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Common Research Information Management from a European University Alliance Perspective

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Abstract

As befits an initiative supported by the European Union DG for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, European University Alliances are expected to deliver a leap forward in the way transnational education is implemented at a European level. The opportunities these cross-institutional collaboration networks offer in the domain of research are however as relevant as those available in the area of teaching and learning. Aware that little has been presented in this domain at previous EUNIS annual congresses, the coauthors set out to explore what European university alliances might achieve (and are already achieving) in the realm of research through an effective collaboration across its member institutions. This exploration aims to identify some best practices against the framework provided by euroCRIS's regular community management work in the area of research information.

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1 Introduction

The European University Alliance (EUA) initiative represents an ambitious endeavor launched by the European Commission to enhance cooperation among higher education institutions (HEIs) across Europe. As a cornerstone of the European Education Area (EEA)[†], the initiative seeks to establish transnational networks of universities that collaborate on education, research, and innovation, thereby contributing to a more integrated European Higher Education Area (Gunn, 2020). The first alliances were established in 2019, with funding from the Erasmus+ programme.

According to the official EUA website (December 2024), the initiative currently encompasses 65 European University alliances, involving over 570 HEIs from 35 countries. This includes, for example, 64 HEIs from France, 12 from the Czech Republic, 8 from Croatia, and 13 from Ireland (see for instance Gogadze et al., 2024). In addition to full partners from EU member states, the alliances also incorporate associated partners from non-EU countries, such as HEIs from the United Kingdom and Switzerland, alongside numerous industry stakeholders, professional associations, and societal organizations.

The primary objectives of the EUA initiative are to strengthen European identity and values by fostering cross-border collaboration and mobility among students and staff, while simultaneously enhancing the quality and competitiveness of European higher education through innovation in education and research (Frame & Curylo, 2024). Although the initiative is primarily focused on education—encompassing student instruction, vocational education and training, and adult learning—its broader scope includes promoting multilingualism, intercultural understanding, and high-quality, inclusive, and innovative education. A defining characteristic of each alliance is its unique thematic focus, determined by shared educational priorities and research interests. While the alliances collectively span a broad spectrum of scientific disciplines, they all emphasize interdisciplinary approaches and seek to address global challenges by leveraging expertise from multiple institutions and fields (Cino Pagliarello, 2022).

Beyond education, research is an increasingly integral component of the EUA initiative. Although education remains the primary focus, many alliances are incorporating joint research strategies to reinforce the European Research Area (ERA). This involves fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, sharing research infrastructures, and exploring cross-border funding opportunities. Given this evolving research dimension, our study aims to investigate the contributions of these alliances to research, identify key challenges and critical issues—particularly in the strategic domain of Research Information Management (RIM)—and assess how RIM systems (also referred to as Current Research Information Systems, or CRIS) can further support the development of the EUA initiative. Our methodology is a mixed approach of literature review and case studies.

2 Joint research strategy

Universities serve as hubs for both teaching and research. While teaching has historically been, and remains, the primary objective of the European University Alliances (EUA) initiative, all consortium projects incorporate a research component. This research dimension is closely linked to teaching but also extends to innovation and knowledge generation through partnerships with industry and society.

[†] European Education Area (EEA), https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/european-universities-initiative

The objectives outlined by the INVEST alliance exemplify this approach and are representative of many other alliances: "strengthening the link between teaching, research, innovation, and knowledge transfer, encouraging mobility, and enhancing high quality and excellence in education and research."[‡]

Indeed, research is a crucial pillar of the EUA initiative, alongside teaching and student mobility. While the initiative initially emphasized education and degree harmonization, research collaboration has become increasingly important, especially as universities seek to strengthen their role in addressing global challenges. The European Commission supports the research and innovation dimension of emerging European Universities through dedicated funding within the Horizon programme, specifically under "Science with and for Society" (SwafS)[§]. Between 2021 and 2024, 22 alliances received financial support for research and innovation initiatives. These projects encompass a broad spectrum of activities. For instance, the EuroTeQ Engineering University enhances its research and innovation capacity by fostering synergies with educational activities and developing a framework for training learning professionals within universities, positioning them as key actors in knowledge transfer and co-creative innovation[**] (see also Fuchs et al., 2023). Similarly, the H2020-funded UNIC4ER research side of the UNIC alliance is establishing an "Engaged Research" Community, which includes the UNIC Post-Industrial Transitions Academy—a European collaboration platform facilitating co-creation between universities, cities, and citizens. Additionally, it offers a virtual Engaged Research Platform, designed as an Open Science Campus to promote open knowledge building[††]. Another example is NeurotechEU, which is pioneering a novel governance model for multi-institutional, international, and intersectoral research collaboration. This initiative also develops joint structures with external stakeholders to foster cooperation between academia and industry[‡‡].

Despite the diversity of research fields and activities, all these projects share three common objectives: they strengthen the research capacity of their respective alliances, they integrate innovation and knowledge transfer, and they contribute to the alliances' broader strategy for deeper institutional integration.

Beyond those alliances specifically funded under this grant, many European University Alliances are now incorporating joint research strategies aimed at reinforcing the European Research Area (ERA). These efforts focus on interdisciplinary collaboration, shared research infrastructures, and the expansion of cross-border funding opportunities (see also Kokkinos et al., 2024). Based on information available on the websites of European University Alliances, four key ways in which they contribute to research can be identified:

- **Access to shared research infrastructure** (42%) – Universities within an alliance provide access to shared laboratories, digital platforms, databases, services, and other research resources, facilitating collaboration among researchers. These resources include research information management systems, directories, and portals. For example, ENGAGE.EU offers a comprehensive research platform that supports collaboration opportunities, grant applications, expert networking, and events. It also includes a CRIS, which compiles publications, projects, and other research outputs.
- **Funding and EU Grants** (35%) – European University Alliances benefit from dedicated funding mechanisms under Horizon Europe, Erasmus+, and national funding schemes.

[‡] INVEST https://www.invest-alliance.eu/

[§] Support for the Research and Innovation Dimension of European Universities (Part II) https://cordis.europa.eu/programme/id/H2020_IBA-SwafS-Support-2-2020

[**] EuroTeQ https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101035802

[††] UNIC4ER https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101035801

[‡‡] NeurotechEU https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101035817

However, securing long-term financial support for collaborative research projects remains a challenge. Alliances also provide assistance with grant applications and seed funding. One example is the EUniWell seed funding programme, which supports early-stage research collaborations among partner universities.

- **Joint PhD programs and researcher mobility** (34%) – Many alliances promote joint doctoral schools and PhD programs, allowing early-career researchers to engage in international, multi-institutional research. Some alliances establish cotutelle agreements, enabling joint PhD supervision between universities in different countries (see also Gunn, 2020). For instance, EUNICE offers interdisciplinary PhD training programs that foster mobility among partner institutions across Europe. Similarly, EUPeace runs a doctoral network and an early-career network, along with fellowship opportunities aimed at supporting emerging scholars.
- **Joint research programs & thematic priorities** (29%) – Many alliances define specific research focus areas aligned with EU strategic priorities, such as climate change, digital transformation, health, energy, and artificial intelligence. For example, EUTOPIA addresses global challenges such as migration, sustainability, and smart cities through structured research programs. Likewise, Una Europa has established research clusters in areas including cultural heritage, sustainability, data science, and European studies and has introduced a Transfer Pilot to enhance research transferability among partner universities.

Beyond these four primary contributions, alliances implement additional joint research strategies that, while slightly less prominent according to the surveyed websites, play a significant role in fostering collaboration:

- **Collaboration with industry & innovation hubs** (25%) – Some alliances engage in strategic partnerships with businesses, startups, and public institutions to drive innovation and applied research. For instance, ENLIGHT collaborates with local governments and industries to develop research-based solutions for regional challenges, while EUonAIR is establishing a responsible innovation incubator dedicated to supporting AI-driven research and innovation projects.
- **Interdisciplinary and cross-border research teams** (22%) – Researchers from different universities collaborate on joint projects funded through EU programs such as Horizon Europe, promoting the creation of multinational, interdisciplinary research teams. For instance, INVEST is launching a Joint Centre of Excellence in Research, with living labs as core components to facilitate real-world, applied research.
- **Open science and knowledge transfer** (22%) – Several alliances actively promote open-access publishing, data sharing, and citizen science initiatives as part of their research strategy. For example, STARS EU is developing a common open data repository, while UNIC has established an open case repository and an Open Science Campus to support transparent and collaborative research efforts.

While a small proportion of alliances (18%) do not yet provide detailed information on their existing or planned research collaborations – likely due to their recent establishment – most have adopted multiple research strategies, often implementing two, three, or more approaches to enhance research cooperation and contribute to the deeper integration of their partner institutions. Moreover, it is important to avoid evaluating all alliances using the same criteria. While some are embedded in research-intensive and highly innovative academic fields, with many industry and business partners, others have different institutional focuses.

3 Key challenges and critical issues

The EUA initiative faces several challenges (Ipsilandis et al., 2024), particularly (though not exclusively) in the development of research activities. Among the key obstacles to the further integration and expansion of alliances are legal and administrative barriers, as well as institutional and governance complexities (see for instance Ferencz & Rumbley, 2022; Maassen et al., 2023; Mäkelä, 2023; Marques & Graf, 2024). Differences in national higher education policies, accreditation standards, and funding models complicate the harmonization of degree recognition and the establishment of joint diplomas. Additionally, bureaucratic hurdles hinder seamless mobility for both students and staff. Additionally, the differences of their legal status have a significant impact on their opportunities (and obstacles) to develop efficient governance and management practices[§§].

At the institutional level, coordinating alliances composed of universities with diverse structures, priorities, and governance models can present significant challenges. Decision-making processes may become slow, as consensus must be reached among multiple partners with differing strategic objectives.Administrative barriers also pose challenges to research integration, as managing cross-border research projects requires substantial administrative coordination. Universities frequently encounter difficulties due to varying legal and financial regulations, making it complex to align research procedures across institutions. While securing sustainable funding for research remains a general challenge in academia, it is not specific to alliances. However, for international projects involving partners from different countries and sectors—including industry, business, and society—disparities in national research policies, funding regulations, intellectual property laws, and evaluation criteria further complicate research harmonization.

Despite these challenges, issues related to co-authorship recognition, joint PhD degrees, and the evaluation of research excellence across national frameworks appear less critical, as some level of alignment has been achieved, particularly within EU countries.

A final challenge for all alliances, and particularly in research, is impact measurement (European Commission, 2025). Assessing the success of alliances in enhancing education quality and employability remains difficult, and the development of standardized metrics for evaluating the impact of research and collaboration across different national systems is essential. In this regard, research information management systems, such as CRIS, can play a pivotal role in supporting data collection, analysis, and reporting.

4 Research information management

The mission of the Nijmegen-based euroCRIS non-profit founded in 2002 is to bring together experts on research information in general and research information systems (CRIS) in particular with the aim of fostering cooperation and knowledge-sharing across the research information community and to promote interoperability of research information through the CERIF standard (Common European Research Information Format). This mission is well-aligned with the research component of EUAs, and presentations have occasionally been delivered at euroCRIS-held events on the work done by some of these alliances (Orel, O., & Vusić, L., 2023).

[§§] A workshop of the ESEU-project with more than 100 participants October 2023 discussed the needs for an ideal legal status for Alliances of higher education institutions to overcome challenges in transnational collaboration; available at https://www.eciu.eu/news/the-added-value-of-a-european-legal-status-for-university-alliances

System interoperability across institutional research information management systems is one of the main topics regularly being discussed within the euroCRIS community. This normally takes the form of national-level system interoperability that may allow institutional CRIS to exchange information to feed wider scope platforms where a research snapshot is provided for whole regions or countries. There are plenty of these national and regional CRIS in the Directory of Research Information Systems (DRIS) that euroCRIS hosts and maintains, and each of them tend to issue interoperability guidelines for their data provider institutions to follow.

There have also been occasional presentations for international interoperability projects – the European Commission-funded Data4RI project was presented at the CRIS2022 Conference in Dubrovnik showcasing the different data sources for national-level funded project information the D4RI initiative was relying on for the purpose of enabling a better research funding policy (Schlag, 2022).

The opportunity that European University Alliances provide for international system interoperability to be more deeply explored is a unique one though. The D4RI initiative was interested in just one CERIF research entity – funded projects – but EUAs would typically want to integrate all entities included in the institutional CRIS for as many of their member institutions that may have one available. These would include researchers, organisations and projects (the three core entities of the CERIF data model) plus additional, "secondary" entities such as research equipment and facilities, research publications and datasets.

As mentioned above, some alliances have already progressed along these lines, usually on the basis of specifically-funded research strategies. EU-CONEXUS, EUTOPIA and FORTHEM have all relied on OpenAIRE to build a common research information management system for them that brings together the aggregated projects and "research products" (publications, datasets, software). Other alliances have developed shared research infrastructure portals to provide opportunities for a better exploitation of research equipment and facilities across the alliance member institutions – the H2020-funded UNITA shared equipment database is one such example among many.

STARS EU European University Alliance

University	open data repository?	If yes, provide the internet address.
Instituto Politécnico de Bragança (IPB)	Yes	https://dados.ipb.pt/
Université de Franche-Comté (UFC)	Yes	https://search-data.ubfc.fr/
Hanze UAS	Yes	https://dataverse.nl/dataverse/hanze
Silesian University in Opava (SUA)	No	
Cracow University of Technology (CUT)	Yes	https://rodbuk.pl/
University "Aleksandër Moisiu" Durrës (UAMD)	No	
University West (UW)	No	
University of La Laguna (ULL)	Yes	https://research-data.ull.es/research-data/
HS Bremen (HSB)	No	

Figure 1: Institutional data repositories for STARS EU member universities as displayed at https://starseu.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/D8.6-STARS-EU-Open-Data-Repository.pdf. The deliverable describes the process for developing shared infrastructure for hosting research datasets (and publications). A dedicated STARS EU community in the Zenodo repository was the final choice.

Member institutions from some EUAs have moreover mapped their digital infrastructure for the purpose of building an aggregation of the various platforms by ensuring their technical interoperability – see for instance the analysis of available open research data repositories conducted by the STARS EU alliance on figure 1 above. No similar approach to the mapping of already operational institutional research information management systems has however been identified by the authors of this paper.

This may partially be due to certain lack of awareness of these institutional systems or to the perceived difficulties in making them interoperable with the technical and human resources available within the alliance. Some early analysis internally conducted by euroCRIS for the EURECA-PRO EUA back in 2022 using data from the DRIS also hinted at significant gaps in the institutional infrastructure across member universities and countries. The wide range of software solutions identified for the existing institutional CRIS within the alliance is clearly a challenge too: only five of the nine universities of the alliance had a registered institutional CRIS in the euroCRIS directory at the time, and *all five were based on different software platforms*, see figure 2 below.

When comparing the Aug 2022 snapshot for EURECA-PRO CRIS systems on figure 2 with the current one at the time of writing (Feb 2025), it's worth noticing that the research portal for the Spanish University of León has already been released that was in pre-production phase then, but no new institutional CRIS systems have emerged in the meantime from any of the EURECA-PRO member universities that lacked one. This is not a call however for commercial CRIS solutions to be implemented at institutions currently lacking one – some of the EURECA-PRO member universities operate open source solutions that could be reused as a sustainable approach for the benefit of the whole alliance and of its smaller members in particular[***].

EURECA-PRO member institutions and their CRIS systems (as of 29/09/2022)

Institution	CRIS brand	DRIS entry
Montanuniversität Leoben (AT)	Pure	https://dspacecris.eurocris.org/cris/dris/dris02261
Technische Universität Bergakademie Freiberg (DE)		
Technical University of Crete (EL)		
Universidad de León (ES)	DialnetCRIS	In pre-production (not yet released)
Silesian University of Technology (PL)	Omega-PSIR	https://dspacecris.eurocris.org/cris/dris/dris01129
Universitatea din Petroşani (RO)		
Hochschule Mittweida (DE)	VIVO	https://dspacecris.eurocris.org/cris/dris/dris01397
Hasselt University (BE)	DSpace-CRIS	https://dspacecris.eurocris.org/cris/dris/dris02263
Université de Lorraine (FR)		

Figure 2: Snapshot for the available institutional CRIS infrastructure at EURECA-PRO member universities as of Aug 2022. Data taken from the euroCRIS Directory of Research Information Systems (DRIS)

The EURECA-PRO alliance and its "research arm" the H2020-funded RE-EURECA-PRO project have produced some significant digital infrastructure:

- A worthwhile Research Inventory platform mapping institutional projects across member institutions[†††] filtered by the alliance's trademark Sustainable Development Goal (SDG12 for sustainable consumption and production patterns) and by the main Lighthouse Missions or

[***] The recently released FIS Landkarte map of institutional CRIS infrastructure in Germany shows the Technische Universität Bergakademie Freiberg is currently in the process of implementing this very open source DSpace-CRIS solution, see https://kfid-online.de/fis_landkarte_visual/fis_landkarte_details.php?id=146

[†††] The EURECA-PRO project information featured on this Research Inventory often provides links to additional research entities such as Principal Investigator, research group and project description (call, abstract, dates, budget, etc.) in the institutional project database. This shows a remarkable level of system interoperability but still falls short of the hyperlinked research graph characteristic of CRIS systems that would for instance allow to drill down on a specific project into its related publications and their network of coauthoring institutions.

research areas defined by the alliance (responsible material flows, environment and water, sustainable materials and products, etc)
- A EURECA-PRO publications repository where lists of research articles are provided both devoted to the alliance itself and related to each of these Lighthouse Missions.
- An internal report on structural and organizational configuration of partner institutions in EURECA-PRO as a deliverable for WP7 Joint Research Structures Utilization Strategy within the RE-EURECA-PRO project. The summary for this internal report mentions the collection of information on "IT solution[s] used by Partners for the purpose of gathering data on the research infrastructure to identify the possibility of creating [a] common database, accessible for Partners".

These aggregations of research information again focus on *individual research entities* (respectively projects, publications and research infrastructures) and leave aside many others – such as researchers, research groups, dissertations, research datasets. Some of these might however be useful for monitoring the impact the joint research effort has had on a number of indicators.

There is currently no evaluation framework for the success or otherwise of European University Alliances. This is furthermore a very complex endeavour given the multi-purpose character of these initiatives, but same as some alliances are exploring developments that may eventually benefit all of them – such as the best approach to establish a legal entity to reduce administrative complexity and improve operational efficiency – it could be argued that an aggregated research information management system would allow many of the indicators to be monitored that could constitute a framework for the evaluation of at least the research dimension of European University Alliances. Some of these indicators could include:

- Increase in rates of co-authored publications across the alliance;
- Increase in rates of funded projects collaboratively raised and run by alliance members;
- Some proxy for the impact of research activities held within the alliance (number of doctoral students participating in shared Doctoral Training Networks, data on mobility for students, ECRs and research and professional services staff, open science indicators, citizen science projects, participants in research seminars, etc)
- Collaboration with external stakeholders to Academia, notably with Industry and local authorities

5 Conclusion

The EUA initiative has established the foundational framework for the development of future European universities. To date, the initiative has primarily focused on teaching, encompassing common curricula, student and staff mobility, and innovative educational approaches. However, as this paper demonstrates, the majority of alliances have already implemented joint research strategies at various levels, including shared infrastructures, funding mechanisms, collaborative research and doctoral programs, cross-border research teams, and innovation hubs. Based on the available information regarding alliance projects, research-related activities are expected to gain increasing prominence, complementing teaching in the ongoing process of integration and consolidation of future European universities. Consequently, alliances must address the challenges associated with research management, with particular emphasis on research information management.

At a time when the 4th Generation University concept is gradually taking hold and frameworks are starting to be explored to identify the appropriate indicators to measure the impact of university research on regional innovation (Bedford, T., 2024), European University Alliances could be ideally placed not just for its member universities to individually explore their role as economic engines for their regions, but also to collectively approach the measurement of this impact within an international context. The role of institutional CRIS systems could be critical for the collection and monitoring of the relevant bits and pieces of research information. Moreover, by exploring the feasibility of aggregating the information held in their institutional CRIS, EUAs could address one of the key pending topics in the research information management domain, namely international system interoperability, thus laying the groundwork for its wider application across Europe.

Conflicts of interest. One of the authors (JS) has been part of a consultancy team that worked for one the alliances in the field of library acquisition policy integration.

Supplementary material. The table underpinning the results reported in section 2 above is available in Zenodo at https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14918773

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