

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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European Universities: Building the Future of Higher Education in the European Union Through University Alliances

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Research Domain: International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract:

The conference paper presents the design and emerging findings from an ongoing doctoral research project focusing on the European Universities Initiative (EUI). This study investigates the formation of forty-one university alliances by mapping their histories, objectives, and modes of operation. We explore how multi-characteristic governance structures enable and constrain the development of these collaborative partnerships, and how these transnational partnerships support the formation of a regional higher education space in the European Union. The conference paper includes some emerging findings from a thematic analysis of a corpus of published documents representing three levels of the EUI: European (EU institutions), transnational (the alliances), and local (higher education institutions). This is the first stage of the data collection and analysis which will subsequently expand to include elite semi-structured interviews and qualitative network analysis.

Paper:

This qualitative research project seeks to shed light on the policy making process of the European Commission's newest higher education programme, the European Universities Initiative (EUI). Two pilot phases have been launched, with an ambitious objective to create 'European Universities' and transform the higher education landscape in the European Union. These European Universities are transnational university alliances composed of three to ten higher education institutions found throughout the entire European Union and participating Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020 countries. Since 2019, forty-one university alliances have been selected involving 284 higher education institutions. These alliances are to serve as 'test-beds' for the full rollout of some twenty European Universities by 2024. If the idea of a European University is not new, the choice of creating them through transnational university alliances is novel. To explore the emergence of the European Universities three main angles have been selected: networks, governance, and regionalism.

This paper starts by mapping the previous partnerships and network processes that have led to the formation of these alliances. These past collaborations include joint degrees, mobility programmes, common membership in transnational interest groups, and participation in European territorial

cooperation programmes. This research addresses these different roots as pillars of the experimentations led by each EUI alliance and a way to grasp the diversity of these emerging networks. Examining this diversity is expected to reveal a multiplicity of objectives for each of these alliances alongside the common goal of building these European Universities. The analysis of these plural histories and objectives is a way to provide insight on the different modes of operation of these alliances, which are to develop innovative ways to overcome current challenges posed by deeper transnational cooperation between higher education institutions throughout the European Union.

The European Universities Initiative leads to the formation of new governance structures that operate on several levels, involve different actors, and address multiple issues. These new governance structures provide a framework that will shape the development of the EUI alliances. The governance of the European Universities Initiative is analysed to grasp how it operates on multiple levels: European, transnational, national, or local. These multiple levels harbour a variety of actors with a wide array of competences including European institutions, transnational interest groups, national governments, or higher education institutions. We investigate how university alliances respond to wide range of European issues by facilitating regional cooperation, creating synergies between education, research and innovation.

Finally, this study examines how these transnational partnerships support the formation of a regional higher education space in the European Union. The European Universities Initiative stems from the experiences of past regional higher education programmes as Erasmus, the Lisbon Strategy, and the Bologna Process and subsequent European Higher Education Area. We explore how past programmes relied on mobility and degree harmonization to incite wider cooperation between different national higher education systems whereas the European Universities Initiative's purpose is to strengthen institutional integration. The European Universities Initiative is the European Commission's flagship higher education programme towards the formation of a European Education Area (EEA). This paper investigates how, alongside being one of the pillars of this new regional space in the European Union, the EUI alliances are to foster synergies between higher education and research by serving as bridges between the newly formed European Education Area and a reformed European Research Area (ERA).

This project relies on multiple sources of original and secondary data. The conference paper includes emerging findings from both pilot phases of the project which involves a thematic analysis of a corpus of published documents representing three levels of the European Universities Initiative: European (European Union institutions), transnational (the alliances), and local (higher education institutions). At the European Level, the analysis includes relevant policy documents produced by European Institutions. At the transnational level, the documents range from consortium agreements to materials found on the websites of university alliances. At the higher education institution level, mission statements relating to the international strategy of the higher education institutions are analysed. This first stage of data collection and analysis will later be completed by elite semi-structured interviews and qualitative network analysis.

This inquiry is situated at the intersection of research on networks, multi-level governance, and comparative regionalism, and aims to contribute to the interdisciplinary scholarships in higher education and European studies.

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