






## The European university alliances challenges and acceleration services solutions

Farnaz Haji Mohammadali , Jesus Alcober , Alba Roma Gomez , Juan Lopez-Rubio , Toni Oller Arcas 

Department of Network Engineering, Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, Spain.

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### Abstract

*University alliances promote collaboration and address complex challenges in higher education. However, these alliances face several obstacles that must be understood and addressed to maximize their effectiveness. This paper aims to explore existing research on the challenges encountered in university alliances. The review identifies key themes and provides insights into strategies that can help overcome these challenges. By understanding the challenges and potential solutions, universities and policymakers can enhance the effectiveness of alliances and foster fruitful collaborations. As a result, we discuss how all these challenges have an effect on the sustainability of their partnerships and how projects such as aUPaEU can overcome some of these challenges.*

**Keywords:** Education, University Alliance, Challenges, Acceleration services, Digital transformation, partnership

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## 1. Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic has proved the significance of higher education's contributions to individuals and society (Teixeira & Klemencic, 2021). University alliances have gained advantage as key drivers of research, education, and innovation (Fedák et al., 2022). While these alliances offer numerous benefits, they also encounter challenges that can hinder their progress. The European University Association highlights the achievements facilitated by university alliances, including knowledge transfer, intercultural skill development, and enhanced innovation (Estermann et al., 2021). University alliances represent the integration of universities with shared objectives and goals, allowing them to share resources, foster innovation, and improve research outcomes (Deiaco & Melin, 2006). The European Higher Education Strategy aims to support the sectors potential as a catalyst for skills and knowledge development as well as a driver for addressing societal challenges through innovation (Maassen et al., 2023). Presently, there are 65 European universities, comprising approximately 570 higher education

institutions located around European countries<sup>1</sup>. University alliances promote mobility by addressing challenges related to student access to study and training opportunities while also providing support services for teachers, researchers, and administrative staff<sup>2</sup>. The Commission Communication on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025 emphasises that learning mobility and cooperation enhance the quality of education and training institutions<sup>3</sup>. However, some educators and learners still face challenges due to insufficient information and guidance regarding learning mobility, difficulty in language learning, and issues of accessibility. These partnerships have fostered a competitive environment for universities operating within Europe (Tranmer & Silva, 2016). The aim of this literature review is to analyse the current research regarding the challenges that university alliances face and propose strategies to overcome them. The aUPaEu project has provided potential solutions for these challenges, specifically focusing on partnerships in European higher education. The study will primarily focus on the five most significant challenges encountered by university alliances in Europe while acknowledging the possibility of additional challenges. The University Partnership for Acceleration of European Universities (aUPaEU)<sup>4</sup> is a collaborative project between five university in Europe and two European university alliances, Unite!<sup>5</sup> and EPiCUR<sup>6</sup>. It aims to integrate and implement acceleration services in the context of a coordinated support system for HEIs, networks, university alliances, and their umbrella organisations. The ultimate purpose is to develop methodologies, sustainability plans, coaching services, and tangible digital technologies to accelerate the process. The aUPaEU project implement these strategies through different Agora platforms that created for different University alliance and match with their nature of alliances and try to address challenges within university alliances. One of successful sample of Agora is Unite! Agora<sup>7</sup> which is digital platform designed for the Unite! European University Alliance, which connects nine partner institutions across Europe. The platform facilitates collaboration in research, innovation, and education by providing tools and services for students, researchers, and staff. It serves as a central hub for finding research infrastructures and shared facilities, providing acceleration services for research and innovation, and hosting knowledge-sharing.

## **2. Methodology**

The methodology of study composed of the analysis of a range of sources, including reports, repositories, articles and books, as well as conference papers. A process was undertaken,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/european-universities-initiative> (last seen 29 January 2025)

<sup>2</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52020DC0625> (last seen 29 January 2025)

<sup>3</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_1743](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1743) (last seen 29 January 2025)

<sup>4</sup> <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101095314/reporting> (last seen 29 January 2025)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.unite-university.eu/> (last seen 29 January 2025)

<sup>6</sup> <https://epicur.edu.eu/> (last seen 29 January 2025)

<sup>7</sup> <https://agora.unite-university.eu/>

involving an initial survey of approximately 150 articles and books, from which a refined selection of almost 50 journal articles and conference papers was made. The keywords, such as "university alliances," "higher education collaborations," and "challenges," selected. The study's findings encompassed an evaluation of the challenges faced by university alliances and highlighted how the aUPaEU project aims to address these challenges.

### **3. Key Challenges**

The aUPaEU project has identified some challenges faced by university alliances and is actively searching for solutions to address them. By providing acceleration services, the project aims to address these challenges and ensure the sustainability and long-term impact of the alliances. Below is a list of the five challenges identified:

#### **3.1. Communication Barriers**

The Communication can be a real challenge in university alliances, especially since they bring together people from different countries, each with their own languages and cultures (Faiman & Tariman, 2019). This diversity can make it hard for everyone to understand each other, leading to misunderstandings and strained relationships. Finding solutions to make communication smoother is crucial for the success of these alliances (Yusof & Rahmat, 2020). One of the main obstacles is the language barrier, and communication styles (Faiman & Tariman, 2019). These factors can all get in the way of information flowing freely between member institutions, causing misunderstandings and delays. Overcoming these challenges is essential for fostering more effective collaboration within university alliances (Yang et al., 2021). Previous research has highlighted issues such as making judgments, dealing with distance, and maintaining ethical standards in online interactions (Isman & Altinay, 2005).

#### **3.2. Resource Sharing**

In university alliances, resource allocation means deciding how to share resources like funding and people among the member universities (Zhao et al., 2021). Each university might give some funding to the alliance, and then that funding can be used for different things like doing research together, building new things, or running joint programs. The universities in an alliance have lots of different experts and teachers with different skills. Allocating resources might mean deciding which teacher works on which project based on what they're good at. Administrative resources, like people who help manage the alliance and make sure everything is running smoothly, also need to be shared fairly. Resource allocation is super important for university alliances because it makes sure that each university gives something to the alliance and gets something back (Yu & Li, 2021). It needs careful planning and making sure everyone gets a fair

share so that the alliance can do its best work and all the universities can work together successfully (Martins et al., 2021).

### **3.3. Student Mobility**

Student mobility challenges in university alliances can cause various problems when students move between different member institutions. These challenges affect both local and international students. Research has shown that students face significant obstacles such as worries about finding a job after graduation, issues with social class divisions, problems with transferring credits between universities, and difficulties with language and culture (López-Duarte et al., 2021). Expenses for studying, traveling, and the big differences in income between European countries are the main barriers for students who want to move (Wulz & Rainer, 2015).

Another big problem is the lack of information and support services for students who are moving. This can make them feel lost and frustrated (Breznik & Skrbinjek, 2020). They might struggle to understand how things work, find the right courses, or get help with their studies. Dealing with complicated paperwork, like enrolling in classes or getting the right permits, can also be stressful and take up a lot of time for mobile students (d'Hombres & Schnepf, 2021).

### **3.4. Coaching services**

Coaching services play an important role in European university alliances, supporting students, researchers, and staff in developing skills, and fostering collaboration across institutions (Hawkins, 2008). Coaching services in European university alliances face several challenges, including a lack of a unified framework, limited awareness, cross-cultural barriers, and resource constraints<sup>8</sup>. Different coaching approaches across universities create inconsistencies, making support uneven. Tracking long-term impact is also difficult without proper monitoring.

### **3.5. Alignment with External Stakeholders**

In university alliances, it's important to keep communication channels open and transparent with people outside the alliance who are involved or interested (Volk & Zerfass, 2020). This means regularly telling them about what the alliance is doing, sharing important information, and asking for their thoughts and feedback. It's also a good idea to involve them in making decisions. This could mean having them on committees, working groups, or advisory boards so their ideas are part of what the alliance does (Chan, 2021). Figuring out who these stakeholders are, how important they are, and what they care about can help manage things better.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/policies/policy-areas/enterprise/database-self-and-co-regulation-initiatives/150> (last seen 29 January 2025)

## **4. Strategies to Address Challenges**

In this section, we will refer to the challenges discussed earlier by reviewing relevant research findings. The aUPaEU project will carefully analyse existing challenges and identify gaps in the current literature. Subsequently, the project will propose effective strategies to address these challenges.

### **4.1. Improved Communication and Collaboration**

By providing acceleration services, the project aims to solve these challenges and ensure the sustainability and long-term impact of the alliances. Additionally, the Unite! platform offers translation for pages in 9 languages, making it more accessible, and provides services, allowing users to learn different languages from one another (Alcober & Haji Mohammadali, 2023).

### **4.2. Facilitating Resource Sharing**

Unite! Agora promotes equitable resource sharing by providing a Research Infrastructure Catalogue, ensuring that researchers across partner institutions can discover, request, and utilise shared facilities and services efficiently. The platform's integrated CRM tracks resource requests and interactions to optimise resource distribution (Haji Mohammadali et al., 2025).

### **4.3. Enhanced Student Mobility**

Unite! Agora enhances student mobility by providing a centralised platform where students can easily access exchange programmes, joint courses, and mobility opportunities across the nine partner universities. Additionally, its knowledge-sharing and event features support virtual mobility, enabling students to participate in international collaborations, training sessions, and networking events. By improving accessibility, transparency, and coordination, Agora fosters a more inclusive and seamless mobility experience within the European university alliance (Haji Mohammadali et al., 2025).

### **4.4. Improve coaching services**

Unite! Agora improves coaching services by providing a structured digital environment where students, researchers, and staff can connect with experienced mentors and advisors across partner universities. Additionally, Agora integrates virtual coaching sessions, webinars, and resource-sharing tools, making expert guidance more accessible and fostering professional growth within the European university alliance (Haji Mohammadali et al., 2025).

### **4.5. Enhanced External Stakeholder Alignment**

Unite! Agora improves external stakeholder alignment by providing a platform for universities, industry partners, and research institutions to collaborate and share knowledge. The platform's

CRM tracks interactions, ensuring everyone is aligned with project goals. Agora also offers events and resources to keep external stakeholders engaged and contribute to research and innovation efforts.

## 5. Discussion and result

From May 2024 to January 2025, the Unite! Agora platform has seen notable success, particularly in retaining users. With 5,213 returning visits, the platform has demonstrated strong user retention, as evidenced by an average visit duration of 8 minutes 56 seconds and 5.4 actions per visit.

Returning Visits Over Time



Figure 1. Unite! Agora user engagement :Matomo analytic (2025)

New visitors, totalling 4,696 visits, have shown engagement, with an average visit duration of 2 minutes 41 seconds .

Frequency Overview



Figure 2. Unite! Agora Frequency overview :Matomo analytic (2025)

These results highlight that Unite! Agora has been successful in fostering engagement among returning visitors from May 2024 to January 2025, while offering opportunities to improve the experience for new users.

## 6. Conclusion

Fortunately, the aUPaEU project has successfully introduced a range of solutions aimed at overcoming the challenges identified in order to promote sustainability. The aUPaEU project has implemented strategies such as coaching services, collaboration and knowledge exchange,

sustainability plans for funding and governance, and the utilisation of tangible digital technologies. Currently the project implementing these innovative strategies, that aims to foster successful institutional reform and transformation, ultimately contributing to the long-term viability and impact of university alliances.

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