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University alliances – the building of new persistent European institutions?

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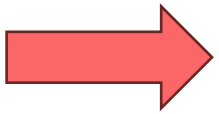
Globalization under transformation

Changes observed wrt higher education globalization (Lee & Stensaker, 2021):

- New geo-political context (security, global challenges, risks…)
- From bottom up to top down collaborative patterns
- Towards a more multi-polar world with new educational centers and hubs
- A more diverse discussion on the pros and cons of globalization
- Higher education increasingly coupled to and sub-ordinated other policy areas



Competition and collaboration at the same time….

A global trend of building university alliances

- Possible to identify different types of national and transnational alliances (Stensaker, 2018)
  - Branding mission (IARU)
  - Interest mission (SKY, LERU and the Guild, EUA, AAU, etc.)
  - Innovation/Academic mission (Coimbra, European university Initiative?)
- However, alliances tend to «drift» in their purpose over time irrespectable of original mission (Vukasovic & Stensaker, 2018)
  - Alliances are dynamic, not stable entities

What are possible explanations for the establishment of university alliances?

- Institutional theory:
  - Environmental adaptation
  - Why entering an alliance: Legitimacy
- Resource-dependency theory:
  - Organizations trying to take control over their environment
  - Why entering an alliance: Risk reduction, economic sustainability
- Organizational learning:
  - Maintain and develop organizational knowledge
  - Why entering an alliance: Knowledge exploration or exploitation

(March, 1991; Beerkens, 2004; Lavie & Rosenkopf, 2006)

What are possible factors holding an alliance together?

Alliances are meta-organizations (Ahrne & Brunsson 2008), and their functioning and sustainability can be analyzed through four factors (Maassen et al. 2022):

- Coordination – ability to make align work and exploit opportunities
- Conflict resolution – alliances are «weak» organizations, and are characterised by (slow) consensus-driven processes
- Commitment – by whom and what is the consistency over time?
- Cultural characteristics – similarities in organizational identity and characteristics may enable trust and create a foundation building long-term relationsships

What evidence exist on EUI progress?

According to the latest European Commission (PPMI-report):

- Exploitation:
  - Boost of visibility/legitimacy
  - Alliances as new policy actors – nationally and at European level
  - Alliances as risk-reduction (many institutions receives national funding)
- Exploration:
  - Experimentation on new educational formats and delivery – increasing flexibility
  - Attempts to address old challenges – recognition, QA across borders, European degree, administrative streamlining of institutional cooperation
  - Piloting collaboration with public and private actors (2200 associated partners involved in EU alliances)

What does the future look like (1)?

- Exploitation and exploration – an issue that is of importance both from an intra-alliance perspective and from an inter-alliance perspective, which may trigger a number of hypothesis (Lavie & Rosenkopf, 2006):
  - As universities face an increasingly diverse environment – membership of (selected) multiple alliances makes sense from the perspective of the individual university
  - As alliances may increasingly face competition from other alliances – broadening the scope and purpose of the individual alliance makes sense from an individual alliance perspective (cf. Vukasovic & Stensaker, 2018)

What does the future look like (2)?

- Exploitation and exploration – what are possible macro-foundations for finding a balance?
  - Membership profile – similar type of institutions might drive path-dependency (less innovation), and more exploitation (March 1991; Stensaker et al., 2023)
  - Regulative measures by public authorities might encourage both exploration and exploitation (Cf. EUI and the EU geographic criteria for alliance characteristics and membership)
  - How will national authorities repond to EUI? Higher education still a national responsibility, and what role will EUI play wrt. the national HE-system?

What does the future look like (3)?

- Exploitation and exploration – what are possible micro-foundations and internal challenges for member institutions
  - Alliances as arenas for experimentation while members continue with “business-as-usual” at home? Level of integration in the alliance?
  - How do universities handle multiple alliance memberships? What couplings, de-couplings, loose couplings will be established?
  - Alliances – protecting or limiting institutional autonomy? For example; More professional alliance secretariats may create tensions wrt the alliance and individual member priorities, Foreu4all network may open up for new power constellations

Towards institutionalization?

- Alliances provide a number of advantages – legitimacy, risk-reduction, opportunities, etc- - in times of high political and economic uncertainty
- Alliances are ineffective in the short run – more important over time (Ahrne & Brunsson 2008)
  - Finding a balance between exploitation and exploration is a key for the sustainable development of the individual alliance
  - However, finding this balance is not only a challenge at alliance level, it is first and foremost a challenge for the individual university

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