspired by existing institutional governance structures. Their significant diversity means that compromises must be agreed. Student or non-academic staff participation in governance bodies is an illustration of this issue, where EUA has shown that diverse cultures exist across Europe.[21] Whether the progressive experience of slightly different governance models will affect governance culture at the member institutions and feed into a transformation of institutional governance, as desired by the European Commission, remains to be seen.

In fact, models have also sometimes emulated integration/change programmes developed in the context of university mergers or concentration measures. While alliances do not seek full integration, the structures and processes used in such change management programmes can provide useful benchmarks. Both initiatives share common challenges, notably with regard to ensuring efficient implementation at all levels, achieving university community buy-in, and leadership commitment. Thematic working groups and cascading cluster structures reaching deep into the member institutions are an example of alliance approaches found in mergers.

Overall, these set-ups are complex and go beyond previous cooperation structures. Other types of partnership may also go as far as setting up common governance structures, but the goals are usually less complex, more focused and unrelated to major institutional transformation. This could make these structures particularly vulnerable to asymmetric disruptions, i.e. important changes affecting some members and requiring strategic adaptations. The 2020-21 pandemic has not had this effect as it concerned all players, though to different degrees, and occurred relatively early in the EUI project cycle, which generally mobilised resources to strengthen cross-institutional collaboration virtually. Nevertheless, the issue of complexity will also need to be considered in the context of sustainability.

19 Differing public and private labour law frameworks affect universities' ability to recruit, remunerate, dismiss and promote university staff. For example, a majority of senior staff held civil servant status at about half of the systems studied under the Autonomy Scorecard.

20 European Commission. "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on achieving the EEA by 2025", COM(2020) 625 final, Brussels 30/09/2020, available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0625&from=EN.

21 Bennetot Pruvot, E. and Estermann, T. (2018). *University Governance: Autonomy, Structures and Inclusiveness.* In: Curaj A., Deca L., Pricopie R. (eds) European Higher Education Area: The Impact of Past and Future Policies. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-77407-7_37.

➤ The role of leadership

As mentioned previously, and like other large change management processes in higher education[22], the senior leadership teams of the institutions involved, supported by their governing bodies, have often been a driving factor for establishing alliances. Institutional leadership also plays an important role for their further development. However, alliances must accommodate the diverse lengths of leadership cycles and the recurrent changes in membership in institutional governing bodies across the different systems. Executive leaders' terms of office typically range from four to six years[23], usually renewable once, but can only be specified as a range in the national regulation or left for universities to decide. A change in leadership teams and governing body membership can therefore lead to the identification of different institutional priorities. There is no embedded mechanism that ensures the permanence of the strategic relevance of the alliance, aside from, crucially, its continued capacity to deliver on the agreed objectives and ability to communicate on these achievements to incoming leaders. In this regard, it may be argued that the inclusion of senior staff in the alliance governance structure at Vice-Rector level and beyond, helps mitigate the impact of leadership changes. Indeed, most universities often recruit their executive leader from within the institution, although this is rarely a legal requirement.

➤ Resource allocation

The question of funding for these partnerships also plays an important role in the context of changes in leadership and governance. The different funding situations and frameworks and the related decisions that institutional decision makers need to take will have an impact on the alliances' future sustainability. This is particularly relevant as Europe has seen a growing divide between systems and countries that have sustained their higher education investments, and those that have currently failed to do so, or only partially caught up with post-2008 cuts.[24] Erasmus+ funding is a very important condition for sustaining the project at some participating institutions, while it is not so relevant for others.[25]

The uncertainty around access to funds and the amount of financial stimulus need to be given due attention when considering alliance sustainability. From an internal governance perspective, the allocation of resources to the alliance during the project lifetime and most importantly beyond, requires the sustained buy-in of the university community at each partner institution. (This is also true for hiring and seconding staff to the alliance activities.) Depending on the funding framework, universities may also have to consider medium term financial trade-offs, for instance with regard to the influx of EU students compared to higher fee-paying international students. Differences as to accountability channels, and more concretely the players involved in financial decision-making processes at each institution, may also be important here. The operation appears complex when the balance has to be found internally at six or more universities.

22 Bennetot Pruvot, E., Estermann, T. and Mason, P. (2015). *DEFINE Thematic Report: University Mergers in Europe. EUA Report.* Brussels, available at: https://eua.eu/resources/publications/363:define-thematic-report-university-mergers-in-europe.html.

23 Bennetot Pruvot, E. and Estermann, T. (2017). *University Autonomy in Europe III: The Scorecard 2017. EUA Report.* Brussels. p.16, available at: https://eua.eu/resources/publications/350:university-autonomy%C2%A0in-europe-iii-%C2%A0the-scorecard-2017.html.

24 Bennetot Pruvot, E., Estermann, T. and Kupriyanova, V. (2020). *EUA Public Funding Observatory Report 2019/20. EUA Report.* Brussels, available at: https://eua.eu/resources/publications/913:eua-public-funding-observatory-report-2019-20.html.

25 i.e. at present 21 member states co-fund the initiative (Vanessa Debiais-Sainton, Head of Higher Education Unit, European Commission, DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture at NTNU European Conference (18 Jan 2020)).

➤ Inclusiveness of governance models

The active involvement of all relevant actors and stakeholders in the alliance's governance model is an important factor in meeting the project objectives, and also to ensure the sustainability of its impact beyond the duration of the project itself. Getting all parties engaged, actively steering the project and contributing to the long-term objectives is an important challenge that needs to be considered to make the alliance sustainable and less vulnerable to change. As one interviewee put it, "the main purpose must remain the enhancement of quality, in a way that could not be achieved by the institutions individually". Another interviewee pointed to the need to "engage people who believe in the alliance vision, who work in silos and who communicate often not only vertically, but also horizontally in this intra-university setting". Quality at the heart of the project seems one important aspect to rally the academic community to the alliance concept. Their continued support is fundamental to alliance resilience and relevance, which pre-supposes nurturing a bottom-up approach over other dimensions that may seem more secondary to achieving higher quality.

➤ Strategy and motivation alignment

On the one hand, alliance objectives are to some extent contingent on the context of its member institutions. As envisaged in each alliance portfolio and mission statement, the combination of institutions is not incidental, but based on the understanding that those institutions share a similar profile or geographical specificities (post-industrial cities; sea and maritime areas, etc.), have common experience and expertise and are committed to a joint vision to address future challenges.

On the other hand, individual institutional priorities depend on each case, making it difficult to draw a common denominator. These priorities are enshrined in institutional autonomy and each university's long-term strategy. However, strategic positioning in higher education is evolving faster as external pressures increase. Universities' strategic foci may thus differ, from striving for academic excellence and international recognition, to enrolment and retention, internationalisation, diversity and inclusion, etc. Regional ecosystems also play an increasingly important role in the definition of institutional strategies.[26]

Diverse initial motivations can also affect the initiative's sustainability. Some institutions were interested in the opportunity to engage in cross-institutional collaboration in order to share common practices and acquire mutual benefits; while for others, the primary incentive was enhanced international recognition for future student cohorts. Once the project has been completed and its financing ends, participants may have different expectations and attitudes to an opportunity to carry on.

While participating institutions are expected to benefit from the EUI collaboration as it should help them to better address their own institutional challenges and achieve strategic goals, this is not yet strongly visible in institutional strategies or individual communication campaigns. EUI rarely features as a major tool in member institutions' plans for achieving institutional priorities, even when those plans were developed after the alliances were established. EUI's potential as a transformation catalyst is not a major item of institutional strategic communication. References to the project in institutional strategies do not match the scale of challenges and goals the alliances set.

26 Reichert, S. (2019). *The Role of Universities in Regional Innovation Ecosystems. EUA Study*. Brussels, available at: https://eua.eu/resources/publications/819:the-role-of-universities-in-regional-innovation-ecosystems.html.

5 Concluding remarks

The challenges described above show that EUI alliance governance and funding matter when it comes to implementing and sustainably achieving the alliance objectives. Each alliance relies on its governing bodies to steer the strategic agenda and live up to the initiative's ambitious expectations. It is important that alliances are aware of and continuously review the challenges described at governance level in order to achieve their specific objectives.

- **A close connection with institutional governing bodies** is needed to ensure a seamless governance process that endures major institutional changes without losing sight of the alliance objectives and goals. Institutional leadership drives alliance development and motivates steering, as envisaged by the NEWLEAD project. Different bodies are involved at university strategy level, depending on the system. They may exclusively comprise external members or be dominated by groups within the university. A better understanding of the governance processes within individual alliance members is important when it comes to considering the different speeds and complexities of institutional level decision-making processes. The diversity of governing body members is another important consideration. Including university Senate or Council members, as well as external advisors who provide quality assurance support and actively participate in strategic oversight and the decision-making process thanks to their expertise in different higher-education systems, could ensure better accountability and more sustainable relationships with all sectors of institutional governance.

- Alliances are already facing, and will encounter, **various legal and regulatory barriers** that need to be overcome in order to facilitate their transnational cooperation. Moreover, they will have to deal with different institutional governance set ups across systems, that are subject to regular reforms and discussions and account for different legal frameworks, regulations, funding and cultural contexts. It remains unclear whether the establishment of legal entities (under the national law of a country involved in the partnership or under a potential European statute) would help address this challenge. While EU level discussions (in the framework of the Bologna Process, the European Education and European Research Areas) may help identify the issues, will most probably need to be addressed at national level, as they concern national regulatory frameworks.

- To achieve the ambitious objectives of EUI, the alliances also need **sustainable funding**. At present, the funding earmarked for EUI is relatively small in comparison to what the initiative aspires to achieve. Discussions on the amount to be allocated to EUI under the new MFF (2021-2027) and the extent to which Horizon Europe can complement the initiative in the next programme period are currently underway.[27] Synergies with other national and European funding schemes are essential for financial sustainability, as well as contributions from the member institutions themselves. In the long run, the relevance of alliance participation will be contingent on sufficient funding. Future institutional leaders and decision-makers will face the question of alliance efficiency and financial sustainability. Although intensified and focused partnerships can also increase efficiency in achieving certain goals, they also require significant and sustained resource commitment, which will be scrutinised from a perspective of financial accountability. Some EUI players believe that the new framework may eventually become the main channel for EU university funding.

- At the time of writing, some alliances were still adapting their governance model to reflect those challenges and to accommodate the evolving needs and dynamics of inter-institutional collaboration. Having been inspired by existing institutional governance models, they are exploring innovative governance configurations and compositions and testing different models of cooperation. In combination with their different initiatives and goals, this has added structural complexity and detail diversity. It bears repeating that a top-down approach will only go as far as it is echoed in the institutional strategies. An emphasis on institutional transformation only partially squares with this bottom-up logic. As more policy goals are transported into the initiative, the core messages and narrative become blurred and less intelligible to the university community. Alliance governance models will not be externally imposed but developed as a natural expansion of the joint efforts towards intra-university collaboration. In addition, **improved alignment with institutions' strategic priorities** is essential to a clear articulation of how the alliance can support individual university goals.

- As with every large-scale transformation programme, attention needs to be paid to the **opportunity costs and existing alternatives**. As in merger processes, establishing deep, long-term collaboration structures requires significant resources and enduring commitment at all levels.[28] One interviewee referred to the scale and timeframe of the work to be carried out, as being "not for the faint-hearted". It is thus all the more important to tread carefully and consider the added value of the EUI scheme, while assessing its potential to disrupt other, existing cooperation undertaken by the university. Paradoxically, despite the advantages of the framework offered by the EUI, collaboration models that are not based on a project cycle may prove more attuned to the institutional strategy. A thorough examination including strategic aspects such as institutional positioning, finances, the existing collaboration ecosystem, etc., is thus needed.

The EUI is one of the latest examples of the wider evolutions and challenges in university governance. Intensified partnerships and closer collaboration should be examined through the lens of institutional governance, independently from the EUI. Engagement with a variety of partners and actors will play an important role in the future development of institutional governance. EUA will further explore these topics in a series of analytical papers.

27 It has also been suggested that the next call will take place in 2022 to ensure that there is no gap between the pilot phase and the next phase of the initiative and that the British member institutions will continue to benefit until the end of the pilot phase, but then alternative forms of funding will be sought (Vanessa Debiais-Sainton, Head of Higher Education Unit, European Commission, DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture at NTNU European Conference (18 Jan 2020)).

28 Bennetot Pruvot, E., Estermann, T. and Mason, P. (2015). *DEFINE Thematic Report: University Mergers in Europe. EUA Report*. Brussels, available at: https://eua.eu/resources/publications/363:define-thematic-report-university-mergers-in-europe.html.

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Vanessa Debiais-Sainton, (European Commission, DG EAC) at NTNU European Conference (18 Jan 2020)

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