Building a European University Consortium:
The Case of the U!REKA-Network

Christoph Rosenbusch (Frankfurt UAS); Mareike Tarazona (Frankfurt UAS);
Barbara Lämmlein (Frankfurt UAS); Claire Garden (Napier);
Ainur Berekbulova; Robin Stevens (HoGent)

Wissen durch Praxis stärkt

Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences
Fachbereich 3: Wirtschaft und Recht
Nibelungenplatz 1
60318 Frankfurt am Main

Abstract: English

European policy makers encourage close interorganizational collaboration of universities across national systems. The study at hand analyzes this development from the organizational level of specific Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and their international network. Using a case study approach, we investigated the development and governance of the U!REKA-Network, a group of European Universities of Applied Sciences, founded in 2016.

Compared to other organizational networks, university-networks have specific characteristics with regard to their goals (high importance of prestige and normative goals) as well as to internal management (loose coupling) of the participating institutions. Establishing comprehensive and sustainable collaboration is a challenging task that requires a functioning interplay between university management, academic heartland and support structures. Attractive opportunity structures for academics and students as well as an integrated and persuasive communication is needed to foster network participation on a broader scale. Mutual trust is very important for network engagement as well as its sustainability and the study offers some useful insights on this topic. Concerning the appropriateness of different governance modes, the empirical results furthermore indicate that there is a certain need for central administrative structures on the network level in international university networks.

Please note that the empirical data of this working paper was already collected in 2019/2020 and the content of the article was finalized in 2020. In the meantime, the network has evolved and is already facing new challenges as the U!REKA SHIFT application has been selected by the European Commission for funding under the European University Initiative (EUI) 2023.

Abstract: German

Die europäischen Entscheidungsträger fördern eine enge interorganisatorische Zusammenarbeit von Hochschulen über nationale Systeme hinweg. In der vorliegenden Studie wird diese Entwicklung auf der organisatorischen Ebene einzelner Hochschulen und ihres internationalen Netzwerks analysiert. Anhand eines Fallstudienansatzes untersuchten wir die Entwicklung und Governance des U!REKA-Netzwerks, einer 2016 gegründeten Gruppe von europäischen Hochschulen für Angewandte Wissenschaften.

Im Vergleich zu anderen organisatorischen Netzwerken weisen Hochschulnetzwerke spezifische Merkmale in Bezug auf ihre Ziele (hohe Bedeutung von Prestige und normativen Zielen) sowie auf das interne Management (lose Kopplung) der beteiligten Einrichtungen auf. Die Etablierung umfassender und nachhaltiger Kooperationen ist eine anspruchsvolle Aufgabe, die ein funktionierendes Zusammenspiel von Hochschulmanagement, akademischem Kernbereich und Unterstützungsstrukturen erfordert. Attraktive Gelegenheitsstrukturen für Wissenschaftler und Studierende sowie eine integrierte und überzeugende Kommunikation sind erforderlich, um die Netzwerkbeteiligung auf breiterer Ebene zu fördern. Gegenseitiges Vertrauen ist sehr wichtig für das Engagement in einem Netzwerk und dessen Nachhaltigkeit, und die Studie bietet einige nützliche Erkenntnisse zu

diesem Thema. In Bezug auf die Angemessenheit verschiedener Governance-Modi deuten die empirischen Ergebnisse außerdem darauf hin, dass in internationalen Hochschulnetzwerken ein gewisser Bedarf an zentralen Verwaltungsstrukturen auf der Netzwerkebene besteht.

Hinweis: Bitte beachten Sie, dass die empirischen Daten des vorliegenden Working Papers bereits 2019/2020 erhoben wurden. Inhaltlich fertiggestellt wurde der Artikel 2020. Inzwischen hat sich das Netzwerk weiterentwickelt und steht bereits vor neuen Herausforderungen, da der U!REKA SHIFT-Antrag von der Europäischen Kommission für eine Förderung im Rahmen der Europäischen Hochschulinitiative (EUI) 2023 ausgewählt wurde.

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1   Introduction

Increased interorganizational cooperation is a major trend in modern societies. Indeed, some researchers see the capability for interorganizational collaboration as a decisive factor for organizational success in the 21st century (Austin 2000; Grossmann, Lobnig and Scala 2007; Pouwels and Koster 2017). "The advantages of network coordination in both public and private sectors are considerable, including enhanced learning, more efficient use of resources, increased capacity to plan for and address complex problems, greater competitiveness and better services" (Provan and Kenis 2008, 229).

As historic drivers of political, societal and educational change, universities are very much part of this trend to increase interorganizational cooperation at national as well as international levels (Beerkens and Derwende 2007). Furthermore, stronger competition among universities, new types of providers of research and higher education, as well as a growing complexity of topics addressed in teaching and research, now make collaboration more attractive and even necessary for universities (Chan 2004; De Wit 1999; Gibbons, et al. 1994; Knight 2013).

Meanwhile, Europeanization of higher education also has a growing impact on the European university landscape (Altbach and Knight 2007). Policy makers actively support transnational university collaboration affecting teaching, research and administration. They aim to strengthen the competitiveness of European higher education but also promote values of social cohesion and mobility in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) (Carlson, Eigmüller and Lueg 2018; Teichler 2010, 54). A key funding program for strengthening the EHEA is ERASMUS+. As part of this initiative, the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master program is already well-established (Bergan 2015; Marques, Zapp and Powell 2020). In 2018 the European Commission took this further by launching the so-called "European University Initiative" (EUI). With this new funding scheme, the European Commission aimed for a more holistic approach to international university cooperation with significantly higher levels of integration between the cooperating institutions than ever before. Indeed, the Commission argued that a transformation of European universities is needed and a more profound level of cooperation between them is required in order to respond to societal changes and new skill demands (Commission 2018).

While there is a significant body of research on the Europeanization of higher education in general—for example, focusing on the Bologna Process, the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, the Open Method of Coordination or the European Qualifications Framework (Curaj, et al. 2015; Maasen and Olsen. 2007; Vukasovic 2013; Serrano-Velarde 2015)—the crucial role of universities as organizational actors in the European integration process has, until now, received only limited attention. It can be stated that "the establishment and development of networks of cooperation between universities to facilitate and strengthen supranational collaboration structures has largely remained a black box" (Marques, Zapp and Powell 2020)

Aside from research on Europeanization of higher education, there is a rather small body of literature on transnational university alliances, especially in teaching. This research shows that university networks with substantial organizational integration are exposed to many different types of challenges, such as legal constraints, issues of quality assurance or different traditions of the higher education systems involved. Although ambitions and motivation to cooperate are high, results and institutional changes often do not meet

expectations. Studies highlight the importance of mutual trust between the partners, long-term strategic commitment and internal coordination between various groups within the universities such as management, academics, students and administration (Heffernan and Poole 2005; Deiaco and Melin 2006; Tarazona 2012). Where these fail, collaborative projects such as double/joint degree programs are often unsustainable or ineffective (Deiaco and Melin 2006; Knight 2008).

We contribute to the understanding of transnational university network development by closely examining a specific European university alliance, the U!REKA-Network by means of a case study. U!REKA means "Urban Research and Education Knowledge Alliance". The network was founded in 2016 including the following universities: Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (the Netherlands), University College Ghent (Belgium), Edinburgh Napier University (United Kingdom), Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences (Germany), Metropolia University of Applied Sciences (Finland) and Oslo Metropolitan University (Norway)". In 2019 two more universities, VSB – Technical University of Ostrava and Politécnico de Lisboa, joined the alliance. All these universities are public and situated in urban regions within their countries. They share a strong focus on applied sciences and third mission. Third mission in this context encompasses all types of activities not directly related to teaching and research by engagement with the wider society (Pausits and Marhl 2011) such as life-long learning, knowledge transfer or service learning.

We provide insight into the institutionalization process and the governance of the U!REKA-Network and contextualize them in the light of the existing scientific knowledge about interorganizational coordination, always taking into account the specific organizational characteristics of universities (for a good overview of the latter see (Musselin 2007)). Thus, we aim at getting a better under-standing of the organizational level of European integration in the higher education sector. We aim at understanding the motivation and constraints of universities as organizational actors (Krücken and Meier. 2006) as well as the preconditions for effective network governance (Provan and Kenis 2008). Our results will hopefully help policy makers, university managers and academics to establish successful and sustainable international university networks.

The U!REKA case study addresses two research questions:

1. What are the drivers and ambitions of international university networks, especially the U!REKA-Network?

2. Which governance modes seem most appropriate to collaborate effectively and reach the intended goals in a comprehensive university consortium such as U!REKA?

2 Theoretical Background

The theoretical background of this study is derived from two different scientific discourses. On the one hand we build on the findings of higher education research, developing a classification of organizational goals within universities. On the other hand, we use the insights of research on interorganizational cooperation in general, focusing on the governance of interorganizational networks.

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2.1 Goals of international university alliances: a classification

Interorganizational cooperation in general is based on the expectation of mutual benefit—or in other words—the attainment of certain goals for the participating organizations. Understandably, goal congruence is discussed as an important explanation for the formation of interorganizational networks (Lundin 2007) and a critical factor of success for their effectivity (Provan and Kenis 2008).

Meanwhile nebulous and changing goals prevail in many organizations and the strategic alignment of organizational structures, decisions and actions to organizational goals is in practice oftentimes more of a desideratum than reality (Preisendörfer 2008, 62). This holds especially true for universities with their specific organizational character. „Universities are pluralistic organizations with multiple goals that are not necessary compatible with a corporate centre or overarching strategic direction" (Jarzabkowski 2003, 29). At the same time, current universities increasingly tend to act as "strategic actors" (Whitley 2008) formulating and pursuing organizational strategies. Management capacity and the ability for collective strategic action have become important features for the prosperity of universities in an increasingly competitive environment (Rosenbusch 2014, 249).

To structure the field for our empirical analysis, this case study works with an initial research model of potential goals for university cooperation derived from Tarazona (2012). Her classification of goals for international joint and double degree programs is expanded to international university networks in a broader sense. Universities as organizations strive for money and prestige, since these are the basic input factors for the university to provide their services and goods. Any strategic action of a university aims at securing or improving the financial situation or at fostering prestige. Prestige is influenced both by vertical differentiation (excellence) and horizontal differentiation (profiles) while monetary goals comprise the attraction of additional funds on the one hand and increased resource efficiency on the other (Tarazona 2012, 61). Meanwhile, universities are, like hospitals, to a relevant extent "normative organizations" (Etzioni 1975), which means that they also pursue cultural and social goals. In this case study, we suggest a differentiation between educational goals and wider sociopolitical goals (Fig. 1). Obviously, the differentiation between specific normative goals on the one hand and profiling goals on the other hand is not a clearcut affair, as an emphasis on normative goals can well be seen as a kind of profiling. However, we argue that there is a difference between a direct motivation towards specific normative goals, for example European integration, on the one hand and a strategic impetus to highlight a specific profile, for example as "European university", on the other hand.

Against this background, the following initial research model was used to inform our investigation into the goals of the network partners.
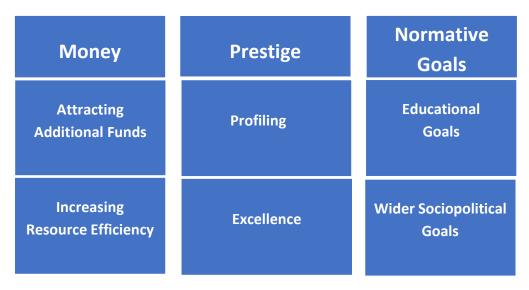
Money	Prestige	Normative Goals
Attracting Additional Funds	Profiling	Educational Goals
Increasing Resource Efficiency	Excellence	Wider Sociopolitical Goals

Figure 1: **Possible organizational goals for universities.**
Author's own compilation based on Tarazona 2012, p. 69

2.2   A conceptual framework of network governance

The second research question refers to the governance modes required in order to achieve the network's goals.

Scientific literature on networks has grown significantly in recent years. However, studies on governance at the network level are scarce. And as we know the insights of network governance research have not yet been applied to university networks.

A valuable theoretical approach for examining network governance has been developed by Provan and Kenis (2008). Their model of governance modes is based on a literature review examining the interdependencies of network characteristics and their (dis)advantages at the network level. They discuss important structural features such as density, fragmentation or multiplexity and their implications for the whole network. The authors then distinguish three types of governance modes: shared governance, lead organization-governed networks and network administrative organization (NAO). A main distinction between the governance modes is whether the network is brokered or not. The concept of brokerage (Burt 1992; Burt 2004) refers to a structure in which one network member acts as a bridge that channels communication between network members or whole cliques within the network.

- *Shared governance* is typical for dense networks where network partners show a high level of connectedness and short paths between organizations. The network members are equally connected to each other and govern themselves without a separate governance entity (participant-governance).

- *A lead organization* coordinates the major activities and most important decisions within another type of participant-governed network. In this type of network one member has a considerably higher level of connectedness and acts as a broker between the members.

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- Finally, the NAO is a brokered type of governance characterized by centralized network administration. The administration unit is an external entity and not part of any of the members. It can be small, consisting only of one person, but it can also be a bigger formal organization.

The effectiveness of each governance mode depends on network characteristics and context factors.

	Number of participants	Trust	Goal consensus	Need for network-level competences
Shared governance	Few	High density	High	Low
Lead organization	Moderate number	Low density, highly centralized	Moderately low	Moderate
Network administrative organization (NAO)	Moderate to many	Moderate density, NAO monitored by members	Moderately high	High

Figure 2: **Modes of network governance and preconditions for network effectiveness**
Provan and Kenis 2008, p. 237

Trust is, in organization studies, a multi-faceted concept (McEvily, Perrone and Zaheer 2003). At a general level, trust is the willingness to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations about another's intentions or behaviours (Rousseau, et al. 1998).

Goal consensus reduces the potential for conflicts between network members. When network members agree on the network level goals and processes, commitment and cooperation of the participants are expected to be higher. Marcos Cuevas, Julkunen and Gabrielsson (2015), for example, show that goal consensus does not only promote trust, it also mediates power asymmetries between network partners.

Another precondition to determine the appropriateness of network governance modes is what Provan and Kenis (2008) call the "need for network level competencies". This refers to the different types of internal and external tasks a network has to address. Internally-oriented competencies comprise the ability to facilitate interdependent action, for example, to establish mechanisms of conflict resolution or common quality management. It is more likely that a NAO can fulfil these specialized tasks and develop the necessary skills. As externally-oriented competencies, Provan and Kenis (2008, 241) specify protecting the network from external shocks and bridging, e.g. through lobbying or acquiring funds. A NAO as the single point of contact facilitates these tasks, as well as, to a lower degree, the lead organization.

Provan and Kenis (2008) conclude that "as trust becomes less densely distributed throughout the network, as the number of participants gets larger, as network goal consensus declines, and as the need for network-level competencies increases, brokered forms of network governance, like lead organization and NAO, are likely to become more effective than shared-governance networks" (Provan and Kenis 2008, 237).

3 Methodology

The case study method is well suited to analyze complex phenomena in a real world setting such as the U!REKA university network (Yin 2009, 3). While not suited for statistical generalization, case studies are good instruments to attain logical understanding (Eisenhardt 1989, 535); or as Mintzberg puts it: „We uncover all kinds of relationships in our hard data, but it is only through the use of this soft data, that we are able to explain them" (Mintzberg 1979, 587).

To answer the research questions two types of data were included: the network partners' main strategic documents, the grant application of the network for the European University Initiative 2019 and 12 semi-structured interviews with the presidents (6) and the network coordinators (6) of the original member universities. The interviews were conducted and analyzed according to the methodological principles developed in Gläser and Laudel (2009) and aimed at making available the expert knowledge and the intentions of the people involved in the institutionalization of the network. The interviews were, per university, cross-validated with each other as well as with the documents following Schmidt (2017).

For the first part of the case study, the identification and reflection of the U!REKA goals, we refer especially to the analysis of strategic papers of the network and its participants as well as university president interviews. Document analysis as a first step determined the main strategic goals of the universities and the official goals of the network. Furthermore, it offered the context knowledge necessary to act as a „capable interlocutor" in the interviews (Witzel 2000, 2). Interviews complemented the document analysis, giving a good overview of the individual goals directly linked to U!REKA, the extent of goal congruence among the partners and the process of how goals are pursued and negotiated within the network. Interviews were recorded and the answers coded and structured according to the classification of goals of international university alliances shown in section 2.1 **(Fig. 1).**

In order to answer the second research question, we drew on the interviews with presidents and network coordinators, analyzing the characteristics of the network based on the theoretical framework presented in section 2.2 **(Fig. 2).** Interviewees were asked about their experiences and the current situation as well as possible future plans. The result was a differentiated picture to what extent the actual mode of governance is seen as suitable to fulfil the common goals. The statements of the interviewees were clustered and analyzed to reconstruct the extent and the development of goal congruence and trust as well as to sum up their opinion as network experts about the need for network level competencies.

Finally, the authors of this publication must state that they are directly involved in the network building process, as members of a working group on higher education research & development. From a methodological standpoint this increases the risks of retrospective

sensemaking, positive self-display and a lack of objectivity. At the same time, it offers opportunities for participant observation, which allows deep and detailed insights and understanding, taking the stance of a "participant as observer" (Kawulich 2005).

In the following sections, interviews and strategic papers will be referred to by using a number for each of the 6 universities, and the abbreviation for strategic paper (strat), member of Scientific Committee (sc) or network coordinator (coco) (e.g. U2_strat or U3_coco).

4   Empirical findings

Reflecting the two research questions and their different theoretical background, the results section is split into parts.

4.1   Context and drivers of the U!REKA network

All groups of goals identified in section 2.1 (Fig. 1) were found to play a role in the U!REKA-Network. Depending on the different contexts in which the universities operate and their different organizational histories and ambitions, most goals are more or less supported by the participating universities, while there is a smaller core of common goals at the heart of the network.

Monetary goals, like the attraction of additional funds, usually play a major role in contemporary universities. However, these goals do not feature prominently in the strategy papers of the universities in the U!REKA network. Being asked about the monetary benefits of the network as a whole, the interviewees mainly refer to the common EUI bid and make clear that the bid would—in case of success—only bring a rather small amount of money, about 210,000 Euro per HEI per year, while the necessary efforts promised in the application will definitely cost substantially more. Nevertheless, it is clear that in case of success in the EUI call, the status as a European University would enlarge the opportunities to attract extra funds in the long run, both within EU funding schemes and probably also within most of the respective national contexts. *"It wouldn't create huge funds at the moment, but I think it has the potential to do so in the future, and it will definitely help if we get the application [EUI bid] through"* (U6_sc: 2).

The second kind of monetary goal, an increase of resource efficiency, is mentioned in all university strategy documents. The following quote also highlights the importance of organizational networks for increased resource efficiency: *"(…) We seek (…) partners who complement our knowledge and expertise and can help us build capacity and capability in a mutually beneficial manner"* (U1_strat). The interviews indicate that most university officials expect to learn from the other HEIs on different levels. Interviewees also acknowledge that formally institutionalized cooperation within a clear framework concerning form and content, will likely simplify future cooperation between their universities, especially in the field of teaching and learning, and potentially research.

The quest for prestige is a major theme in all strategy documents analyzed. As the interviews show, it is also a very important explanation for the universities' engagement in the network. The strategy papers emphasize both aspects of prestige, i.e. profiling and

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excellence, for example ambitions to be *"leader in research, teaching and innovation in education"* (U3_strat) or *"leading in terms of introducing new technology, innovative solutions and effective work methods"* (U6_strat). The interviews with university presidents and local coordinators show significantly more focus on reinforcing their university profiles than excellence. A central aim of the network is to strengthen their positions as modern and internationally oriented applied universities in metropolitan areas. Along with that comes a specific, and very diverse, non-elite student population, a strong focus on knowledge transfer and cooperation within the respective regions, the ambition to concretely tackle current societal issues and the ambition to offer international connections to students and employees. *"The urban context and the focus on applied sciences are at the heart of our network. (…) we want to be seen as a university that keeps its fingers on the pulse of current developments"* (U2_coco: 4). Or as another interviewee puts it: *"There is this straight forward demand question, request, by industry, by other public organizations, by citizens, on talents, which can actually operate in an international setting. (…) So yes, U!REKA helps a lot, because it actually makes us better in offering that to our students"* (U1_sc: 3). The analysis of the EUI bid, the universities´ strategy papers as well as the interviews clearly indicate that all universities in this network want to strengthen their profile in the field of third mission activities and societal impact as well as their international profile.

The empirical investigation also shows that normative goals are a major motivation for engagement in the network. Among the educational goals there seems to be a common wish to offer more, and more varied, learning opportunities for students, sharing a vision of more flexible and individualized educational programs. *"And what is important what we create an awareness for students, and also our own staff by the way, that you can actually kind of select out of all these blocks. You can select your routes. (…) So, we should make this available for our students and our staff to see that there is so much more that you can do"* (U1_sc: 2f). These programs are expected to better prepare the students for a future as professionals who are used to acting confidently and sensibly in an international environment and who have learned about different ways to tackle problems in different countries and professional cultures. Or as the 2020 EUI-application reads: "U!REKA is building a European University to educate the EU professionals of tomorrow and contribute to an inclusive, intercultural and open-minded professional Europe" (U!REKA 2020, 2).

Two wider sociopolitical goals are also stressed by officials from all six universities. On the one hand, the universities wish to contribute to a more evidence- and knowledge-based practice in all parts of society (third mission aspect) and on the other hand, they aspire to contribute to the unity and integration of Europe as well as the promotion of European values like freedom of speech and solidarity. *"We as UASs have such an important role to play in regional business and in changing society and in, let's say, educating responsible citizens that behave as European citizens"* (U4_sc: 3).

This study concentrates on university goals at the organizational level. Nevertheless, the investigation shows that external goals, especially political goals, play a major role for the strategic actions of university management. Many of these goals are in accordance with the organizational goals mentioned above. For example, most governments favour societal impact and internationalization of their universities in general. As some interviewees mentioned, the whole idea of smart specialization and thematic networks of HEIs that tackle societal problems is also a strong impetus that shapes political expectations and

funding schemes (see e.g. OECD 2013). Meanwhile, some government measures strongly oppose the establishment of a comprehensive European University network. Brexit is of course a striking example that heavily affects one of the network universities. A lesser known example is a Flemish government regulation that for UAS allows only a very limited percentage of all courses to be taught in a foreign language. Nevertheless, interviewees form the respective universities believe that the potential advantages for their universities, students and staff outweigh the costs of overcoming these hurdles.

In conclusion, the core of shared goals aims at strengthening the university profiles with regard to third mission activities, internationalization and common topics in teaching and research. This impetus is combined with a strong vision of fulfilling important societal tasks. Concerning normative goals, it is important to note that educational goals and wider sociopolitical goals are heavily interconnected. Monetary benefits as well as excellence are less relevant to the network, but might become relevant in the future.

4.2 Modes of cooperation and network effectiveness

After identifying the goals within and for the network, we next deal with the question of the appropriateness of different network organization and governance modes. What is the current governance mode? And is this one the most suitable in the light of the strategic goals of the network and its future plans? Empirical findings are structured by the theoretical model presented in figure 2 (Provan and Kenis 2008).

4.2.1 Number of participants

The U!REKA network initially had 6 members, two new members joined the group in 2019. This relatively low, or at most moderate, number of participants suggests that a participant-governed network mode (shared governance or lead organization) should be most effective.

4.2.2 Trust in the U!REKA-Network

As indicated in the literature, trust is a very important feature for the development of the network (Partha 1988; Eberl and Kabst 2005; Nielsen 2004). One interviewee points out the positive relationship between trust and common ambition. *"They are building trust amongst the U!REKA steering committee members (…). And I think that is strengthening the ambition that they have. They know each other: 'Ok, maybe we can do more together'"* (U3_coco: 7). Many interviewees indicate that the establishment of trust takes time. It is first built between specific individuals and supported by the experience that all or at least almost all participants play by the common rules and stick to the agreements made. *"As a network you must have a certain kind of structure, certain ways of working together and people who really get to know each other. Otherwise it is very hard to sustain the network"* (u5_sc: 3). At the same time U!REKA's EUI bid demonstrates that the network members show great ambition to realize a significantly higher level of organizational interconnectedness leading to a level of institutionalized trust, no longer depending on single persons as described by Nielsen (2004). Nevertheless, the dependency on specific individuals is relatively high; a fact that becomes obvious each time a local coordinator or responsible board member changes.

Another insight concerning trust in interuniversity-cooperation is that collaboration in the field of teaching seems to need more efforts and thus a more longterm oriented and trusting relationship than research cooperation. Establishing a research project is principally easier and usually involves fewer people and less change of the existing structures than establishing a common study program. *"We are committing to important changes, I mean all of this communal campuses, joint programs, joint degrees and things like that, that of course involves substantial efforts"* (U6_coco: 10). Concerning the resilience of the network it is remarkable that the commitment of the participating universities is stable, even though the network barely missed EUI-funding two times after a substantial common effort. One quote of a participating university's president illustrates and partly explains this longterm commitment. *"I'm a strong believer in choosing your partners carefully and doing this, using criteria, using a vision of strategic planning in the back of your head. And once you have chosen them go for a very strong collaboration which can go very far. And then go for it in a structural way (…) and that's where the idea of the European University comes in. Simply because it fits with this idea"* (U4_sc: 3).

Most interviewees indicate their readiness to carry out actions which are not closely related to their organizational goals, because they have built up a longterm oriented relationship with their partners. They expect that this "good will" is also found within the partner institutions. *"There is always a good will to approach things/new ideas within the consortium"* (U3_sc: 6). Or as another board member puts it: *"If the principles and intentions are good, you can get along very well"* (U1_sc: 5).

Among all the participating universities, one gathered a high level of trust and network centrality. This organization in many aspects performs as a lead organization. There are several reasons for this. On the one hand this HEI seems to have the most far-reaching commitment among the network universities, as interviewees from the other universities confirm. The board member of this university describes his vision as follows: *"If, 5 years from now, we are still a collection of 8 independent Universities of Applied Sciences, we have not accomplished our mission"* (U1_sc: 3). Secondly, language and culture issues seem to favour a central position for this HEI. Most network members perceive a particular similarity, *"a shared way of thinking"* (U3_sc: 4), with this university. Another interesting reason for the specifically high trust in this HEI relates to its management capacity. Several interviewees state that this university has shown to be a good strategic actor. Finally, this university was the driving force behind the foundation of the network. However, some actors in the network note a slow change towards more density and less centrality, as some universities take on more responsibility. *"We should always look which problem we react on as U!REKA and then we can decide who is in the lead"* (U2_sc: 8).

4.2.3 Goal consensus within the network

The empirical investigation shows a high goal consensus among five out of the six original network members. While all universities share the goal of enhancing and profiling their third mission activities, one university puts a relatively high emphasis on the acquisition of additional funds, mainly research funds.

Network goals became more and more concrete over time. In the beginning they were quite diffuse, possessing the character of a broader common vision. The common EUI-bids in 2019 and 2020 have forced the participants to focus on more concrete goals and actions. The organizational changes mentioned in the EUI applications are far-reaching: the

necessary deeper integration and concrete action would be a true challenge for university management in the different institutions. A board member of another HEI states: *"It is a ´mission to the moon´ to set up a pan-European University of Applied Sciences. But if you take it apart into different challenges, you can think for each of them for a way how to approach it"*. And he adds *"The important point is that we have to tackle these challenges simultaneously. A step-by-step-approach is not possible"* (U1_sc: 6). One local network coordinator acknowledges: *"I´m not sure if our board is fully aware of all the consequences, if this [EUI] bid is successful"* (U2_coco: 13).

To understand the nature of a goal consensus in this network, it is of the utmost importance to explain that only a limited number of people in the participating HEIs are actively integrated in the U!REKA-Network. The numbers vary between the different institutions but all interviewees agree that network-engagement is quite limited to the universities´ central management, international offices and some rather specific projects in teaching and research. One board member notices: *"We need more cooperation on all levels"* (U4_sc: 10). At the same time all interviewees are well aware of the fact that universities are loosely coupled systems where engagement in specific initiatives cannot just be ordered by a central administration. A top-down initiative like a comprehensive university network needs to be complemented by bottom-up initiatives of academics and students. Whether this expansion of network activities within the different universities is successful, is a major point of concern.

Concerning the strategic alignment of organizational and individual goals one board member underlines the aspect of opportunity structures: *"The central question is: What do we have to offer to our academics? What do we have to offer to our students?"* (U5_sc: 4). Interviewees see different abilities to raise support for central management plans and to foster collective actions within their institutions. One board member states that concerning the network there has been very little organizational change within their HEI so far (a fact that is true for most universities) but also very limited engagement of university members (which is not true for the other HEIs). It states: *"If the application is successful (…), we will have to use the momentum to bring the U!REKA idea to our academics, to have people engaged in working groups…"* (U6_sc: 6). Several coordinator interviews pointed to the necessity of steady persuasive efforts, constantly bringing in new ideas, keeping in touch with academics and students as well as being able to offer support or funding opportunities as signs of appreciation of the engaged people. It is necessary to have "draft horses" or "impressarios"—i.e. influential people within the university that foster and sustain university development by continuous reasoning, personal engagement and charisma. *"We need evangelizers"* (U6_coco: 12). While this comment holds true for all individual universities, we again see the central aspect of communication and persuasion on the network level.

4.2.4   Need for network level competencies

Most interviewees are quite satisfied with the current governance mode, actually a mixture of shared governance and lead organization. Furthermore, all interviewees are very clear about not establishing unnecessary bureaucracy. *"If we found a new entity on the network level, I mean that is of course possible, but I would be afraid that this organization might lose touch with its 'home organizations'"* (U2_sc: 10). So far, most interviewees don't see any necessity to have a centralized administrative unit (NAO) at the network level as

external demands seem to be well catered for. For example, many universities feel well represented in Brussels by the lobbyist of their nation or region.

Generally speaking, the interviewees are convinced that with regard to organizational structures one should follow Louis Sullivan's design principle of "form follows function". With this in mind the interviews nevertheless show that a NAO or at least a more centralized coordination might be useful for some aspects of cooperation. On the one hand, several interviewees underline the crucial importance of information technology for the planned network activities, like virtual working groups, online seminars etc. It might well become useful to have centrally administered infrastructure and standards, for example to ensure connectivity and IT security. On the other hand, interviewees point out the necessity of an integrated and comprehensive communication that encompasses all the different and often fragmented initiatives that typically develop within a university network. *"It will be important to have an integrated approach, an integrated communication to really make U!REKA a success. Otherwise it will all be patchwork and individual efforts"* (U5_coco: 8). This central communication might well be needed to make the network understandable for external players on the one hand but also—and probably more important—to foster identification and participation for academics and students in the participating universities.

5   Conclusion

Investigations shows that engagement in the U!REKA network is motivated by different goals from practically all sectors of our model of possible organizational goals of universities (see figure 1). In other words, goals are as comprehensive and varied as the intended actions of the network which includes all levels of a university's tasks: teaching and learning, research, administration and third mission. While all of these goals are relevant, there is a core of specific goals for the U!REKA-Network which are reflected in strategy papers as well as in the conducted interviews. Most important are the ambitions to improve individual organizational profiles with respect to third mission activities and internationalization. *"To wrap it up: This is a great opportunity for profiling"* (U2_sc: 4). Besides that obviously normative goals also play a major role in explaining engagement in the network. Educational goals are of special significance for teaching-oriented universities of applied sciences and, as shown above, an intensified cooperation in teaching needs longterm engagement in the network. Broader sociopolitical goals concern the wish to foster European integration as well as knowledge transfer with the respective local communities.

In conclusion, there is a focus on profiling and normative goals which fits well with the specificity of UASs with their focus on teaching and third mission. Common goals can only be achieved in a longterm perspective, and are not based on short-term engagements in which universities or academics often team up as "communities of prey" (in German "Beutegemeinschaften", (Rosenbusch 2014, 211)).

Our second research question focuses on the suitable governance mode for an international university network whose idea is comprehensive cooperation at various organizational levels, comprising core processes of teaching, research and third mission activities. The U!REKA-Network started as a participant-governed network, and it still is.

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According to the typology of Provan and Kenis (2008), the network is characterized by a shared governance. The ongoing development from a broader vision to more concrete goals was accompanied by the growing centrality of one HEI which now acts more or less as a lead institution. The more concrete and far-reaching the network actions, it seems, the more likely a brokered form of network governance (lead organization or NAO) is to emerge. Concerning the broker or leader function within the network, the U!REKA-universities have agreed to pass the general leadership of the network from university to university on an annual basis. Within the EUI application the network universities agreed on thematic leadership, meaning that every university is responsible for the coordination and the outcomes of one specific work package.

Concerning the four preconditions for network effectiveness derived from Provan and Kenis (2008, see fig. 2), we firstly discern a relatively low to moderate number of participants that fits well with the empirically observable participant-governance. Secondly, as mentioned above, goal consensus is relatively high within the U!REKA-Network.

Thirdly, and in accordance with other studies on university cooperation (see section 1), the issue of mutual trust is of major importance for the scope of engagement with this network as well as its sustainability. At the time of the interviews, there was generally a high level of trust among the people involved in network formation. But it has to been taken into account that so far only a limited number of people at different levels are strongly involved such as steering committee members, local coordinators as well as some academics and administrators. Furthermore, empirical findings clearly indicate that trust in university networks needs time to evolve. It is first built between individuals and it seems to be a longterm challenge to establish a more institutionalized and less personal form of trust. Trust obviously grows with the experience of reliability, accordance to the rules and transparency or what organizational researchers call "procedural fairness" (Osterloh and Weibel 2006, 134). Some network actors also point out the importance of shared ways of thinking, i.e. the existence and/or establishment of dominant cognitive frames (D'Andreta, et al. 2016). An-other interesting factor to explain the different degrees of trust attributed to the various network universities is management capacity, the proven ability to act strategically and to successfully foster collective action within the loosely coupled system of the respective universities.

The importance of loose coupling for university-networks is a central finding that also bears consequences for the fourth precondition, the need for network level competencies or a NAO within university networks. One central aspect of necessary network level competencies concerns the ability to raise collective action. All steering board decisions have to be complemented by bottom up initiatives of researchers, teachers, staff and students. Apart from creating adequate opportunity structures for university members within the different HEIs—for example by setting up internal funding schemes or by recruiting specific personnel—the aspect of communication and persuasion is very central to foster network engagement of the so-called "academic heartland" (Clark 1983). *"We need to tell the U!REKA story"* (U3_sc). This holds true within the universities where "evangelizers" (see chapter 4.2) are needed, as well as on the network level where an integrated communication might help a lot to foster identification with the network on a broader scale.

The need for network level competencies also refers to external tasks such as representation and communication. The interviews have shown that it might well become necessary to professionalize communication and harmonize processes in the field of information technology, where respective infrastructure and common regulations are crucial for the functioning of the network. Here a brokerage or more centralized coordination also seems necessary. This conclusion is supported by a recent publication of the European University Association on the governance structures of university alliances supported by the European University Initiative. The authors state that several networks (European Universities) have established separate legal entities, i.e. NAOs, or are in the process of doing so "to better anchor their collaboration structure" (Estermann, Bennetot und Stoyanova 2021, 17). So far, however, most university presidents in the U!REKA-network were sceptical about the foundation of a NAO. Only one indicates: *"I think that nevertheless we need some kind of administrative structure on the network level, how small it might be, to tie the whole thing together"* (U2_sc: 10).

In summary, the analytical model of Provan and Kenis (2008) offers a useful heuristic to assess the most effective governance model for university networks. Following this model, the most appropriate governance mode would be shared governance. This is because of the small number of partners and the high levels of trust and goal consensus. But as more actors (need to) get involved within the institutions (program coordinators, researchers, faculty administration), the need for network level competencies significantly rises. A NAO seems to become necessary and more effective to achieve the ambitious goals of a comprehensive and strongly interconnected European university network.

The study at hand shows that universities are specific institutions with regard to goals (high importance of prestige and normative goals), internal management (loose coupling) as well as country-specific regulations and political expectations. A functioning interplay between university management, academic heartland and support structures is needed to successfully and sustainably establish a comprehensive university network. This holds especially true if the network focuses on teaching.

Finally, it might well be a useful lesson to understand that without sufficient trust, no international university network will be able to successfully support its "mission to the moon", no matter how many resources are offered to support this endeavour.

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