

Should I Stay or Should I Go? Reflections from the European Universities Initiative Symposium

13.6.2025

“Should I stay, or should I go?” This provocative question was posed by Dr. Bjørn Stensaker from the University of Oslo, serving as rapporteur for the European Universities Initiative: 5 Years On – A Research and Practice Symposium, held in June 2025 in Lugano, Switzerland. His reflection captured a key tension faced by many higher education institutions engaged in the European Universities Initiative (EUI). Structural concerns were also raised by Sebastian Stride from SIRIS Academic: Can alliances really thrive with eight to ten full partners, when even forming strategic partnerships with just three institutions can be a challenge?

These questions strike at the heart of the complex dynamics within European University Alliances, which operate in a space that demands both deep collaboration and strategic competitiveness. As highlighted in recent research, these alliances are simultaneously platforms for joint action and arenas of institutional rivalry (Kehm, 2019; Maassen et al, 2023).



Landscape of Lugano, (photo: A-M Mäkelä, 2025)

Strategic Choices and Institutional Motivations

Joining one of the 65 European University Alliances has been a strategic decision for many institutions—while others have chosen to remain outside. Motivations vary widely. For some, participation offers a chance to influence European educational policy. For others, it’s about building institutional identity, branding, or

organizational sensemaking. Some alliance partners prioritize joint degrees and curricula; others focus more on joint research, development, and innovation (RDI). Regardless of the motivation, each choice points toward a shared ambition: transformation. Yet, there are limits. The “projectification” of alliances—where activities are confined to project timelines and funding cycles—raises questions about how sustainable and systemic these transformations can really be (Maassen et al., 2023).

Alliances as Platforms for Collaboration

Launched by the European Commission, the European Universities Initiative promotes long-term cooperation between higher education institutions across Europe. As of 2025, it has resulted in 65 alliances, connecting over 570 institutions in 35 countries. These alliances create shared platforms for student mobility, joint research, and innovative teaching practices.

The Lugano symposium brought together nearly 100 researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to reflect on the initiative’s achievements and challenges. Opening remarks emphasized the growing importance of alliances in transforming European higher education.



Close to 100 researchers and practitioners participated the symposium (photo: A-M Mäkelä, 2025).

Key panel discussions explored how project-based collaboration is reshaping governance models and institutional identities. Presenters examined how alliances enhance inclusiveness and enable strategic

change. Internal shifts within universities were also in focus—particularly around communication, staff engagement, and student participation in governance.



Key Panel Discussion: Continuities, Changes and Challenges for European Higher Education Landscape. Five Years of the European Universities Initiative (photo: A-M Mäkelä, 2025).

The HEROES European University Alliance exemplifies how strategic collaboration can drive transformation across research, education, and innovation. Bringing together institutions from Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Sweden, HEROES focuses on societal impact and co-creation, making it a strong case of alliance-based renewal in practice.

Global Reach and Local Impact

Alliances are not only engines of institutional renewal; they also play a role in advancing global partnerships and soft diplomacy. A dedicated session for early-career researchers highlighted how working in a European alliance influences everyday academic life, from administration to building a shared academic culture.

Swiss institutions—though from a non-EU country—offered compelling examples of how EUI engagement can integrate education, research, and innovation in meaningful ways. Poster sessions showcased practical tools and good practices, including co-creative teaching models and frameworks for measuring societal impact.

Looking Ahead

The Lugano symposium offered a wide-ranging view of how European University Alliances are evolving. As higher education institutions continue to ask whether to stay or go, one thing is clear: alliances are not static structures—they are dynamic platforms for change, cooperation, and competition.

Anne-Maria Mäkelä
Senior Advisor, International RDI and Networks
SEAMK

References

Kehm, B. M. (2019). University alliances in the European Higher Education Area: Conditions for success. In A. Curaj, L. Deca, & R. Pricopie (Eds.), European higher education area: Challenges for a new decade (pp. 39–53). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-56316-5_3

Maassen, P., Stensaker, B., & Rosso, A. (2023). *The European university alliances—an examination of organizational potentials and perils.*
Higher Education, 86, 953–968. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00951-4

Presentations at the Symposium called European Universities Initiative: 5 Years On – A Research and Practice Symposium, held in June 2025 in Lugano, Switzerland.