The European Universities Initiative:
Unpacking Decision-Making in Higher Education Alliances

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Abstract

The European Universities Initiative (EUI) is a relatively new scheme of higher education collaboration and is set out to create multilateral alliances between higher education institutions across Europe, working towards strengthening quality and competitiveness in higher education and ultimately becoming `the universities of the future´. The pilot call in 2019 resulted in the establishment of 17 alliances, and the second call in 2020 resulted in 24 new alliances. Altogether there are now 41 higher education alliances including universities from both the European Union member states and partner countries. Although international strategic alliances in the field of higher education and research collaboration have become a new empirical fact (Thomas, 2014), there still is a gap in understanding how these bodies are being organised and governed. This study seeks to address this lacuna by investigating how decision-making processes take place in two EUI alliances – Circle U. and FORTHEM. The study is qualitative in character, focusing on semi-structured interviews with key actors from the alliances and review of relevant literature and policy documents. Conceptually the study builds on decision theory, whereby four decision-making models have been chosen and outlined; the rational actor model, the collegial model, the political model and the garbage can model.

The study investigates two main stages in the alliances – the initiation stage and the consolidation stage. Key findings from the initiation stage reveal that both Circle U. and FORTHEM were formed based on existing connections between the participating universities, however they also revealed that Circle U. was more strategically selective than FORTHEM at this stage. In the consolidation stage, the findings reveal Circle U. and FORTHEM as having formalised and hierarchical structures, although decision-making power have been delegated downwards to the lower levels. It is also shown that much of the structure and goals had already been chosen ex-ante by the Commission. Regarding decision-making the findings demonstrate that decisions are made by consensus in both alliances, and that resource dependency, soft power, trust and tensions underpin these decision-making processes.

Keywords: alliances, collaboration, European Universities Initiative, internationalisation, Circle U., FORTHEM, decision-making, decision theory

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1. Introduction

1.1. Context

1.1.1. European Integration in Higher Education

Higher education has for a long time been on the political agenda and processes of coordination and cooperation represent the efforts in advancing European integration in higher education systems. Corbett (2005) argues that these efforts can be traced back as early as the start of the European Community (EC) and display the developments throughout the decades up to the 1980s. Corbett (2005) states that it started with a proposal by one of the representatives from the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) governments to create a European university. The idea was however not realised, and the instigation from the European Community (EC) lost its momentum. From then and up to the late 1960s, "the issue of higher education moved from its position as a potential policy area for Community structured cooperation (...) to an issue in which the European executives were instructed not to intervene'' (Corbett, 2005, p. 49). The 1970s marked a new period for the EC and higher education as they formulated a policy vision and supported the creation of higher education institutions and arrangements, such as the European University Institute in Florence (Corbett, 2005). The university did not, however, comply with the idea of a supranational university which the politicians had imagined.

The 1990s mark the beginning of two processes that notably have accelerated the European integration and internationalisation of higher education in Europe: *The Bologna Process*, with the aim to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA), and *the Lisbon Strategy*, which aims to use the European higher education systems as a means for Europe to become the most competitive knowledge-based economy (Enders and Westerheijden, 2011). In 1998 the ministers of education from France, Germany, the UK, and Italy drafted the Sorbonne Declaration, signalling a need for intergovernmental coordination of European higher education systems. A year later in Bologna, 25 more European countries joined this declaration with the main objective of developing a European Higher Education Area (EHEA). They agreed to pursue this mission which resulted in a social structure consisting of a Secretariat and a follow-up group. At this early stage, Bologna was only consisting of member states and formally excluded any form of supranational steering.

Concurrently, the EU was increasingly concerned with how to make Europe more competitive compared to countries such as the USA, Japan, China and other growing economies. During the last decades in the twentieth century, ideas and concepts such as the 'knowledge society' and 'knowledge economy' found their way into and influenced EU higher education policy (Välimaa, 2011). In 2000 the EU Heads of States and Governments met to discuss this concern, which resulted in a strategy, known as the Lisbon Strategy, to become the most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world. They emphasised the role of higher education institutions and their contribution to the knowledge economy (Enders and Westerheijden, 2011). The European Commission (EC) also quickly realised that "Bologna was not only in line with some previous European policies for higher education, but was going in promising future directions for EU policies" (Enders and Westerheijden, 2011, pp. 472-473). Even though the EC was kept out of the Bologna Process at first, they became an official member in 2001. With the EC becoming a member, it allowed for elements of vertical integration which in turn gave the process further momentum (Enders and Westerheijden, 2011, p. 473). More countries joined, and as of now there are 49 countries taking part in the Bologna process, reaching far beyond the EU member states.

These parallel processes of horizontal integration through the Bologna process and vertical integration through the Lisbon Strategy show that there is a strong belief among the governments in Europe that a greater unity will provide a greater strength (Corbett, 2005). The Bologna process and its objective of creating a EHEA is considered by many researchers to be a success (Enders and Westerheijden, 2011; Välimaa, 2011; Bergan and Deca, 2018). Among the reasons for this perception is the fact Bologna now includes participation from 49 countries and has led to a convergence towards a standard study model of a bachelor and master structure. The Bologna process is also argued to have intensified and generated more cooperation and networking between European higher education institutions (Välimaa, 2011), thus paving the way initiatives such as the EUI.

1.1.2. The Making of the European Universities Initiative

As already mentioned above, the first efforts to establish a European university can be traced back to the start of the EU, although it remained unfulfilled. In 2017, the idea resurfaced in a speech delivered by the French President Emmanuel Macron entitled 'New Initiative for Europe':

I believe 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 (Macron, 2017).

The speech initiated great interest and proved to be "an influential driver of change" (Gunn, 2020, p. 16). Only a couple of months later, the European Commission presented a report for the EU leaders at the Gothenburg summit with recommendations to "work towards truly European Universities, which are enabled to network and cooperate seamlessly across borders and compete internationally..." (European Commission, 2017, p. 5). The conclusions of the Gothenburg summit endorsed Macron's idea and the Commission's recommendation, and called on the Council, the Member States, and the Commission to take further action in

strengthening strategic partnerships across the EU between higher education institutions and encouraging the emergence by 2024 of some twenty 'European Universities', consisting in bottom-up networks of universities across the EU which will enable students to obtain a degree by combining studies in several EU countries and contribute to the international competitiveness of European universities (European Council, 2017, p. 3).

Having established political congruence of this vision, the work of realising the networks of universities could begin. First, existing partnerships and networks were mapped out. Second, the Commission in close cooperation with Member States set up an expert group to work on and establish key objectives for the initiative, as well as selection criteria for a pilot phase (European Council, 2018). Two main objectives were selected for the initiative: 1) To promote European values and strengthening European identity, and 2) To further develop quality, attractiveness, competitiveness, and performance in higher education institutions, and contribute to the knowledge economy, employment, culture and welfare (European Commission, 2018, p. 125). These were outlined in more detail as expectations to the alliances, which included implementation of a shared long-term strategy, an inter-university campus where students and staff can meet physically or virtually, and European knowledge-creating teams (European Commission, 2018, p. 125-126).

Furthermore, the Commission outlined eligibility criteria for the proposals. The main criteria included one university being the coordinator of the alliance and having full legal and financial responsibility, and that there would be at least three participating universities in each alliance. In addition, there were criteria set around the relevance of the proposals and the aims and ambitions of the alliances, geographical balance between the participating universities and a consistency between ambitions and implementation of planned activities (European Commission, 2018).

The pilot call was launched under Erasmus+ in 2018 with a budget of €85 million, each alliance to receive €5 million each over three years. The call attracted applications from 54 alliances from which 17 were selected (European Commission, 2019). The second call resulted in 24 additional alliances in 2020, and an increase in the budget of up to €287 million, each alliance to receive the original €5 million and €2 million from the Horizon 2020 programme (European Commission, 2020). 41 'European Universities' alliances are now established after the two Erasmus+ calls, covering 5% of all higher education institutions in Europe (European Council, 2021).

1.2. Problem Statement

Universities in Europe are in a period displaying experimentation and innovation, encouraged by internationalisation and globalisation forces (De Wit and Deca, 2020; Tierney, 2020). The EUI is a new initiative within this transformational context, making it a highly relevant and potent topic for empirical studies. The need for empirical studies regarding this initiative has already been put forth by for example De Wit and Deca (2020, p. 7) who state that "the impact of high profile new projects needs to be assessed, such as the European Universities Initiative, since they might redefine internationalization as we now know it".

This study is set in an organisational theory perspective, investigating the governance and decision-making processes in two EUI alliances - Circle U. and FORTHEM. Regarding collaborative arrangements in higher education several researchers (e.g., Beerkens and Derwende, 2007; Eckel and Hartley, 2008; Thomas, 2014) have studied aspects related to their success, yet little research has been conducted regarding structural and organisational elements. The aim of this study is to gain a better understanding of the inner workings of the two alliances, which can then be used in future research on higher education collaboration.

1.3. Research Questions

The main research question that will be investigated is:

How can the governance and the decision-making processes in two European Universities Alliances - Circle U. and FORTHEM - be understood and explained?

To narrow the research focus, the following sub questions have been included:

- How are the alliances organised and governed?
- How have the goals been decided upon, and how do they influence decision-making?
- How is the degree of tension and trust between the participating universities?
- How are collaborative agreements, strategic visions and decisions made and how are these communicated throughout the alliances?

1.4 Disposition

The thesis consists of seven chapter. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the study, including context and the making of the EUI, problem statement, research questions and thesis outline. Chapter 2 is a literature review which presents relevant literature on globalisation and higher education collaboration and examines studies on management of collaborative arrangements between higher education institutions. Chapter 3 contains the theoretical framework, where higher education alliances are set in an organisational context and four decision-making models are presented: The rational actor model, the collegial model, the political model and the garbage can model. Chapter 4 covers the methodology of this study with a description of choice of research design, method, the research process, ethical considerations and research assessment. Chapter 5 presents the results of the collaborative dynamics through semi-structured interview analysis. Chapter 6 is where the results are discussed in light of the decision-making models. Finally, chapter 7 contains a short summary of the study, along with key findings and research avenues ahead.

2. Literature Review

In this chapter, relevant literature in the field of international higher education collaboration is presented. The literature review will examine aspects related to the international collaboration processes, namely globalisation and collaboration in higher education, and studies on international higher education collaboration.

2.1. Globalisation and Collaboration in Higher Education

Over the years, the world has been subjected to massive forces that have shaped the realities of today. Within the higher education field, several researchers aim to make sense of these forces by providing conceptual understandings and definitions (Altbach, 2001; Knight, 2004; Altbach and Knight, 2007; Altbach, 2013). Lee and Stensaker (2021, p. 158) provide a recent understanding of globalisation, stating that it is the process of relationships between local, national and supra-national actors becoming more interdependent and interconnected. It is a shared understanding amongst these authors that globalisation has facilitated more interaction between HEIs and has created a great impetus for internationalisation activities. De Wit and Deca (2020) claim that internationalisation has gone from being a marginal aspect to a key strategic reform agenda in higher education. In 2020, the European University Association (EUA) published a report after having conducted a survey among HEIs in Europe to map their international engagement. The results reveal that 43% of the universities have a specific internationalisation strategy, while 53% reported internationalisation to be part of their general strategy (EUA, 2020).

As internationalisation has become of strategic importance, one can identify an increase of publications and research covering various internationalisation activities. One of these internationalisation activities is student mobility, which de Wit (2010) and de Wit, Ferencz, & Rumbley (2013) amongst others, observe has received much attention the last decades. De Wit et al. (2013) posit through OECD data from 2011 that the number of students going abroad has increased significantly going from 250,000 students in 1965 to an estimated 3.7 million in 2011. The OECD report from 2021 named "Education at a Glance" (2021, p. 215) shows that the number of international higher education students has continued to expand, reaching 6.1 million in 2019.

Another aspect of internationalisation that has become prominent is the spread of global university rankings (Knight, 2009; Kehm and Stensaker, 2009). HEIs have increasingly adopted the use of rankings aimed at measuring performance, which Altbach (2013) argues can be useful to some extent, however many excellent HEIs do not appear in the rankings simply because they do not fit into the criteria, leading specialised universities and universities in some developing countries to be left out. Tierney (2020, p. 19) argues that one of the risks of striving for these rankings is that universities adhere to the same activities, which in turn can lead to imitation or mimetic isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). However, he proposes instead that the universities are more likely to establish global links to each other, enabling innovative relationships.

Although student mobility and university rankings have received much attention in recent years, Tierney (2020, p. 16) further outlines an expansion of internationalisation towards program and provider mobility, joint degrees programmes, and whole institutions moving overseas. As a result of but also to further these developments, universities are encouraged to form links with each other to attract and attain students, thus leading collaboration between HEIs to become an integral part of the internationalisation strategy of universities (Chan, 2004). In addition, Eckel and Hartley (2008) highlight that universities globally are expected to contribute to solving societal challenges and meet society's needs, yet they often do not have the resources to do this alone. Collaboration is increasingly viewed by the governments and policy makers as the future for creating new capacities and meeting these expectations (de Wit, 2002; Amey, Eddy and Ozaki, 2007; Thomas, 2014).

Gunn (2020) highlights that collaborations between HEIs are a longstanding feature, and lists early examples such as The Universities Bureau of the British Empire founded in 1913, and the International Association of Universities (IAU) founded in 1950. Along with actors becoming more interconnected and interdependent, there has in recent years been an increase and an intensification of international collaborative arrangements and initiatives involving HEIs (Chan, 2004; Beerkens, 2015; Thomas, 2014; Tierney, 2020). Collaboration initiatives can take various forms such as international alliances, dual degrees, joint ventures, partnerships, consortia or networks. They vary in structure, size, and function, and they can have different aims. However, they all share a desire to achieve something that would not be possible for HEIs to achieve alone (Tadaki and Tremewan, 2013). The EUI represents a new international scheme within this context of collaboration (Gunn, 2020).

2.2. Studies on Higher Education Collaboration

Along with the increase of higher education collaborations and alliances, there has been a growing of scholarly interest in the topic (Lee and Stensaker, 2021). A search on Google Scholar (April 14, 2022) containing the search words "higher education + collaboration" revealed 3 830 000 results. Most publications are descriptive in nature covering various aspects of collaborative arrangements in higher education. De Wit (2001) and Beerkens (2002) for example provide a description of higher education collaboration types with the aim of creating a typology. De Wit (2001) distinguishes between three types of collaboration: Associations, academic consortia and institutional networks. Beerkens (2002) adds to this typology by differentiating the collaborative arrangements by size, scope, composition and intensity. These researchers also touch upon the motivations and rationales for collaborating. However, Chan (2004) and Eddy (2010) explore this more in depth. Chan (2004) highlights the competitive environment of universities and argues that universities have increasingly been forming strategic alliances to enhance their own position and to be able to provide better services to students. This shows how universities "co-opt" in that they make competitors their allies. Eddy (2010) supports this argument and further emphasises that HEIs also partner up with each other to gain access to more resources, which relates to the theory of resource dependence, aligned with arguments by resource dependency theorists (e.g., Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978; Tolbert, 1985; Powell and Rey, 2015). Eddy (2010) also highlights a different perspective regarding motivation, which is based in HEIs having shared goals and wanting to pursue collective interests such as students' success or making an impact on societal challenges.

While De Wit (2001), Beerkens (2002), Chan (2004) and Eddy (2010) all provide clarity on the collaboration types and motivations, other researchers have explored and identified various functions and features critical for the success of higher education alliances. Beerkens and Derwende (2007), for example, argue that university partners need to be different yet similar and highlight that alliances' performance is dependent on their compatibility and their complementarity. Compatibility entails the similarities and the institutional fit which enables projects and activities to be implemented, and complementarity refers to the differences between the university partners complementing each other and thus enhancing the performance (Beerkens and Derwende, 2007). The higher compatibility and complementarity, the greater the chance of success. These components relate to the properties of the

universities. Other researchers have focused on the relational and procedural aspects of collaboration. For example, Thomas (2014) examined a consortia of business schools in a European country and identified other success factors such as making time to clarify issues and decisions, brand identification, navigating and adapting to the environment, success measurement and having one or two leaders bringing the alliance together and giving it momentum. Eckel and Hartley (2008) explored the coordination and governance of joint ventures in North American HE and found that success is dependent on forging relationships and a sense of shared identity. Similarly, Tadaki and Tremewan (2013) argue that university partners need to establish other meanings of collaboration than only the access to funding and other tangible and intangible resources to succeed in the long run.

The studies mentioned above highlight various components – internal mechanisms and success factors for higher education collaboration, and help to understand and analyse alliance governance and performance according to their functions and features. These have provided important insights for this research project. The literature search was not exhaustive, and other aspects like mergers could have been included but were of less relevance to the questions posed in this study. The literature search reveals a research gap regarding the micro processes of collaborations in higher education, more specifically how decisions are made and how they are influenced. A growing number of international higher education initiatives and alliances calls for further research on how these can be understood and successfully managed, which is the starting point of this research project.

3. Theoretical Framework

This chapter presents the theoretical framework and literature for the project. The alliances will firstly be set in an organisational context, and then literature on decision theory will be presented. The last section presents concluding remarks and propositions of how the theories will be applied in the analysis.

3.1 University Alliances as Meta-Organisations

University alliances can in many ways be understood as meta-organisations (Vukasovic & Stensaker, 2017). Meta-organisations are organisations consisting not of individuals, but of organisations as members. Ahrne and Brunsson (2005, p. 433) argue that one explanation as

to why organisations form or enter meta-organisations is that they share the same purpose and interests, and value the outcomes the meta-organisation produces. Organisations can also wish to influence external factors; by pooling resources meta-organisations can achieve more than a single organisation can, and they can protect the participating organisations from external threats. A third explanation for why organisations form or enter meta-organisations has to do with the social status attached to them. Organisations then decide to join meta-organisations considered to have a high social status in order to achieve similar status for themselves (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005, p. 434). Based on these explanations, Vukasovic and Stensaker (2017, p. 350) place higher education alliances on a continuum and argue that "on the one side, there are alliances which build their legitimacy on representativeness (with broad and open membership) and, on the other side, alliances which build their legitimacy on special characteristics (excellence, geographical location, etc.), thus being more selective with regard to potential membership". Ahrne and Brunsson (2005) state that although the organisations share common features, they usually also exhibit many differences, for instance regarding size, structure and competencies. These differences may lead to conflicts and competition between the members as to who does what and who is in charge. Standard ways of conflict resolution are often considered to be persuasion (changing the preferences and/or interests of some of the organisations), bargaining (compromise without changing preferences), voting and consensus. These conditions affect the way decisions are made and how meta-organisations are governed (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2005). In this project, Circle U. and FORTHEM will be analysed as meta-organisations, whereby decision theory will form the analytical framework in order to understand the governance and the decision processes that take place in these alliances.

3.2 Decision Theory

Literature on organisational decision-making includes many theories and perspectives which are often "divided" into two different branches: Instrumental theories and institutional theories. Instrumental theories are based on rationality and assume that the decision maker is mainly focused on affecting outcomes (March, 1991), while institutional theories highlight the cultural and structural processes that influence decision-making (Selznick, 1957). Although the analysis is based on organisational decision theory, literature on higher education institutions is also important to understand the decision processes in the higher education alliances. The different decision theories have been accumulated into different models where

each model leads to a different analysis of how organisations make decisions (e.g., Allison and Zelikow, 1999; Christensen, Lærgreid, Roness & Røvik, 2007; Baldridge, 1971). Four decision models have been chosen and outlined. These are *the rational actor model, the collegial model, the political model, and the garbage can model*. These models are common analytical frameworks in research on public sector organisations, thus offering a way of analysing the inner workings of higher education alliances as meta-organisations.

3.2.1 The Rational Actor Model

The rational actor model assumes that organisations are characterised by two features: (1) They display a highly formalised governance structure where the roles and positions are explicitly formulated, and (2) their activities and interactions are coordinated to achieve specific and clearly defined goals (Scott & Davis, 2007). Decision-making is assumed to follow a rational mindset which March (1991) illustrates through four key dimensions: Goals (or a consistent preference ordering), alternatives, consequences, and a decision rule. Goals refer to the organisation's members' consistent interests and values which are translated into a utility function. When the members are faced with a decision-making problem, the utility function ranks the possible consequences of the alternatives based on the members' values and objectives (Allison & Zelikow, 1999, p. 18). Alternatives represent the decision possibilities the members must choose from. Consequences are the outcomes attached to the given alternatives, while the decision rule determines the means by which actors select a given alternative whose consequences is thought to have the largest pay-off. In short, the traditional rational model assumes that the members of the organisation are able to review all alternatives, assess all consequences attached to them and thus make a calculated and value-maximising choice (Allison & Zelikow, 1999, p. 20). However, this ideal model of perfect rationality is considered by many theorists as inadequate when explaining decision processes, not least within public organisations laden with multiple cultures, conflicting goals and preferences, and inconsistent or conflicting stakeholder expectations or demands. Simon (1955) introduced the term "bounded rationality", highlighting that organisations are constrained by limited information, including how accurate it is, and limited alternatives. When decision makers have limited information, which is always the case not least within dynamic environments, this can create uncertainty, making it difficult to make a "perfect" rational decision (Simon, 1955).

Following the rational actor model, universities can be understood as rational, strategic organisations. According to Bleiklie, Michelsen, Krücken and Frølich (2017), the rational model leads to the assumption that the governance structure in universities is centralised and hierarchical, where decisions are made at the top level and directed downwards. Universities are unified actors, where the members have shared and clearly defined goals. Several theorists have pointed out that European universities have in the last decades been subjected to reforms and measures, signalling a push to become more market oriented (Bleiklie & Kogan, 2007; Frølich, Stensaker, Scordato & Bótas, 2014). As a response to this development, universities have increasingly adopted practices and measures similar to public administration, reflecting more of a rational management approach (Frølich et al., 2014, p. 80). Based on the elements presented above, a first proposition (to be tested empirically) reads as follows:

- *Proposition 1: Higher education alliances are understood as rational, unified meta-organisations where decision-making occurs in a linear fashion and reflects costs and benefits analysis based on clearly defined and shared strategic goals and interests.*

3.2.2 The Collegial Model

The collegial model is in line with the cultural perspective, which highlights that organisations have certain cultural traits, values and traditions which create a shared identity for the organisation's members (Selznick, 1957). Collegial organisations are often described as egalitarian consensus-based systems where the members are considered as equals, and where a formal hierarchy is considered unnecessary (Birnbaum, 1988). Through informal social interactions, members form a shared understanding of objectives, and rules and norms of appropriate behaviour are created which act as steering mechanisms (March and Olsen, 2011). Members of the organisations are assigned positions and roles which, like rules, prescribe appropriate behaviour (Scott, 2014). Attached to these roles are expectations of behaviour and duties, upheld by other members in the organisation. In the collegial model decision-making is consensus-based, meaning that the members try, through consultation and discussions, to reach a joint decision that satisfies most or all (Birnbaum, 1988, p. 86). All the members do not have to agree, but everyone gets to express their opinion and there is a will implied to try to come to a shared agreement. The focus is on the process (of joint deliberation and compromise), more than the outcome, as is the case in the rational actor model.

According to Selznick (1957), there are many opportunities for social interaction between the actors, and the universities' long history has made it possible to develop a strong culture with

shared values and norms. Despite these rules and roles prescribing behaviour, organisations can face problems in terms of ambiguity and conflicts (March and Olsen, 2011, p. 485). Members often have multiple roles, and as a result, sometimes challenge some rules as they follow others. This is highly likely in the context of a strategic alliance, where the individual members have one role at their university, and a different role in the alliance. When universities face new experiences or find themselves in new settings the rules and the institutionalised understandings may be challenged. The rules might not prescribe what to do, or what is right and wrong. This triggers a search for new understandings and legitimisations (March & Olsen, 2011, p. 489).

Universities have traditionally been depicted as self-governing organisations consisting of equal scholars, where decisions are made in a bottom-up, collegial manner (Farnham, 1999). In the collegial model, the governance structure in universities is understood to be decentralised. There is no top management as suggested in the rational actor model, rather decision-making takes place across several levels and organisational units (Bleiklie et al. 2017). Because the members of the universities are assumed to have common interests and goals, and a shared identity, they will make decisions that will benefit most or all members. A second proposition to be tested empirically reads:

- *Proposition 2: Higher education alliances are understood as bottom-up, consensus-seeking meta-organisations where decisions reflect the joint rules and procedures created by the partner universities and the will to come to a joint agreement based on shared goals and interests.*

3.2.3 The Political Model

The previous two models view organisations as unitary actors with relatively stable and shared preferences. In the political model, organisations are understood as consisting of multiple competing members. The members have different goals and interests and diverging opinions about what should be done. Power is shared among them, and action is a result of bargaining, positioning and the "pulling and hauling that is politics" (Allison & Zelikow, 1999, p. 255).

Baldridge (1971) has summarised the decision process in the political model as playing out along five stages: a) the social structure, b) interest articulation, c) the legislative stage, d) the policy, and e) the execution of policy. The *social structure* refers to the groups with different

interests and objectives. Many of the conflicts between the organisation's members and groups reside in the complexity of this structure, and in the differences in interests and objectives. In the *interest articulation* stage, individual members and groups try to express their values and objectives in such a convincing way that it gains favour by the rest of the members (Baldridge (1971, p. 11). In the *legislative stage* the articulated interests are translated into policy. The members with power exercise pressure on the other members, and they negotiate and make compromises. The *policy* is the result of the previous stages, an "authoritative, binding decision to commit the university to one set of possible alternative actions, to one set of goals and values" (Baldridge, 1971, p. 14). Finally, the policy or decision is *executed*, which in turn can generate feedback from those who are affected by the decision and a new round of interest articulation and conflicts is then initiated.

According to Baldridge (1971, p. 9), universities can be viewed as politicised pluralistic organisations where small groups of elites make most of the major decisions. The members' different interests make it difficult to attain consensus of direction and shared goals, resulting in a fragmented governance structure where decisions are divided between the groups. With the power being shared between them, actors will try to bargain and influence policy and each other to change opinions so that their values and goals are given priority (Baldridge, 1971). Conflicts between members and groups in the university are therefore expected. Baldridge (1971, p.9) points out that universities have a democratic tendency by which other groups such as students and faculties are demanding and receiving a voice in the decision-making situations. Sometimes they are also given the power to vote, and the decisions are then a result of the players' voting system (March & Olsen, 1989).

Based on the elements in the political model, strategic higher education alliances can be understood as consisting of universities who have different (possible conflicting) goals and interests. The decision processes are characterised by bargaining and positioning between the partners, where conflicts are expected, and decisions are a result of compromises. Following the political model, a third proposition to be tested empirically is:

- *Proposition 3: Higher education alliances are understood as meta-organisations consisting of universities with diverging goals and objectives, where the actors try to influence decisions to their own benefit underpinned by power and status. Decisions are both a part of and a product of political bargaining, negotiations and compromises.*

3.2.4 The Garbage Can Model

The garbage can model has been used to describe the decision processes in organisations which Cohen, March and Olsen (1972) describe as organised anarchies. These are characterised by diffuse and inconsistent preferences and processes, and fluid participation in the decision process. In contrast to the rational model which assumes that decisions are made in a linear and consequential fashion, the garbage can model assumes that decisions are dependent on what is available in the garbage can. A 'garbage can' is used as a metaphor for an opportunity to make a decision in which decision makers "dump" their problems and solutions. The decision is the result of the interplay between four independent streams within the organisation: choice opportunities, participants, problems, and solutions.

Choice opportunities are decision-making occasions within the organisation, where members are expected to make decisions. These opportunities happen regularly, and they can arise at random and/or by making them into routines such as weekly or monthly meetings. Participants are those who participate in the choice opportunities. The *participation* varies, and it is not always the same people who participate in making decisions. They come and go, as they cannot spend all their time on a given problem. They bring with them different points of view and energy, and they bring problems and solutions, making the decision process more or less difficult and complex. *Problems* can arise within the organisation and in the organisation's environment. They can revolve around issues that concern just a few members of the organisation, or the entire organisation. Within an alliance there can for example emerge problems revolving resources or goal alignment. According to Cohen et al. (1972) these problems demand attention, and the choice opportunities give the members an opening for airing their problems. *Solutions* in the garbage can model are viewed as products of someone's work, and they are usually created before a given problem is formulated. Cohen et al. (1972, p. 3) explains this by stating that organisations often don't know what the question is before they know the answer. Members will then search for problems where they can apply existing solutions.

The garbage can model suggests that decisions can be made in three different ways (Cohen et al., 1972). The first being through *resolution*, where problems are eventually solved after a period of working on them. Cohen et al. (1972, p. 8) points out that this is the familiar way in most organisations. The second style is by *oversight*, when a choice is made quickly and

without attention to other problems. In those situations, decision makers may be desperate to solve the problem so they grab a solution from the garbage can. The last style of decision making is what Cohen et al. (1972, p. 8) refer to as *flight*. This is when a problem remains in the garbage can without being matched to a solution and is therefore never resolved.

The garbage can model was first presented by Cohen et al. (1972) which identified decision situations at universities that did not meet the conditions for the traditional decision models. According to Cohen et al. (1972) universities can be understood as organised anarchies. The members of the university are unaware of what they are trying to do, how they are going to do it and who should be making decisions. The garbage can model aims to explain how choices are made when the organisation's goals and interests are diffuse, when the members struggle to understand the processes that occur and when the decision makers vary. Problems can be in search of solutions and solutions can be in search of problems. Alliances consisting of universities are examples of such uncontested solutions. A fourth proposition based on this model reads:

- *Proposition 4: Higher education alliances are understood as meta-organisations resembling an organised anarchy, where; goals and objectives are unclear, the participation in decision-making opportunities varies, problems and solutions occur in a chaotic and non-linear way, and no one claims to oversee the decision-making process.*

3.3 Concluding Remarks and Propositions

The theory chapter has presented how organisational decision-making processes can be understood and explained through a rational model, a collegial model, a political model and a "garbage can" model. These decision-making models have been used by several researchers to explain decision-making processes within universities, however the rise of managerialism has led to new understandings and interpretations, resulting in hybrid decision structures (Maassen and Stensaker, 2019). It is therefore important to note that the decision-making models are ideal types, and that it is not expected to find elements of only one, but a mix of these. However, there is a possibility of a given model being dominant in some parts of the governance and/or key stages of the decision-making processes.

An analytical model (Table 2.1) has been created which presents the decision dimensions from the four decision models. The interview guide is structured around these dimensions. The analysis of these dimensions is sorted into two stages of the alliances: 1) *The initiation stage*, from when the universities first entered the alliance, and 2) *the consolidation stage*, where the different dimensions and the inner workings of the alliances are developed. Decision-making has happened in both stages, and it was important to not only unpack the consolidation stage, but also the initiation stage to shed light on the universities motivation, and how it influenced the consolidation stage. By including these stages, this will cover the decision-making processes from the start of the alliances and until now, which will help secure enough information in order to unpack the governance and decision-making processes. Given that the alliances are relatively new, a third stage focusing on outcomes was not included in this study.

Table 3.1 Decision Models

Models / Dimensions	Rational Actor Model	Collegial Model	Political Model	Garbage Can Model
Governance structure	Centralised, hierarchical	Decentralised	Fragmented, flat	Loosely coupled, Chaotic
Actors	Formal positions	Peers	Interest representatives	Various and inconsistent
Goals	Shared and clearly defined with a clear preference	Based on shared norms and identity	Diverging goals and interests	Diffuse and diverse, triggered by choice opportunities and attention
Problems and solutions	Defining the problems and reviewing available alternatives	Determined by backgrounds and participants' interests	Arise through self-interest	Solutions seeking for problems
Premise	Full rationality and maximising utility (outcome)	Consensus and legitimacy (process)	Winning or compromising (power struggle)	Organised anarchy (fluidity)
Choice	Selecting the best alternative	Agreement on what satisfies all or the majority	Reach a compromise or through voting	What is available in the garbage can
Temporality	Deadlines and future orientation based on goals	Flexible, open-ended	Open-ended	Undefined, emergent

4. Methodology

This chapter presents the choice of research design and methodology for this project. First, the choice of a qualitative approach will be explained. Second, the literature search is presented. Third, the sampling selection of cases and informants is addressed. Fourth, the interview process is outlined. Fifth, the analysis process, including transcription and coding, is presented. Last, the ethical considerations and an assessment of the project's quality and validity are addressed.

4.1. Research Method and Design

The use of qualitative research methods is well-established for exploring social and structural phenomenon. Qualitative research methods offer the possibility for "understanding the world from the perspective of those studied (i.e., informants); and for examining and articulating processes" (Pratt, 2009, p. 856). The phenomena studied in this project are the decision-making processes occurring within the alliances of the European Universities Initiative, where the alliances are viewed as cases. A case study is a study of a phenomenon within its context, where the lines between the phenomenon and the context are blurred (Bukve, 2021, p. 126). More specific, a case study can be defined as "the intensive (qualitative or quantitative) analysis of a single unit or a small number of units (the cases), where the researcher's goal is to understand a larger class of similar units (a population of cases)" (Seawright & Gerring, 2008, p. 296).

Case study research has for a long time been debated whether it has any scientific value, and if it is a sufficient and suitable method for doing research. However, Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that case study research is in fact necessary for certain research tasks. Where large samples have the advantage of width and involving many, the case study has the advantage of depth. A case design allows for an in-depth study of the selected alliances within the initiative.

With the aim of unpacking the governance and the decision-making processes in the relatively new higher education alliances, a qualitative method allows for an exploratory approach and a rich data collection from those directly involved in these processes. A qualitative interview was therefore considered suitable for this purpose. The qualitative interview can be understood as the exchange or the conversation between two people or more, about a common theme of interest (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2010, p. 53). The interview can have several forms,

however a semi-structured interview based on an interview guide designed by the researcher beforehand, was employed. This was to narrow down the scope and keep it thematically defined but left open for follow up questions if the informants were to bring forth unexpected but relevant topics or if something needed clarifying (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2010).

4.2. Literature Search

Literature and data were mainly retrieved by searching for, selecting, and analysing existing literature and research from the fields of political science, international relations, public policy and administration. The databases Google Scholar and the University of Agder's online library (via Bibsys) were used to get an overview and to find relevant research. Regular Google searches were used to access information about the European Universities Initiative and the alliances. The supervisors also suggested several relevant articles and journals mostly related to organisation and decision theory. Furthermore, the reference list on relevant articles were used to expand the search. Search words included higher education, universities, European universities initiative, alliance, collaboration, partnership, decision-making, organisation, internationalisation and several combinations of these.

Source criticism was a critical part of the selection of research and literature in order to secure relevance and validity. The criteria were peer-reviewed articles and well-established and cited authors within the particular fields. The alliance's own websites and publications were also used, in addition to publications from the Council of the European Union and the European Commission.

4.3. Sampling and Informants

Out of the 41 EUI alliances, FORTHEM and Circle U. have been selected as cases for this project. These alliances were both formed in the start of the initiative, making it possible to collect rich data regarding the initiation and the consolidation of the alliances. The alliances also bring together rather distinct groups of universities. They consist of universities spread all over the European continent, with different history, cultures, structures, and most likely different goals and visions. Studying how these alliances are governed and how the universities make decisions together is therefore highly relevant. In addition, both networks involve non-EU based universities from Norway, and given that the initiative comes from the European Commission, this constitutes an additional interesting aspect in the study.

Relevant informants were considered to be those having management and coordinating positions in the alliances. Decision-making processes were expected to happen in different levels of the alliances, making it important to include not only presidents or vice-rectors from the universities, but also coordinators and project managers. Being a student from one of the participating universities in FORTHEM, I had a contact who identified and recommended several possible informants. To identify relevant informants from Circle U., I sent an email to an administrator who gave me the names and email addresses to possible informants. The recommended informants were then contacted by email. A total of 8 participants were contacted, of whom 7 agreed to participate in the study. These included vice-rectors and administrative coordinators from the partner universities involved with the two case consortia, stretching from the south, north, east, and west of Europe.

4.4. The Interview Process

4.4.1. Preparation

The first preparation involved creating an interview guide. The guide was structured around decision-making in two main stages: the initiation and the consolidation of the alliances. By organising the interview this way, it provided a good structure for later analysis. The questions were purposely designed to be open-ended because open-ended questions are considered to provide a greater opportunity for the informants to answer within their own frameworks, thus increasing validity (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002). When the interview guide was finished, the researcher applied for approval from the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD) to conduct the interviews. Once the application was approved, a request to participate in an interview, including an information letter about the project and their anonymity, and a consent form was sent to the informants by email. When the informants had expressed interest and agreed to participate, we agreed on a time, and they sent the signed consent form to the researcher's email. The informants were then sent a link to the virtual meeting.

4.4.2. Conducting the interviews

As the informants were located in different countries in Europe, the interviews were conducted on the Zoom digital platform during the Spring of 2022. At the start of the interviews, a few minutes were devoted to repeat what the project is about and what the

informants' participation involved. The interviews were recorded on a separate audio recorder, and they varied in duration from 45 minutes to 75 minutes, depending on how much the informants wanted to share and how much time they could devote to the interview. The pilot interview followed the interview guide without much follow up questions and clarification. When it then was transcribed, the researcher noticed missed opportunities for further information and elaboration on some of the topics and some adjustments were made for the rest of the interviews. The participants brought forth interesting aspects which the researcher followed up with additional questions, and some informants were asked to clarify or elaborate on what they had said, and also provide examples.

All the informants expressed interest in the topic of the project, and seemed to have enjoyed reflecting on the different aspects of the governance and decision-processes in their alliances. Some even expressed that some of the topics discussed made them realise their strategic importance of them, and that they should focus more on them in their daily work.

4.5. Analysis

When the interviews had been conducted, the next step was transcribing the data material. The interviews were transcribed shortly after in order to have them fresh in memory and made anonymous by referring to them as informant 1, informant 2 and so on, according to the order they were interviewed. The material was then manually coded. Coding involves creating codes from words, sentences or a dialogue from the transcribed documents (Tjora, 2018). It can help extract the essence of the material, reduce its volume and generate ideas. The codes were then categorised and thematised according to the two stages mentioned earlier, which formed the basis of the main themes in the analysis (Tjora, 2018). From here, the main themes and findings were put together in a coherent manner and applied to the theoretical framework.

4.6. Ethical Considerations

The main ethical consideration for this research project relates to the informants' anonymity and protecting their identity. The research project followed the standard procedure of getting approval from the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD). The informants received information regarding their involvement in the project, and that the consent could be withdrawn anytime without any consequences. Once the interviews had been conducted, the

project followed guidelines for data storing and management, ensuring confidentiality and privacy regarding personal information.

The informants possess management or coordinator positions within the alliance which constitutes a relatively small group of people. Many of the informants were quite open and honest when talking about the alliance and the decision-making dynamics, and most of the informants consented to information about themselves being published in a way that they could be recognised. However, some of the informants did not consent to this, and expressed concern regarding the risk of getting recognised in the findings. It was important to make sure that the presented data material did not contain anything that could reveal their identity or which university they belonged to. Some of the presented results have therefore been made more indirect to protect the informants' anonymity. Furthermore, it is important to note that the informants do not represent their universities' view or

4.7. Assessment of the Research

A critical part of doing good research is being able to reflect on what constitutes good quality research. Gerring (2011) argues for a 'best possible' approach for methodological adequacy and highlights how reflecting on the research's validity, reliability and transparency is important to maximise and evaluate adequacy. Qualitative methods are frequently used when measuring structural and social processes that would be difficult to measure with quantitative methods. As already mentioned, choosing a qualitative method allowed for an exploratory approach and to gather rich information about the governance and the decision-making processes, and the interplay between several influential factors, which for example a questionnaire might not have captured to this effect.

Another aspect of assessing the research's validity has to do with the representativeness and the number in samples. According to Gerring (2011) a larger number of samples is naturally superior to a small number. The disadvantage of using a qualitative method such as interviews for this project is that it limits the number of cases and informants due to limited time available. Only two alliances and eight participants were considered and approached for this project, which leads to the results having a low degree of generalisability. However, the two alliances were purposively selected as cases with representativeness in mind, because they bring together distinct groups of universities.

It is important to present the procedures used to retrieve the findings in a truthful and transparent way. If the researcher only presents the final results without presenting the procedures and tests conducted it will be difficult to judge the accountability and validity of the research (Gerring, 2011). In order to try to secure transparency, validity and accountability a thorough explanation and description of the research process and the researcher's understanding of the theoretical framework have been outlined.

As already stated, the main goal of this research is to unpack decision-making processes in relatively new higher education alliances formats and to gain a better understanding of how they are governed and how the universities make decisions together. By exploring these processes in depth, it can be possible to draw upon these insights in future research.

5. Results

This chapter includes the key empirical findings regarding the governance of and decision-making processes within Circle U and FORTHEM. For a comparative illustration, the findings from Circle U. and FORTHEM are presented together. The key findings include a) a short introduction of the informants' roles and responsibilities, b) an exploration of the initiation stage and the universities' rationale and objectives for joining the initiative, c) an exploration of the consolidation stage including governance structure, goals, power, trust, conflicts, problems and decision-making, and d) the universities' views of the future of the initiative and the alliances.

5.1. Roles and Responsibilities in Circle U. and FORTHEM

The informants from the two alliances illustrated a variety of roles and responsibilities. All participate in decision-making processes at the strategic level, and they have at least one role in the alliance and one role at their universities. Almost all had been part of the alliance since the start of the application in 2019.

5.2. The Initiation Stage: Entering the Alliance

The making of Circle U.

One of the informants described the time of the first call as the wild west where everyone was running around trying to find suitable partners. All the universities in Circle U. had been engaged and are still engaged in other university alliances and national networks, such as the Guild, the European University Association (EUA), the Network of Universities from the Capitals of Europe (UNICA) and the League of European Research Universities (LERU). Through these alliances and networks, most of the partner universities had already formed connections to each other before entering Circle U. The Guild, a network of European research-led universities founded in 2016, was identified as the starting point of Circle U. where some of the rectors and presidents discussed the initiative and creating an alliance. They were described as looking for research-intensive, capital-based universities to partner up with, and approached other universities which whom they had previous connections with. The first university partners of Circle U. were from the north, the west and central Europe. The Commission set a criterion to cover geographical diversity, thus the alliance started looking for universities in the south and chose universities which many of the partners had existing connections with. In short, there was a common view amongst the informants that Circle U. was created based on existing connections between strong, research-intensive universities located in capital cities or major urban areas.

The making of FORTHEM

All informants identified the University of Mainz, the University of Burgundy and the University of Opole as the core, who started working on creating the alliance after President Macron's speech.

> "*So, the colleagues at the international office began discussing this between them as soon as they heard about the EUI, before the call was published. So already in Spring 2018 they were starting to talk about the idea of doing something together.*" (Informant 3).

The informants stated that these universities have had connections for a long time, and even a triple partnership with joined study programs and Erasmus exchange. The informants stated

that after these universities had discussed forming this alliance, they approached other universities. One of the informants expressed that the partner universities were in contact with many different universities to see if they would be interested.

> "*As far as I know, the leader of [xxx] international office contacted our leader of the international office, and then they started negotiations saying there would be this opportunity and it would be very beneficial.*" (Informant 1).

The University of Mainz was also mentioned to have a close relationship with Bologna, and wanted to ask them to join the alliance, but they were already "taken" by another alliance. The fourth partner, Valencia, was also mentioned to have close connections with the core universities (Mainz, Burgundy and Opole). The remaining universities were similarly approached based on existing connections, however one informant stated that the selection was based on their location as they needed partners from the north and the east of Europe. Through close existing connections and recommendations from people having connections to other universities, there are now (Spring 2022) nine universities in FORTHEM.

Rationale for joining the EUI and Circle U.
When asked about the motivation behind joining the EUI and forming Circle U. the informants listed two main reasons. The first reason is based in a strategic perspective where the universities saw the alliance as a means to enhance their own internationalisation and strategic position in the context of a changing European higher education landscape:

> "*We decided to join in order to participate in this movement and also to be able to lift our own internationalisation effort and give our students and staff the possibility of collaboration with strong European partners. Both the strategic importance of the project in a European perspective, but also a very egocentric perspective in order to get access to strong partners.*" (Informant 4).

> "*And I think that we are also realistic about the fact that, of course, since the speech of Macron in 2017 everybody was talking about the European Universities Initiative and of course, for nine big universities in Europe it was difficult maybe to make just an abstraction of that and say that "we don't want to be there". So, it*

is true that realistically, also it was to make sure that we can also position
ourselves in Europe to be part of this initiative." (Informant 2).

The second reason pertains to the perception of what the alliance can achieve, and that they want to be part of this development. Several viewed the goals of the initiative as aligning with their own university goals and saw the initiative as an opportunity to be part of something larger than themselves. In addition to seeing the alliance as a means to achieve their own goals, they expressed a motive to contribute to and influence European higher education policy.

> "*It's not just about education, research and service to society, but also to try to contribute effectively to what might be the future of higher education and research in Europe. It is a bit ambitious of course, because we are not policy makers, we are universities. What we are trying to do is to train students, to make research etc. But still, it is true that we are trying also to influence what could be the future of education and research.*" (Informant 2).

Rationale for joining the EUI and FORTHEM

The informants expressed that the core universities of the alliance decided to join because of close relations to each other, and because they viewed the initiative as a big visionary idea that could provide even stronger collaborations between universities and lead to more possibilities for students in terms of mobility and education, which they believed to be the future of education.

> "*Our idea was that we should join, because we as universities… as I said before we are very committed in international education… We have to bring Europe to the people, to the people who have not the possibility. Bring Europe to them at home. This was really the idea, to take the next step in what exchange could mean.*" (Informant 2).

One informant expressed however that one of the universities did not jump on this opportunity immediately because they examined the other universities' rankings and noted that they were not globally leading universities. The informant explained that the highest management of their university stated that they did not need to be part of the initiative

because they are already well networked. The informant stated that the management needed convincing, and the reason which led them to join the alliance can be related to the possibilities of the alliance but also the status it could bring:

> "*This is not just another project or just another network, but this alliance scheme is an opportunity of quite high-level integration, which has not been seen in other collaboration formats. And that is very interesting to experiment with, and to be kind of forerunners in this. The Commission also wants us to set a model for other higher education institutions. We can be one of those who has had the model for the rest of European higher education institutions, so I think that was quite attractive.*" (Informant 1).

5.3. The Consolidation Stage: Setting up the Alliance

Circle U.'s governance structure

All informants had a shared view of the governance structure in the alliance, with all illustrating a clear hierarchical structure. They all described the General Assembly as being the top decision-making body consisting of the rectors or presidents of each university, and two students appointed by the alliance's own student union. The General Assembly meetings are scheduled twice a year, and upon written request by the Management Board. The Management Board consists of one vice-rector from each university with the right to vote, and one project coordinator from each university and the Secretary General without the right to vote. The participants in the Management Board are appointed by the universities for two years, and the informants stated that the participation is consistent and that these meetings are scheduled every three or four weeks. Below the Management Board are the Work Packages (WP) which are part of the operational management and handle the deliverables. They are led by coordinators appointed by each university. Then there are Task Forces consisting of two or three universities, in charge of delivering specific activities.

The informants expressed that the major strategic decisions and directions reside with the General Assembly. One example mentioned was the expansion of the alliance to new members. One of the informants pointed out that there was a need for top-down management

at the start of the project in order to have a clear strategic direction, but that the role of the presidents and the rectors have eventually become less crucial. Consequently, because the General Assembly only meets twice a year, the Management Board has been left with more power to make strategic decisions.

Regarding responsibilities in the alliance, the informants expressed that they tried to keep it evenly distributed. Although with two new partners who became effective members in January 2022, and formally in March 2022, it would not be even anymore. Before the new partners joined, each university had responsibility for one WP. The WPs were distributed on voluntary basis and based on joint decisions. Because the University of Oslo is coordinating the entire alliance, the informants stated that it has a larger responsibility.

FORTHEM's governance structure

Similar to Circle U., the informants from FORTHEM illustrated a hierarchical structure, which has undergone changes since the start of the alliance. They all identified the Steering Committee as the top strategic decision-making level consisting of a vice-rector or vice-president, a student, an academic and a head of international office from each university, making up 28 people all together. They convene two or three times a year. Then there are the Mission boards – The Mobility Mission Board, the Labs Mission Board, and the Outreach Mission Board), and the Coordination and Communication Board (CCB). The CCB was not part of the initial governance structure but was created about a year to a year and a half ago. The CCB consists of a vice-rector and a coordinator from each university and gathers every month or when needed. Then there are seven work packages (WPs), which are led by the Mission boards and the CCB, and below these are local working groups at each university. The informants stated that it is always the same people participating in these governance levels.

The informants stated that the CCB was created to have a board for WP 1, 2 and 7, which did not have a Mission Board in the initial structure. These WPs answered directly to the Steering Committee, which "*wasn't able to give guidance on a regular basis and wasn't really reactive enough, wasn't really aware*" (Informant 3). The informants expressed that there was a need for effective decision-making and consequently the CCB was created. Over time, as can also be seen in Circle U., the Steering Committee has more or less been replaced with the CCB.

"*The first governance system was such that we had this main board from each university, one vice-president or president, from each university some head of international office or head of administration, one student and one professor/researcher/teacher responsible for all faculties. So, four people from all the universities, 28 people all together. We thought this would be a nice mixture, but in fact with 28 people you can't act, it's too much for everyday level.*" (Informant 2).

"*The idea was not necessarily to replace the Steering Committee but simply to be an intermediatory level… and any decisions were still being made by the Steering Committee, but in reality, we kind of replaced the Steering Committee and we kind of… when it got to the end of the funding application, we said we better have a Steering Committee meeting to validate all this, but the decisions were already made. In reality we already replaced this kind of rather too big and too representative body maybe.*" (Informant 3).

Despite having a hierarchical multi-level governance system, some of the informants still view the governance structure to be rather complex. One informant stated that people who work within the alliance is sometimes confused. The informants expressed that many people in the alliance have multiple roles and participate in multiple levels:

"*So, it has been criticised that the same people design the tasks, implement the tasks and evaluate the tasks and report to themselves at various levels and then they approve their own records etc. etc. So, this is kind of stamping your own papers at various levels.*" (Informant 1).

"*And this was part of what we discovered to be some of the problems with the governance structure in FORTHEM to begin with, that we have the same people in different levels of responsibility.*" (Informant 3).

The informants stated that the universities are still making changes to the governance structure, which include introducing a rotating presidency and coordination responsibility in order to make it more equal between the universities. One informant mentioned that the

universities have noted that other alliances have created a legal entity within their structure. However, the universities in FORTHEM partner universities decided not to create a legal entity:

> "*We decided that we don't really want a legal superstructure telling us what to do. We'd rather keep the control of the universities and have the alliance doing things based on the desire for each university to do them.*" (Informant 3).

Regarding the work and responsibilities between the universities the informants all shared the view that this has been equally distributed with each partner university having responsibility for one WP. However, two new universities have joined the alliance during 2021, and it remains to be seen how the responsibilities will be distributed in the near future.

Circle U.'s strategic goals

When asked about the strategic goals of the alliance, the informants displayed a coherent and shared perception. Several were mentioned by the informants, most of them long-term visions. For example, "*trying to get the students and staff with some skills and really make them contribute to world peace…*" (Informant 2), and "*to empower our students, to make a better world, something like that*" (Informant 1). The informants also identified three main focus areas: Global health, democracy and climate. These statements of visions and focus areas are very much in line with the alliance's vision statement. Other goals mentioned were the creation of an inter-university campus, and a goal set by the Commission to reach 50% mobile students in the alliance by 2025.

There was a shared view among the informants that when the application was written, the universities discussed what goals they wanted to include. However, they did not have much choice in deciding the goals because these were already set by the Commission beforehand. One of the informants expressed this by stating that "*the call from the Commission was really strict, so we had to answer their objectives if we wanted to be funded*" (Informant 3). The informants also shared the view that the goals were highly ambitious, and none of them believed the goals to be realistic and could be used as a management tool.

When asked about the prioritisation of the goals, one of the informants stated *"actually, not that well"* (Informant 4). The informants shared a view that the daily management of the

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alliance did not resonate with the set goals, but more in terms of WPs and what they had to deliver and report to the Commission. They expressed that the long-term goals are not in focus, because they prioritise tasks and decisions by following deadlines.

> "*It's a little bit of a pity, and we've discussed that we should be more focused on the long-term goals of the alliance, rather than the daily management of the deliverables. But still, you have to work on them, and the Commission expects us to deliver on time.*" (Informant 3).

The informants mentioned several tools and mechanisms for measuring the work in the alliance, the main one being the measuring, evaluating and learning officer who set up a framework for the WP indicators. Another one being a quality assurance framework, through which they assess the activities. An example mentioned was sending surveys to the students and staff participating in the summer schools.

FORTHEM's strategic goals

The informants from FORTHEM mentioned many of the same goals, displaying a shared and coherent perception of what the formal goals of the alliance are. Speeding up mobility was for example mentioned as a goal of the alliance, however one informant stated that it is hard to motivate people to take mobility action and that not everybody is interesting in this, which is an indication of them having diverging goals and interests. It can also have something to do with the Commission setting a 50% mobility goal, which some of the informants commented on, as did the informants from Circle U., to be overly ambitious and unrealistic. The informants expressed that the goals were more or less already established by the Commission in the first call and that they included all of them:

> "*I think the first step was an intelligent reading of the call for application. So, the application writing team had read through the call, and they pretty much included everything in the application... We want to kind of be very good students in a way, that we want to fulfill all the visions of the Commission, so actually we included everything.*" (Informant 1).

This informant also expressed that there had been discussions in the alliance whether they should make adjustments regarding the goals for the new funding period.

"*There have been discussions that "should we really include all of the elements of the core for application in our actual funding proposal?", because it's just too much. It's overwhelming. When the Commission preannounced that there would be a call for the alliances for further funding, they promised 24 million euros, and finally in the call for applications the maximum budget was defined at 14.4 million euros. That's quite much less. The aims remain the same. So, we need to reach the same goals with much less money, practically speaking. It's rather problematic.*" (Informant 1).

When asked about the prioritisation of the goals, one of the informants described his perception of the process from the current application. The university partners were asked to prioritise the goals by ranking them by numbers or grades, however it did not work because they could not agree on which goals to exclude due to partners' diverging interests and motivations. This resulting in having to include almost all the goals proposed for the new funding application.

Interplay between authority and power in Circle U.

One of the informants stated that the EU funded projects require one university to coordinate the projects formally, which led to the University of Oslo coordinating the Erasmus + project, and the university of Paris Cité coordinating the Horizon 2020 project. The informants could not account for the reason as to why or how the University of Oslo and University of Paris Cité were given this responsibility, however, some of the informants acknowledged that it led to these universities having "*maybe a bit more voice than the others*" (Informant 3). Some expressed that this division of responsibilities only meant that these universities had more work, not more decision-making power. The informants expressed that formally, decisions cannot be made if someone disagrees, and what is interesting to note is the establishment of the Secretary General as a legal entity in 2021. The Secretary General is selected by the President of the alliance, and two vice-rectors from the university partners. The understanding of the informants is that the rationale for the establishment of this governance body was to link the different governance levels and to have someone with a neutral position in the alliance. The role of the Secretary General is to monitor the day-to-day management and ensure implementation of activities together with the WP coordinators.

Although the informants stated that decisions could not be made without everyone agreeing, there was a common view that some of the universities had more informal power than others. Some informants mentioned for example that there are differences in the universities' budgets and some universities are higher ranked than others, leading them to have a larger say than the other partners.

> "*You can call it soft power because nobody really uses this power but if King's College says something, people listen.*" (Informant 4).

> "*Of course, if the topic about research is discussed in the management board, I would say that if Paris say something, it would be hard for the others to decide on something else.*" (Informant 3).

Interplay between authority and power in FORTHEM

The informants shared the perception that, on paper, the power was equally distributed between the partners. However, they also referred to the universities of Mainz and the university of Burgundy as "central players" representing the core of the alliance, illustrating the presence of informal power. As with the informants from Circle U., the informants from FORTHEM also acknowledged that the coordinating university has more power when compared to the other partner universities.

> "*If you are the one who look at the timetable and the milestones, you have of course some sort of power... That is Mainz's role. Of course, in the strategic aspect, Mainz has maybe a little bit more power than the others.*" (Informant 2).

Various methods for influencing decision-making were mentioned, illustrating the partners use of informal power. One informant stated that through joint discussion and argumentation, they usually convince the other partners to see things their way:

> "*When there's a decision, we go through so many things so thoroughly that usually we have quite good arguments to present to the partners that convince them.*" (Informant 1).

Another informant considered how agendas and framing questions were used to influence decision-making:

> "*So, those people who wants to be more directive often tend to use the agenda to frame things as "we're going to give you two options, you must vote for option A or option B", whereas from a consensual approach it would be much more "let's explore option A and let's explore option B, see what works and what doesn't work for the partners, and then try to find a synergistic solution between the two and aim for that".*" (Informant 3).

Trust among the university partners in Circle U.

There was a shared perception among the informants that there is a high degree of trust between the universities, and one of the informants expressed this as one of the strengths of the alliance. Some of the informants pointed out that they started to work together during the pandemic, which prohibited them to meet physically, but despite this they have been able to form relations with each other which in turn have enabled them to tackle sensitive issues in a good way. One informant described the relationship between the universities this way:

> "*Everybody is joking and there is really a good chemistry. And you can only have good chemistry when you have trust, I think. So, I think there is a high level of trust. You can always approach someone saying, "I'm concerned about this and that, can we talk about it?".*" (Informant 4).

Trust among the university partners in FORTHEM

The informants all shared the perception that there is a high degree of trust between the partner universities, even though Covid-19 has prevented them to meet physically for two years. In the first years of the alliance, they took the time to talk and get to know each other.

> "*The relationship is good and when we do meet, we're really happy to meet each other. We have personal ties and the atmosphere in meetings is positive and we enjoy working together.*" (Informant 3).

> "*I think that in general we work quite well together. It also depends on the concrete work package I think, and the certain topics.*" (Informant 1).

Conflicts and tensions between the partners in Circle U.

The informants showed different perceptions when they reflected over and answered this question. Some claimed that there had not been any conflicts, merely different point of views. Others stated very affirmably that there had been several conflicts or tensions that had occurred between the partners, although no major conflicts that haven't been resolved. One example of a conflict or tension revolved around the expansion of the alliance and the inclusion of universities from the south:

> "*We saw that the partners from the north weren't really agreeing with this idea, and I'm not really sure why actually, but I think it was to do with picking the right partner with good rankings etc… We based our argumentation on the report from the jury who selected Circle U., who said that one of the weaknesses with the project was that we didn't have any partner from the south [of Europe]. We based our argumentation on this, but it wasn't really heard, until the Commission said that we should have more members, and if we had more members, we would get more funding. Then the Danish and the Norwegians changed their minds, because basically they were the ones against it.*" (Informant 3).

The informants reported that all tensions have been solved through discussion or compromise:

> "*You bend and you find a common path forward. Compromising or if it's only one university that feels very strongly about something, they surrender, if you can say that.*" (Informant 4).

Conflicts and tensions between the partners in FORTHEM

The informants stated that there have been several conflicts between the university partners, and one informant even expressed that tension is always present:

> "*There is always tension. Tensions and misunderstandings about various things. There are individual tensions, there are more collective tensions. There's time pressure, there's stress, frustration…*" (Informant 3).

> "*When a project starts, there's this honeymoon period, that everyone is happy and overjoyed and shows their best faces and we're happy together. When there are some challenges, and actual work needs to be done and delivered by deadline etc., then some conflicts come to the surface… When we talk about money, then you can see the dynamics in many ways, so how partners argue which budget items are most important.*" (Informant 1).

One informant talked about a tension that arose regarding the design of the web page. WP 7, which is about communication, had the responsibility of designing the web page and they started designing it already in 2019. The informant pointed out that the web page was, however, quite basic without a cohesive view. Some months later, the University of Mainz proposed through a Whatsapp message to the vice-rectors, to give this responsibility to an agency. The informant stated that when this was brought in the open, there was a big reaction from people in the alliance, saying that Mainz could not decide this unilaterally, and that it was something everyone needed to discuss. The informant stated that Mainz apologised, and that the issue was solved through joint discussions.

Another conflict or tension that was discussed was related to the coordination responsibility of the alliance. Mainz was chosen as the FORTHEM's coordinating university of FORTHEM by agreement between the other universities. However, some of the informants expressed that this led to quite a concentration of power to this university, which caused a tension among the other partner universities who viewed the alliance as amongst equals.

> "*It was a difference of visions in the way we were doing things. So, we got to a point where we were saying "we're going to renew the funding. If Mainz is going to coordinate again, then this puts them in a position of… they are the coordinator of the alliance, and it becomes harder and harder to have other voices heard. We then suggested that the coordination… it would be fairer in the alliance between equals, that the coordination should rotate between universities.*" (Informant 3).

The informants stated that tensions, conflicts and problems are solved through discussion and sometimes by compromise:

"*The most important is that we do this openly, and I think there's a culture for this, that we put things to the agenda and want to solve them. And also sometimes making compromises, for example in the question of who would coordinate in the new funding period. That was also quite painful at some point. But in the end, after long discussions, a compromise was reached.*" (Informant 1).

"*We then suggested that the coordination, it would be fairer in the alliance between equals, that the coordination should rotate between universities. So, that was the initial idea that the coordination would be taken in turns. As a way of showing that it is an alliance of equals. This is what finally got accepted by everybody.*" (Informant 3).

Main problems and challenges in Circle U. so far

A variety of problems were expressed by the informants. One of the problems mentioned was combining the top-down approach and the bottom-up approach:

"*So, we have this top-down approach. We've described the project, and of course we can change some things, but not so much because we have to justify each change to the [European] Commission. But we also want our academic staff and students to participate in the projects, so we also open the door to new projects and new ideas. And combining both is difficult because we don't necessarily have the money for bottom-up projects. We receive funding for top-down projects, but we don't really receive funding for bottom-up projects.*" (Informant 3).

This example links to the challenge of funding, which another informant mentioned to be a problem:

"*The Erasmus grant is very little, and only covers like 20 or 30 percent of what we're actually doing, so we actually need a lot of extra money. And some have it and some don't. But that's more internally, but it will be an alliance obstacle.*" (Informant 4).

Another challenge that some of the informants mentioned is having both a long-term and a short-term focus, and how to balance these. Having tight deadlines meant that the long-term focus was put in the background:

> "*For example, we had to write a framework for mobility and a framework for recognition of credits, so it's very complex topics, and we had very little time to write this. I think it's a challenge because at the end you just write because you need to write something very quickly, but you're not really thinking about the long-term consequences or the long-term goals.*" (Informant 3).

One of the informants identified the lack of information and uncertainty as one of the biggest challenges facing the alliance, with the universities having different information and different degrees of information. A solution to this particular problem was that one university was given the responsibility for handling the communications:

> "*I feel that with this new person that is working, that she is centralising the information, which is really good, and making sure that the communication is consistent in what we are doing.*" (Informant 2).

Main problems and challenges in FORTHEM so far

The informants referred to a variety of problems throughout the interviews. One of the main problems that all the informants mentioned was the initial governance structure and how it did not meet the demand for decision-making at the lower levels. The Steering Committee meets only a few times a year. In addition, it was stated to be consisting of too many people, making it difficult to make decisions effectively.

Similarly to Circle U., communication and how to make the alliance known to people and the outside world was pointed out as a challenge.

> "*I think it's in all our universities that most of the people are not even aware of the existence of the alliance. It's not super visible, even though we are present in all kinds of info sessions and brochures and whatever… I think this is a big challenge because at the same time we have quite ambitious goals with involving*

people and to scale up our activities, but if people don't even know that we exist then it's very hard." (Informant 1).

"*We haven't reached enough awareness within our different universities of what we do. It still tends to be quite an elitist concern between the people who are directly involved.*" (Informant 3).

Furthermore, Covid-19 was mentioned by some of the informants as a problem in and for the alliance. The pandemic, and respective lockdowns, prevented the university partners to meet physically and caused the alliance to change their goals in terms of project outcomes.

"*It would have been crazy to pretend we could have done all the things we're talking about mobility, about setting up new trustful connections between universities and two years you can't travel, it's impossible. It's fantastic that we reached anything.*" (Informant 2).

Finding solutions in Circle U.

When asked this question, all the informants shared the view that the universities make decisions based on consensus and emphasised that they find solutions through discussion. The informants also mentioned that they have internal regulations and bureaucracy documents stating what is supposed to happen at each level. Although they have a voting system in the Management Board, the informants expressed that the universities never vote. They rather spend time discussing the topics, sometimes several times before coming to a decision.

"*The thing I like the most is that we always look for consensus… It was very hard sometimes. Sometimes we discussed the same topic in two or three Management Boards meetings, but in the end, we come up with a joint final decision.*" (Informant 1).

"*I think we all try to, via discussion and consensus, and some sort of, we meet in the middle and go forward. I think all the universities are pretty good at bending towards each other to find solutions.*" (Informant 4).

However, some informants viewed this process of always striving for consensus as challenging and inhibiting. It was mentioned that there were times where the universities did not make a decision, making the fact that they don't vote quite interesting.

> "*It's a bit frustrating sometimes, because you would like an answer from the Management Board, you would like them to say okay, then we do this, or no, we don't do that. But sometimes it doesn't happen because you can't decide if there's no unanimity. That's the drawback of consensus. Sometimes if we can't make a decision, we just leave it out. It's considered like a no maybe. And we discussed that quite recently actually, that it's a bit frustrating sometimes that we are waiting for a decision, and it doesn't come. It seems like they don't want to take the risk.*" (Informant 3).

The informants explained that solutions and decision-making also occur on the operational level, in the WPs. The informants expressed that the universities try to delegate decision-power to the lower levels and that they go by the principle of subsidiarity:

> "*It seems very complex, but we try to keep it simple by having this principle that if there's an issue in WP 4, the best thing is for WP 4 to decide, and not push it up towards the Management Board. The Management Board only gets involved if there are difficulties, so they need some strategic direction.*" (Informant 4).

> "*For example, we have established a joint quality assurance framework, so, to understand what is quality assurance for leading activities there. And that was managed by a task force made of people working with quality work and they decided to work on that. They are drafting what is this quality framework etc. And it's their decision, their responsibility, so it's not the Management Board or the rectors to decide on that.*" (Informant 2).

In regard to finding solutions to emerging problems or solving a misunderstanding in the WPs, the informants also mentioned that a common way was to create task forces.

"*We have a tendency to create new task forces when we see that there is a problem. Sometimes it works. That's how we solve problems in general, or we talk to people directly.*" (Informant 3).

Finding solutions in FORTHEM

As was the case for Circle U., it was a shared view among FORTHEM informants that the partner universities mostly make decisions by consensus and arrive at solutions which are jointly agreed by the universities. Although, the informants highlighted that there are diverging preferences between the universities on how to make decisions, where some prefer more direct decision-making and others prefer consensual decision-making.

"*When you make decisions with seven partners, or even nine partners, you have a very basic consensus. You can't rely on this and think that is enough. Really, to make decisions with some importance, you can't make it only by consensus.*" (Informant 2).

Those who prefer direct decision-making tend to frame the agenda to an either/or situation without leaving room for discussion and finding solutions that satisfies the majority:

"*Consensus usually wins out but there have been a few problems when we've had a lack of information, or we've had things presented in a certain way in order to force a quick decision which is not necessarily a decision which is optimal for everyone in the end.*" (Informant 3).

Another informant described differences in how the universities prepare for these decision-making meetings, and that some are not well prepared and start to improvise, illustrating:

"*We are quite busy preparing for these bigger meetings to define our own position and to delegate and represent the decision, so this is quite well synchronised here. It's not always the same in all of the partner universities. So, sometimes in the high level, even maybe still in Committee meetings you can see that representatives of the same university might disagree… Many times, the members are just simply, apparently not well prepared and they start to improvise in the middle of the meeting.*" (Informant 1).

Implementing and following up decisions in Circle U.

Some of the informants explained that once a decision has been made, they always decide who is responsible for the implementation. The responsibility was mentioned to mainly lie with project coordinators and WP coordinators who ensure the people within the universities and in the WPs and task forces that the decision is understood and that they know how to implement it.

For following up and taking feedback into account, the informants stated that it followed the same structure back, and one also gave an example of how the people in the WPs influence the work and the decisions taken in the Management Board.

> "*So, if the WP coordinators, for example the WP 6 coordinator says 'I don't understand this and this' or 'shouldn't we do this instead?', then I come back to WP 1 if I deem it necessary. If it's just common sense, then we just say let's do this.*" (Informant 3).

> "*For example, the Circle U. challenge. That was because WP 4 said 'this is not possible, I know we stated this in the grand agreement but it's not possible, we have to give you this feedback, and we suggest we do like this instead'. And the Management Board said: 'well okay, we can see what you mean, that's okay, we do it like this'.*" (Informant 4).

Implementing and following up decisions in FORTHEM

Once decisions and actions have been decided by the CCB or the Steering Committee, they are implemented by those in the working level, the working teams of the Missions, but also the FORTHEM offices which consist of people who is part of the core team of FORTHEM. These are the ones implementing and following up decisions, and one informant highlighted their importance by stating without them "*the whole thing is useless*" (Informant 1).

One informant described the process as such:

> "*The question gets formulated, is sent out to the CCB or the Steering Committee. The Steering Committee debates it, makes a decision and then the decision, the information gets passed down…*" (Informant 3).

Actions are then followed up by the various coordinators and if there are problems that cannot be solved in the working teams, they are taken to the CCB.

5.4. Views of the Future of the Alliances and Europe's University Landscape

The informants from Circle U. expressed a variety of visions they imagined for the alliances five or ten years from now. Some believed that the alliances would be more known among students and staff, but also among policy makers and politicians. Some also mentioned that they envisioned the alliances to have flagship initiatives such as joint bachelor's and master's programmes, and maybe a European student card.

One informant from Circle U. expressed that the alliances would look very different from each other:

> "*Some will be very far advanced, total digital interuniversity campuses. Others will be more primitive. Some will be focused extremely on one research area, STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics], for example. And others would be hybrids. I think it will actually look very different.*" (Informant 4).

Some of the informants reflected over the goal of the alliance resulting in one university, and expressed that it would not be realistic for Circle U.

> "*I know that some alliances are on those lengths, really trying to have one university, but for us the profile of our universities makes it not possible. And in fact, it is not relevant for us to do that, because we are still thinking globally and acting locally. We are still local universities, that Oslo wants to impact Norway and things like this.*" (Informant 2).

All the informants shared the belief that the EUI will have impact on the university landscape in Europe in some way, however the perception of the degree of impact varied among the informants. One of the hopeful statements was:

"I really think that this is the future of education, and I really think that if we've made a very solid and good base for our future activities, up to 2030, I would say that we are on the right path." (Informant 1).

Some were less hopeful, expressing that it will take time and effort in order to make an impact, and that it depended on different factors:

"So, in the short run I'm not sure it will drastically change the European landscape, but I think it will probably increase the number of alliances with time, if they [the Commission] find funding. Maybe the universities will more and more like to fund these projects themselves, or the governments themselves, with the support of the European Union. It's the only way of making those European universities sustainable." (Informant 3).

"From my perspective, maybe the changes won't be so visible because it won't be at the national level, or at the structural level, but those changes will be made more on the university level. Like more about how we do research together, how we push open science, open education, to have more accessible research. It will take time, but I'm sure it will be the case." (Informant 2).

The informants from FORTHEM also had different perceptions of how they imagined the alliances to look like in five or ten years. One informant expressed a belief that it will be easier to go on exchange because of more mobility and joint programs opportunities. The same informant also believed there will be more opportunities for virtual mobility because of the pandemic. Another informant went even further with the hope that the alliances are forerunners in having addressed some of the current challenges in the EHEA; connected to regulations, degree recognition and quality assurance. The last informant was not as hopeful as the other informants, expressing that the alliances will probably remain more or less the same as they are now because of how little they have progressed in the three years that have

passed already. However, the informant expressed hope in that the alliances will be more known to the public and that more students will be involved.

Regarding the legal entity that the universities decided not to have, one of the informants mentioned that it will be a topic for the alliance in the next years, and it is also a question the European Commission keeps raising.

Despite different visions of the alliance's future, all the informants expressed a belief that the initiative will trigger impact on Europe's university landscape.

> "*It's good that there's this opportunity to experiment with this bigger integration, and if everything goes fine and we really come up with some very good ideas, that we can then exchange with universities that are not in these alliances and we would have this impact.*" (Informant 1).

6. Discussion

In this chapter the findings from the two alliances will be analysed in light of the adopted theoretical framework and the extant literature on the topic (Chapter 2). The discussion will follow the same structure as in the previous chapter, beginning with the 'initiation stage' and then the 'consolidation stage'.

6.1. The Initiation Stage

The findings reveal that the initiation of the two alliances was mainly based on existing connections between the universities, displaying trust and the phenomenon of path dependency. Most of the universities in Circle U. knew each other from being part of another network, while in FORTHEM there were three universities identified as the core, which then reached out to other universities based on connections. Choosing each other based on connections displays trust as a key foundation for the decision-making processes behind the initiation of both the alliances. This can be linked to Selznick's (1957) claim that through social interaction actors form a shared identity and a shared understanding of behaviour. However, choosing partners based on connections also laid down the path for these universities, which could be understood as inhibiting their choice of partners by excluding

others that could be more strategically beneficial. The rational actor will according to Allison and Zelikow (1999) review the alternatives and make a calculated choice, however the initiation process Moreover, when it came to the expansion of the alliances to new members, the universities had to follow a criterion for geographical diversity set by the Commission in order to get more funding, which further limited their choices. Circle U. needed partners from the south of Europe, whilst FORTHEM needed partners from the north and east of Europe. Despite these limitations, Circle U. displayed a more rational and strategic approach by reviewing alternatives and choosing research-intensive universities located in major areas, which can be linked to Allison and Zelikow's (1999) argument of making a calculated and value-maximising choice. FORTHEM on the other hand continued to rely on existing networks based on trust and past experiences. Following Vukasovic and Stensaker's (2017) argument of placing the alliances on a continuum, Circle U. can be placed on the one pole as building their legitimacy on special characteristics such as excellence and status. FORTHEM can be placed on the other pole as being more democratically representative with less tangible criteria.

The rationale for joining the EUI and creating an alliance were different between the two alliances. The universities in Circle U. displayed a pro-active strategic behaviour by viewing the alliance as a means to enhance their own internationalisation and position in Europe, but also to influence the future of education in Europe. As such, they can be understood as interest representatives highlighted in the political model. These rationales relate to Ahrne and Brunsson's (2005) explanations on how organisations enter alliances as a means for achieving their own objectives, and to influence external factors. However, the findings also indicate the rationale to be afflicted by environmental determinism, in that the universities perceived there to be no other alternative but to join. The findings from FORTHEM illustrated that one of the universities was reluctant in joining due to initial perception that they did not need this initiative and due to the low status they associated with the alliance. This stands in contrast to the universities in Circle U. However, what convinced this university, and what all the universities highlighted were the possibilities the initiative and the alliance could bring about, which relates to Ahrne and Brunsson's (2015) claim that the universities share the same strategic interests and jointly value the outcome the alliance can produce.

To conclude, the findings revealed similarities and differences between Circle U. and FORTHEM in the initiation stage. Both alliances were formed based on connections,

indicating that trust and familiarity played important roles in the process. However, the findings indicate that the partner universities in Circle U. were more strategically selective in their expansion process, than the partner universities in FORTHEM.

6.2. The Consolidation Stage

Governance Structure

Both the alliances were illustrated as having formalised, hierarchical governance structures. Decision-making power is divided into levels, the roles and positions are defined and formally appointed, and activities are coordinated to achieve the desired goals. In FORTHEM, it was also stated that the same individuals or decision makers had multiple roles at several levels, which indicates a centralisation of the governance, and a concentration of power. Considering the four decision models, these results strongly point to the prevalence of a rational actor model, where the governance structure is centralised and hierarchical (Bleiklie et al., 2017). What is interesting to note is how the highest level of management has more or less been replaced by the level below in both alliances. In Circle U., the Management Board was stated to have replaced the General Assembly in some strategic decisions, whilst in FORTHEM the CCB was stated to have replaced the Steering Committee. The need for strategic direction in both alliances decreased and became less important over time, while at the same time there was a need for more efficient governance. This can be understood as a move from the rational actor model to a collegial/democratic model as power has been delegated to the lower levels. Another interpretation points to a co-existence of both the rational actor model and the collegial model depending on the situation at hand, as the centre is still there even though power is delegated.

Another interesting aspect the findings revealed is the upcoming changes in the governance structure of FORTHEM, which increasingly resembles the governance structure of Circle U. A rotating presidency and coordination responsibility will be introduced to the new governance structure of FORTHEM in order to make it more equal between the universities, further indicating a move towards a collegial model. In addition, the roles and responsibilities in both alliances were stated to be equally distributed among the university partners, by each university being responsible for one work package. However, with the expansion of the alliances, it requires them to make additional changes if they want the responsibilities to remain equally distributed.

Goals

The findings reveal that the strategic goals are heavily influenced by the objectives set by the European Commission, and that the alliances did not have much say in deciding which goals they wanted to pursue due to funding criteria. Despite this, the findings showed a shared perception among the partner universities of the long-term goals in both alliances. Considering the decision models, this displays the alliances as unitary actors working towards the same goals, which is prevalent in the rational actor model and the collegial model. On the one side, it can be interpreted that the partner universities acted rational and strategic towards the Commission to receive funding and gain legitimacy. On the other side, the implicit goals display a less instrumental and more nuanced orientation within the alliances.

It is important to note that although the goals are shared, most of the universities in both alliances do not find them achievable or useful as management tools. This links to a potential mission overload in higher education, displaying the increased pressure and expectations towards universities today and how the universities respond to this. It was stated that the daily management resonate more with work packages and deliverables than goals per se, which supports Frølich et al.'s (2014) claim that universities have increasingly adopted measures similar to public administration to meet the increasing demands. As a possible consequence of this, the findings indicate a temporal tension between the long-term goals and the short-term goals, where the universities struggle to focus on the long-term goals as they comply to high external demands to deliver results and follow deadlines set by the Commission. This raises a relevant question of whether it leads to the deliverables being de-coupled from actual long-term plans. Considering the garbage can model, following deadlines without regard to long-term goals is in line with Cohen et al.'s (1972) notion of the oversight style.

Another finding which points to a different decision model is the example of prioritisation. Both alliances found the goals overwhelming, and the partner universities in FORTHEM decided to try to prioritise them. However, they were unable to do so because of disagreements on what goals to exclude due to various interests and motivations. This example displays that the universities have diverging strategic interests. Considering the decision-making models, this is in line with the political model and links to Allison and Zelikow's (1999) argument that members have diverging opinions about what should be done, and Baldridge's (1971) claim that having different interests make it difficult to attain consensus of direction. A different reading is that they failed due to lack of clear criteria of

how prioritisation could be made, which suggests low levels of institutionalisation. This is can be linked to March and Olsen's (2011) argument of when universities find themselves in a new setting, such as these strategic alliances, the rules and existing understandings do not prescribe what to do which in turn can trigger a search for new understandings.

Power and Trust

When it comes to formal power the decision models display this differently. In the rational actor model, power is centred to the highest level of management, while in the collegial and the political models, power is shared amongst the partners. The garbage can model display power as diffuse as there is no one who claims to be in charge of the decision-making process. The findings indicate that power is shared among the partner universities as they have divided the work and responsibilities between them by each partner university being responsible for one work package. In addition, both alliances have adopted a consensual decision-making system, meaning that decisions cannot be made without everyone agreeing. This is in line with Birnbaum's (1988) argument about emphasises in the collegial model.

Despite the partner universities' efforts to share the power, there were several examples of informal power. Oslo and Paris Cité in Circle U. and Mainz in FORTHEM were identified as having more say in decision-making due to them having coordinating roles. Furthermore, the findings revealed that some of the partner universities have informal power through the status associated with them, whereby King´s College was mentioned. The findings suggest that by having a coordinating role and by being associated with status, these partner universities have significant sway in decision-making. These forms of informal power are subtle and cannot be easily removed. There was also evidence of informal power being used deliberately to influence decision-making, as with the example of agenda framing in FORTHEM. This suggests the decision-process to have aspects from the political model, where one university tries to impel the other universities to vote rather than making a shared decision that most can support.

The informants all stated there to be a high degree of trust between the university partners in both alliances. Considering the decision models, a high degree of trust is more prevalent in the collegial model and what Selznick (1957) highlights about members creating a shared identity through informal social interactions. Yet, it is important to keep in mind that trust takes time to develop, which brings back the dimension of temporality. During Covid-19, the

possibilities for social and personal interaction were limited to non-existent, which is needed in order for trust to foster.

Conflicts and Tensions

The findings show evidence of conflicts and tensions in both alliances, which is not surprising. Drawing from the decision models, the findings can be interpreted through a political model, which highlights that conflicts between partners are expected and solved through compromise. Although conflicts are most prevalent in the political model, it does not mean that the other decision models exclude them or say they do not arise. The example of the web page in FORTHEM where Mainz wanted to make a quick decision on letting an agency handle the web page, illustrates a misuse of power in a collegial system in that the way it was done was not accepted by the other universities and they had to discuss the options. The example of rotating the coordination responsibility in FORTHEM also point to a collegial model in that it illustrates mechanisms to foster fairness and equality between the partners. However, with Mainz as incumbent they are in a still in a position to exercise some soft power over the process.

Problems and Solutions

Regarding the problems and solutions, the findings disclosed some interesting aspects regarding the governance of and the decision-making processes in the two alliances. Drawing on Simon's (1955) argument of "bounded rationality", a lack of information can create uncertainty and limit the rational decision-making process. In Circle U. one of the problems that was mentioned highlights the importance of centralising information with the aim of having a better coordination. A related problem mentioned in FORTHEM concerned a lack of internal communication within the partner universities and how it affected mobilisation and decision-making at the alliance level. Not everyone internally at the universities agree with each other, which becomes visible at the alliance level meetings when improvisation becomes the norm. Improvisation suggests a lack of clear agendas and objectives, and can be linked to Cohen et al.'s (1972) claim of organised anarchies where the decision-making process is diffuse and inconsistent. An alternative reading is that the participants show an absence of collective action and in terms of the political model, the members within the partner universities can then be understood as interest representatives having diverging goals and interests (Allison and Zelikow, 1999).

A problem concerning both FORTHEM and Circle U. relates to the importance of funding, indicating a resource dependency. One can identify how this affects the decision-making in Circle U. by considering the expansion of the alliance. Originally the universities did not agree on whether they should include new partners. However, when it was stated by the Commission that the alliance would receive additional funding if they included more partners, they chose to do it. The resource dependency was also illustrated through the problem of combining a top-down and bottom-up approach. Being dependent on funding from the Commission entails that the alliances are not free to do what they want. This was also illustrated through the example of FORTHEM including all the goals set by the Commission in the application. This decision-making behaviour signals a compliance to external demands without regard to other problems or other alternatives. Considering the decision models, this behaviour does not comply with a sequential decision-making process as described in the rational actor model, neither the collegial nor the political model. The garbage can model does not follow a sequential order, rather Cohen et al. (1972) highlights that solutions can be in search of problems. Through this model, funding can be understood as being readily available as a solution waiting to be paired with problems.

Respondents from both alliances disclosed that decisions are often made through consensus and decision-making power is delegated to the lower levels of governance within the alliance. This is in line with the collegial model and Birnbaum's (1988) argument that a formal hierarchy is not necessary, and that the members try to make a decision that satisfies most or all through discussions. In Circle U. it was mentioned that creating task forces are a common way of solving problems, which illustrates a bottom-up approach (Farnham, 1999). These task forces can be understood as flexible, democratic arrangements to solve emerging operational problems, further indicating the saliency of features associated with the collegial model.

The findings revealed that strategic decision-making bodies such as the Steering Committee, the General Assembly and the Management Board, also have a voting system, which display the decision-making structure as consensus based with veto power. However, the findings suggest that the partner universities have never used voting to arrive at a decision. A possible explanation for this is that the consortia parties want to avoid internal conflict. They would rather discuss the matters several times, and sometimes they fail to arrive at a decision. This can be linked to the garbage can model and the "flight" style highlighted by Cohen et al. (1972), where problems remain in the garbage can and are never resolved.

The lack of arriving at decisions can be identified as a limitation of the collegial model. This was also the case in FORTHEM. The findings reveal diverging views between the universities in FORTHEM of what the best way to make decisions is. Some want a more direct process based on selecting the best alternative, which is in line with the rational actor model. Others wish for a more consensual-oriented process where actors discuss and decide on what benefits the majority of parties, which points to a collegial model. This can be interpreted as a tension between outcome (rational) vs. process (collegial).

6.3. Views of the future of the alliances and Europe's university landscape

The findings revealed various perceptions of the future of the alliances. Many respondents referred to other alliances' wishes to establish a single university, which might be a response to a policy pressure from the EU. However, the universities in Circle U. and FORTHEM explained that this is not their goal. They acknowledged that they are dependent on funding and that this is already challenging. However, they expressed that the EUI is an opportunity to experiment with collaboration and were overall positive that it would trigger an impact on Europe's university landscape.

7. Conclusion

This thesis has investigated the governance and decision-making processes of two EUI alliances – FORTHEM and Circle U. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key actors within these alliances, and the findings were viewed in light seminal contributions from decision theory. The findings displayed the participating universities as rational actors when entering the alliances. They wanted to position themselves in Europe and influence future education and viewed the initiative and the alliances as means to achieve their ambitions and goals. In the consolidation stage elements from all the decision models can be identified, as previously hypothesised in the theoretical framework chapter.

The first research question sought to determine how the alliances are organised and governed. The findings reveal that the alliances have had somewhat different governance structures, but they point to a convergence between them in that FORTHEM's governance structure is

becoming more similar to Circle U's structure. Both alliances have formalised, hierarchical structures on paper, however power has been delegated downwards and strategic decisions are made in the lower levels. The second research question revolves around the goals of the alliances and how they were decided upon. The findings reveal that the alliances have highly ambitious goals mainly set by the Commission, to the point where they are thought to be unattainable, and not useful as management tools. Regarding the third research question of the degree of tension, power and trust between the universities, the findings revealed several tensions though not to the point where they could not be solved. Trust was stated to be high between the partner universities, although as discussed it is important to consider the limitations of social interaction and that the alliances are relatively new. The findings further revealed that power is shared between the partner universities in both alliances when it came to decision-making, although, as one of the criteria set by the Commission, there needs to be one university coordinating the alliances. The fourth research question asked how agreements, visions and decisions are made and how they are communicated throughout the alliance. The findings revealed that both alliances come to agreements and decisions by consensus. However, they also revealed a deficiency with this mode of governance as it prevents decisions being made when the universities do not come to an agreement.

All findings considered, Circle U. and FORTHEM can be understood as consensus-seeking meta-organisations built on connections and trust, with formalised hierarchical governance structures, though with decision power delegated to the lower levels. They are much affected by and reliant on the Commission, indicating a resource dependency, which then raises the question of sustainability for further collaboration. How are these alliances going to continue to collaborate and evolve if the funding ends? The link these alliances have created between universities in Europe and the Commission also raises relevant questions of whether it provides possibilities for the universities to access more parts of the Commission and can influence higher education policy, and if the Commission in return gains more control over the universities.

Due to the small number of cases and informants, further research on the topic is required to establish viability and generalisability. Potential research avenues ahead can be to explore these alliances over time in relation to goal attainment, sustainability but also what impact these alliances have on internationalisation, integration and higher education policy.

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Appendix A: Interview Consent Form

This is an inquiry about participation in a research project where the main purpose is to investigate decision making processes within higher education alliances. In this letter we will give you information about the purpose of the project and what your participation will involve.

Purpose of the project
The aim of this project is to gain a better understanding of how higher education alliances are organized and governed. It is based on the European Universities Initiative and will investigate how decision-making processes within two alliances – FORTHEM and Circle U – take place. The main research question is "How can decision-making processes within higher education alliances be described and interpreted?"

This research project is my master's dissertation at the University of Agder in Norway and is scheduled to be finalized on June 1st, 2022.

I hope you would like to participate in an interview regarding the decision processes happening in the alliance your university is a part of.

Who is responsible for the research project?
My name is Christel Claussen and I am a student at the university of Agder, taking a master's degree in Political Science and Leadership.

My supervisors are Romulo Pinheiro and Stefan Gänzle and the University of Agder is the institution responsible for the project.

Why are you being asked to participate?
The selected informants are those who have a key role in the alliance in terms of strategic decision making. I hope to conduct interviews with 4 informants from each alliance.

You are being asked to participate because you have a management role and take part in the decision-making processes within the alliance.

What does participation involve for you?
Participation will involve an interview of 45-60 minutes. The interview will be conducted on Zoom and will be recorded on a separate audio recorder.

I will ask you questions regarding the alliance and how decisions are made.

Participation is voluntary
Participation in the project is voluntary. If you choose to participate, you can withdraw your consent at any time without giving a reason. There will be no negative consequences for you if you choose not to participate or later decide to withdraw.

Your personal privacy – how we will store and use your personal data
We will only use your personal data for the purpose(s) specified in this information letter. We will process your personal data confidentially and in accordance with data protection legislation (the General Data Protection Regulation and Personal Data Act).

Only me and my supervisors will have access to your personal data (your name, email and role in the alliance).

The recordings will be stored on the memory card in the audio recorder while they're being transcribed. I will replace your name and contact details with a code. Once the interview is transcribed, the memory card will be destroyed by Agder University library.

Your rights
So long as you can be identified in the collected data, you have the right to:
access the personal data that is being processed about you
request that your personal data is deleted
request that incorrect personal data about you is corrected/rectified
receive a copy of your personal data (data portability), and
send a complaint to the Data Protection Officer or The Norwegian Data Protection Authority regarding the processing of your personal data

What gives us the right to process your personal data?
We will process your personal data based on your consent.

Based on an agreement with the University of Agder, Data Protection Services has assessed that the processing of personal data in this project is in accordance with data protection legislation.

Where can I find out more?
If you have questions about the project, or want to exercise your rights, contact:
Student researcher: Christel Claussen (chrisc15@uia.no)
Supervisors: Rómulo Pinheiro (Romulo.m.pinheiro@uia.no)/Stefan Gänzle (Stefan.ganzle@uia.no)
Data Protection Services, by email: (personverntjenester@sikt.no) or by telephone: +47 53 21 15 00.

Yours sincerely,

Researcher   Supervisors

Christel Claussen   Rómulo M. Pinheiro and Stefan Gänzle

Consent form

I have received and understood information about the project and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give consent:

☐ to participate in an interview
☐ for information about me/myself to be published in a way that I can be recognised

I give consent for my personal data to be processed until the end date of the project June 1st 2022.

(Signed by participant, date)

Appendix B: Interview Guide

Introduction	**Introductory questions** • What is your title and position, and how long have you had this position? • What is your formal role and responsibilities in the alliance?
Main interview	**Phase 1: Initiation Stage** • Has your university been engaged in other university alliances (e.g., EUA) before entering the EUI? • Why did the university choose to apply to join the European Universities Initiative? • Can you tell a little bit about the process? • How did your university choose this particular alliance? Were there alternatives? • Was the university approached or did the university approach potential partners? • What does the university aspire to achieve by participating in this alliance?
	Phase 2: Consolidation Stage Structure • How would you describe the alliance's governance structure? • Why did the universities decide to adopt this governance structure? Were there alternatives? • How does it relate to your university's internal governance arrangements? • How have the roles and responsibilities amongst partners been distributed? Goals • What are the formal goals of the alliance? • Are there any informal goals or implicit goals for the alliance/your own institution? • How did the universities decide on these goals? • Are the goals the same as they were in the beginning, or have they changed over time? • If so, how and why? • How are the goals prioritized and measured within the alliance? • How are they communicated throughout the alliance and to the outside world?

	Actors
	   • Who participates in the strategic decision-making process?
	   • Is it always the same participants or does the participation vary?
	   • How would you describe the distribution of power and authority between the universities in decision-making processes?
	   • Are there differences between the universities regarding the degree of involvement in the strategic decision processes? If so, who are most and least involved, and why?
	   • How would you describe the degree of trust between the universities in the alliance?
	   • Can you provide an example of tensions or conflicts that have emerged, and how was this solved?

	Decision process and implementation
	
	Choice opportunities
	   • How often do you meet for decision-making purposes?
	   • Do you schedule these meetings, or do they happen ad hoc?
	
	Problems
	   • What has been the main problems or challenges in the alliance so far?
	   • How are problems or challenges identified?
	   • How do you handle lack of information and uncertainty?
	
	Solutions
	   • How do you arrive at solutions to the main problems or challenges? Can you provide an example?
	   • Has any of the mentioned challenges been solved, and if so, how?
	   • Do you come to an agreement, and if so, how?
	
	Implementation
	   • How and by whom are the decisions implemented and carried out?
	   • How do you follow up the decisions? Who are the key actors?
	   • How do you take into account the feedback from those who implement the decisions?
	   • Can you provide an example?

Conclusion	**Closing** • Is there anything else you would like to add in regards to decision-making within the alliance? • What do you think the alliances will look like in five or ten years from now? • Do you think the EUI will trigger significant impact on Europe's university landscape?