# University Alliances: Enhancing Control, Capacity, and Creativity in Dynamic Environments

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**Abstract.** During the last few decades a high number of university alliances and strategic partnerships between higher education institutions have been established all over the world. This development can be interpreted in different ways and the article offers some theoretical perspectives relevant to understanding the emergence of and the engagement in institutional collaborations, and how such collaboration affects the field of higher education. The article argues that alliances between universities are ways to enhance organizational capacity but also to take control of more competitive environments. Furthermore, alliances and partnerships can also be seen as the means to enhance organizational creativity and innovation in more organic ways. The paper gives an empirical illustration of how alliances develop and transform over time, and discusses possible long-term implications of alliance formation in the higher education sector.

**Keywords:** higher education sector, convergence, divergence, university alliances, strategic partnerships, meta-organization, The American Association of Universities.

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## Introduction

Internationalization and globalization of higher education have risen to the core of policy agendas throughout the world during the last decade. Following this political interest, there is a growing bulk of research on internationalization and globalization issues aimed at offering better definitions and more conceptual understandings of this phenomenon [de Wit 2002; Marginson, Rhoades 2002; Kehm 2003; Vaira 2004; Huisman, van der Wende 2004]. Still, much diversity and fragmentation can be said to characterize the research efforts so far [Beerkens 2004; Marginson, van der Wende 2007; Maringe, Foskett 2010]. Examples of the wide research focus include analysis of the interrelationship and differences between internationalization and globalization of higher education [Knight, de Wit 1995; Enders, Fulton 2002; van Vught et al. 2002; Knight 2004; Altbach, Knight 2007], studies of

geographically bounded processes including the Bologna process in Europe [Teichler 1999; Horie 2002; Gornitzka, Langfeldt 2008; Marginson et al. 2011], for-profit higher education and academic capitalism [Morey 2004; Slaughter, Cantwell 2011], international student and staff mobility [Santiago et al. 2008; Wildavsky 2010], global university rankings [Deem et al. 2009; Kehm, Stensaker 2009; Hazelkorn 2007; 2011], and university alliances and network establishments [Beerkens 2003; 2004; Beerkens, van der Wende 2007; Olds 2009; Sakamoto, Chapman 2011; Gunn, Mintrom 2013;, Vukasovic, Stensaker 2017].

All these studies point to a changing higher education landscape where the key higher education institution—the university—is also changing [Marginson 2002; Bartell 2003; Currie et al 2003; Salmi 2009; Ramirez 2010; Wildavsky 2010; Hazelkorn 2011]. Some authors also provide rather more concrete statements concerning the implications of these change processes, suspecting growing convergence following the globalization where the western university model and way of organizing is being emulated throughout the world [Wildavsky 2010; Ramirez 2010].

Conducting a more detailed empirical analysis of the convergence thesis is interesting for several reasons. First, while many studies of the higher education landscape specifically tend to emphasize communalities and converging trends in policy-making, we have few studies demonstrating the actual transformations taking place. Often, organizational structures are used as a proxy indicator for convergence in organizational behavior, although such structures have clear limitations as measures of organizational change [Stensaker 2004; Enders 2004]. Since higher education institutions are organizations with deeply embedded values, cultures and traditions, formal structures are often poor predictors of academic performance. As such, it can be more interesting to study the actions taken by individual higher education institutions, especially concerning how they maneuver and position themselves in the field they are embedded within.

Second, by focusing upon higher education institutions and their attempts—individually and collectively—to position themselves in the environment, we can perhaps also learn more about the mechanisms involved in processes related to convergence and divergence in the higher education sector. While analysis of student and staff mobility, changes in funding schemes, and various policy initiatives regarding joint degrees or collaborative research, all contribute to change along several dimensions, a focus upon the institutional level enables us to create a more overarching and better informed understanding of the changes in higher education [Taylor 2004; Teichler 2007].

While higher education institutions can be `strategic` in a number of ways, an emerging trend in higher education is the increasing number of national university alliances and networks emerging [Gunn, Mintrom 2013; Stensaker 2013]. Some of the most well-known of these networks are the Russell Group in the UK, the Group of Eight

in Australia, the U15 in Canada, and SKY in South Korea. Also internationally, numerous university networks or consortia have been established during the last few decades such as LERU and the Guild in Europe, and the more globally focused including IARU and the African Research University Alliance in Africa. Hence, university alliances are fast becoming a global phenomenon.

The purposes, activities and profiles of university alliances differ [Beerkens 2004; Olds 2009; Stensaker 2013], and the objective of the current article is to offer some theoretical perspectives for understanding the establishment of university alliances and how these may develop over time, and, in essence, to sketch out their potential impact on the higher education landscape. As such, the article also aims at informing the debate on whether university alliance establishments can be seen as an example of increasing convergence in higher education or whether such alliances are rather an indication of a growing stratification of higher education pointing to several 'layers' of institutions in the future global market for higher education [Stensaker 2013].

## University alliances—the rise of `meta-organizations` in higher education

In higher education, key global policy trends in recent decades have often been related to de-regulation, the stimulation of competition among universities and colleges, and the need for more institutional autonomy to enable the institutional competitiveness [van Vught et al 2002; Slaughter, Cantwell 2011]. These policy ideas have travelled effortlessly between continents and between countries [Czarniawska, Sevón 1996] and resulted in new routines and standards for what is perceived as proper governance [Brunsson, Jacobsson 2000], and affected the modes of collaboration and competition [Djelic, Sahlin-Andersson 2006]. Not least is it possible to identify the growing importance of ´meta-organizations´—new organizations where other organizations are members—which through collective actions and new forms of cooperation develop capacity for influencing society in which they are embedded [Ahrne, Brunsson 2008; Torfing 2012].

Such ´meta-organizations´ can be seen as structures that are i) a functional response to a more complex and competitive society, ii) a strategic solution to problems individual organizations are unable to respond to, or iii) a transformation of the organizational field [Torfing, 2012]. These three explanations are not mutually exclusive, but they provide some distinct lenses through which university alliances can be analysed, not least through their links with established theoretical perspectives in the studies of organization.

First, the establishment of university alliances can be seen as a functional response to a complex society—both nationally and internationally. In a world that is increasingly complex, containing new types of actors and with new markets emerging, establishing an alliance could be seen as a response mechanism for organizational sur-

vival and for increased control in a situation perceived as uncertain. This argument is central in neo-institutional theory which postulates that in situations characterized by uncertainty, organizations imitate other organizations that are perceived as successful [Labianca et al. 2001], that this imitation is triggered by environmental pressures for legitimacy [Hall, du Gay 1996], and that such pressures often can be described as meaning structures that force an organization to behave in ´rationalized´ ways [Ramirez 2010]. As a result, organizational changes will lead to convergence and increasing conformity by triggering reproduction and reinforcement of existing modes of thought and organizations [Scott 2001; Drori et al. 2006]. As concepts such as excellence and `world-class` are frequently mentioned in higher education policy discourse [Hazelkorn 2007; 2011], such purposes are likely to stimulate the establishment of alliances reinforcing such perceptions, although attempts related to gaining control also may have other rationales depending on what are perceived as the dominant ideas in the environment [Knight 2004].

Second, university alliances could also be seen as a strategic solution to problems individual organizations are unable to cope with on their own, and where some kind of cooperation is relevant. This kind of perspective has often been applied in analysis of organizations collaborating in the private sector, and is often linked to how critical resources—economic, political or technological—can be secured through formal organizational collaboration. This is an argument often associated with resource-dependence theory [Pfeffer, Salancik 1978] although it can also be linked to older forms of institutional theory [Selznick 1957; Greenwood, Hinings 1996]. The focus in this perspective is how organizations intentionally and in a more strategic fashion analyze their options and make informed choices as to how survival and prosperity can be achieved. In this perspective, being both similar to or different from potential competitors are possible options [Middlehurst 2002], although the logic associated with the resource-dependency is about how a more unique position can be established in an organizational field (Santiago et al. 2008). As a consequence, university alliances could be seen as an attempt to create special niches and build unique positions and capacity other organizations or alliances would find difficult, or even impossible, to imitate.

The two first perspectives can be associated with organizations acting in passive (functional) or active (strategic) ways when facing challenges in the environment. However, it is also possible to argue for a third perspective, characterized by a more organic view of organizational choice and change. This perspective, often associated with Scandinavian institutionalism, shares the neo-institutional view that powerful ideas and templates are found in the environment, but that there is an active agency found by those trying to make sense and adapt to these ideas [Czarniawska, Joerges 1996]. As a consequence, imitation is less about conformity and more about innovation and or-

ganizational learning [Sevòn 1996], not least due to the ability of organizations to edit and transform ideas in creative ways [Sahlin-Andersson 1996]. In this perspective, similarities and differences can occur in parallel processes, and there are many possible outcomes as analyses are made, options considered and decisions taken [Stensaker 2004]. The establishment of university alliances is in this perspective more dynamic and unpredictable, where purposes and activities may shift and transform over time.

To sum up, the three perspectives suggest that university alliances can serve different purposes including that of taking control of the environment, strengthen organizational capacity and enhancing creativity in a more competitive and dynamic higher education landscape. As indicated earlier, the perspectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and they may overlap, not least in a longer time perspective as environmental drivers change along with the internal dynamics of the focal alliance. For example, while members of alliances in general can be seen as having an interest in cooperation, they may at other times still see other member institutions as potential competitors, which may change the internal dynamics of an alliance [Ahrne, Brunsson 2008].

## An empirical illustration of the theoretical perspectives—The American Association of Universities (AAU)

As many of the current university alliances are quite young, especially in relation to the age of many of their member organizations, it is difficult to find good empirical examples concerning how alliances may change and transform over time. However, there is one alliance that differs considerably from many others with respect to age and which currently is closing in on the 120th anniversary of its establishment: The American Association of Universities (AAU)[1]. As such, the AAU is an interesting alliance to analyze, not least to identify possible shifts in purpose and functions over time.

The AAU is an old alliance formed in 1900 when 14 US universities came together to form a joint association due to experiencing problems concerning the reputation of US higher education at that time. Due to the rise of diploma mills and universities with dubious academic standards at that time, leading European institutions were increasingly skeptical about receiving US students, and the Presidents of the universities of Chicago, Harvard, Columbia, Johns Hopkins and California joined forces to advance the standards of “our own weaker institutions” as they formulated it in the letter of invitation to the other founding institutions [AAU 2000]. As many US universities were

[1] The historical description of the AAU is primarily based on “The Association of American Universities: A century in service to higher education 1900–2000” [AAU 2000], although other sources have been added to improve reliability and account for field level developments [Geiger 1986; 2004; 2009; Kerr 2001;, Berman 2012].

formed on the German university model [Geiger 1986], establishing good links with these universities and acquiring their acceptance was a strong rationale behind the establishment of the association. However, Geiger [1986] has also suggested that the forming of the AAU was a way to keep the promising students in the US, and to strengthen the quality and independence of US higher education. Kerr [2001: 118] has in addition suggested that the AAU also contributed to shaping and reproducing the reputational characteristics of the higher education system in the US. Due to the lack of a strong federal influence early on, associations such as the AAU played an important role in structuring a very decentralized system.

After the founding meeting in 1900, two major measures were taken by the 14 AAU universities. First, the members of the association agreed to implement a set of academic standards related to their educational offerings and, second, to promote these standards externally—both within the US and abroad. These steps were highly successful, and German universities soon started to use AAU membership as key admission criteria for US students. Other non-AAU US institutions wanting to acquire the same reputation soon asked for AAU membership, but as the association wanted to remain rather small and exclusive, many of these were turned down. However, the AAU offered to develop a list of US institutions which were seen as upholding proper academic standards, and the so-called "AAU Accepted List" became an important quality assurance tool for the expanding US higher education. Even if regional accreditation bodies were established, this list was seen as an equivalent to formal accreditation until it was terminated in 1948 [AAU 2000].

During WWII, the relationship between the AAU and the Federal Government in the US changed significantly [Geiger 2009]. As research conducted in US universities in general and by AAU members in particular had contributed to numerous scientific discoveries during the war, the Federal Government wanted to increase the funding directed at research-intensive universities, and in order to handle the newly established relationship with Washington the AAU was `taken over` by the Presidents of the member universities and became an organization more linked to federal policy processes and funding issues. As new policy and funding bodies developed after WWII (including NSF, NIH, and the research organization of the Public Health Service), new streams of money and resources were directed towards US higher education and especially to AAU member universities (see also [Kerr 2001]). The level of funding increased particularly after the Soviet-Union launched the Sputnik satellite towards the end of the 1950s and remained at a high level until the 1970s [Geiger 2009]. It was during the latter part of this period of expansion that the AAU established its first Washington office (1962), an establishment that was later followed by the establishment of a special Council on Federal Relations in 1969. During this period, the AAU started to develop some internal

tensions as a result of the fact that the association had a collective interest in expanding the total funding level directed towards research while members also wanted to increase their own shares of this funding. The latter process was often conducted by individual members of the AAU lobbying federal politicians, and arguing for earmarked funding to individual universities [AAU 2000].

Due to problems in the US economy during the 1970s, funding to research universities was reduced and many AAU members experienced economic challenges as a consequence, not least due to rising administrative costs due to the emergence of new federal policy initiatives such as increased student aid, affirmative action, and other public regulations affecting US universities. In this period, the AAU became even more formalized and after a planning period stretching from 1971, the association hired its first president in 1977, and rapidly built up a professional staff supporting the appointee. This professionalization of the association soon resulted in the development of a range of activities and new committees, clearinghouses for research, etc.

In the 1980s, US policy-making was introduced to `Reaganomics` which meant de-regulations at federal level and the introduction of a higher education sector more characterized by competition and market solutions [Geiger 2004; Berman 2012]. The links between research universities and economic development were as a consequence strengthened not least through federal regulations such as the Bayh-Dole Act on technology transfer [Berman 2012]. The increased competition was met in various ways by US higher education, and while some institutions tried to become entrepreneurial—sometimes resulting in research misconduct especially in the booming field of biomedical research [Greenberg 2007]—others sought to protect themselves from the competition by lobbying the policy-makers for earmarked funding [Geiger 2004]. The latter business, which has caused considerable turbulence within the AAU since the 1970s, escalated and members split in their view on whether federal resources should be distributed through competition or earmarking. In the latter group of AAU members, several built up their own federal lobbying offices in Washington.

One issue nevertheless united the AAU members in this period. This was related to the federal wish to increase the efficiency of research funding by cutting the `indirect costs` related to the research grants obtained [AAU 2000]. By cutting indirect costs, the federal level effectively increased the economic burden of those receiving the grants forcing universities to use some of their own funds to co-finance the research undertaken [Ibid.]. While this issue has been high on the agenda of the AAU since the 1980s, it remains a challenging area for the association even today.

As the federal policies emphasizing competition have continued into a new millennium, the AAU has become more attentive to issues

concerning reputation and status during recent decades. Although the association currently has 62 members and is considerably larger than many university alliances established in other parts of the world during recent times [Vukasovic, Stensaker 2017], the association still remains rather exclusive given the fact that there are around 3.500 institutions in the US. US higher education has also seen the rise of other university alliances alongside the AAU, such as the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (NASULGC), and the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU), but none of these alliances carry the same reputational status as the AAU.

The majority of the AAU founding universities were private, but the association grew steadily over the years, and in 1909 eight public universities had already joined, leading to a quite balanced public-private institutional membership. Currently, the AAU membership also includes two Canadian universities—McGill and Toronto—making the association in principle into an international alliance. Membership of the AAU is by invitation only, and while the history of the AAU is mostly about growth, some universities have during the latter decades left the association—some voluntary while others have had their membership terminated.

In 1999, one of the founding members of the AAU, Clark University, left the association and was followed by another founding member, the Catholic University of America, in 2002. While these universities were said to have left the association voluntarily as their mission had diverted significantly from that of AAU members over the years, more controversy came to the fore in 2011 when two other universities, Nebraska and Syracuse University, left the AAU after some heated internal discussions about the future profile of the AAU [Lederman, Nelson 2011]. Due to public questioning about the exclusiveness of AAU members, the association undertook an internal review of the research performance profile of its members, a process that ended with the association voting to terminate the membership of Nebraska University (Syracuse University left voluntarily). While both Nebraska and Syracuse argued that their research performances were quite good, both institutions suffered from a lack of a medical school boosting a research profile in biomedical and life-science areas [Ibid.].

Currently, the AAU is continuing its lobbying for federal support in Washington. But as federal spending on higher education in the US currently is proposed to be cut further from previous levels, the AAU seems to face a continuous challenge in trying to secure federal dollars while the members of the association are embedded in fierce competition for the funds available—a competition not everyone can win, and which will probably put further strain on the association in the years to come.

**Theoretical perspectives on the transformation of the AAU**

As illustrated in the brief synopsis of the AAU history, the association has undergone several transformations over time. Using our theoretical perspectives as points of departure, it can be argued that the establishment of the association can be linked to a strategic ambition of building capacity—both domestically and internationally. By developing a set of academic standards and actively promoting them, AAU can be said to have started out as an accreditation institution, before the accreditation systems was actually invented in the US [AAU 2000]. The ambition of being accepted internationally was not so much spurred by economic issues as by building reputation and by the wish to brand US higher education (cf. [Geiger 1986]). In this regard, the institutions clearly had a collective interest, and joined forces to build the reputation they perceived as difficult to achieve individually.

Due to changes in the funding regime in the US after WWII, the association transformed quite rapidly in 1949–50, and soon became an association for Presidents of the member universities, rather than for those that cared more about the quality assurance role the AAU had initially focused on. The establishment of strong federal links and the opening up of a Washington office with a special AAU President in charge of the daily running of the association fits well with the perspective of alliances as a way to gain more control in a changing environment. As the federal spending directed at US higher education steadily increased in the decades after WWII, and as AAU members traditionally have received a considerable amount of research money from federal agencies and funding bodies, the AAU became quite a successful interest organization in this period, focusing on internal US higher education policy issues rather than on building reputation on the international arena.

However, as the economic climate changed during the 1980s, the AAU also discovered some of the potential problems of meta-organizations; the challenge to balance joint cooperation with internal competition [Ahrne, Brunsson 2008]. It is quite interesting that it was during this period that the AAU became more professional as an association—through expanding the staff in the Washington office. This expansion can be explained in several ways; either as a sign of a `drift` in the activities of the AAU, or as a sign of disinterest in the AAU by their members as they wanted to secure important resources directly from policy-makers in Washington. There is empirical backing for both explanations as the association in this period expanded its activities into a range of new areas including establishing a clearinghouse for research, and the development of a new unit for institutional data analysis, while individual AAU members also opened up their own lobbying office in Washington. The former explanation fits well with the perspective of university alliances as arenas for creativity, where new activities and collaborations emerged [AAU 2000]. For example, during the 1980s and 1990s the AAU became very innovative in promot-

ing the association by building up and strengthening the public affairs functions within AAU member institutions.

Hence, it can be argued that the AAU in a situation more characterized by growing internal competition and tensions regarding federal resource distribution, again shifted focus and `re-discovered` the advantages of boosting the reputational dimension of the association. As federal policies are continuing to emphasize competition, the AAU can be said to have a greater interest in making a stricter distinction between those being members and those on the outside as reputation may have a positive impact on competitive funding [Geiger 2004]. The termination of membership of institutions that performed poorly according to AAU standards is a sign of an association caring more about its reputation than before (the AAU had expanded its membership for 99 years before Clark University departed from the association in 1999). The perspective that fits this latest transformation is again that of trying to take control—this time of the reputation of the AAU through firmer management of the criteria related to the membership.

If we are to interpret how the theoretical perspectives fit with the assumptions related to convergence and divergence of the higher education landscape, one could argue that the establishment phase of the AAU was characterized by an attempt to create a distinct association nationally, although the AAU at the same time clearly was trying to emulate what were considered as leading universities internationally. When the AAU became more oriented towards federal policy-making, it started to resemble other US university alliances such as NAICU and NASULGC—acting more like a typical interest organization and behaving in much the same way as other alliances competing for the same federal resources. However, during the last few decades, it is possible to argue that the AAU has once again been trying to emphasize its distinctiveness compared with other alliances and institutions in the field—although their role as an interest organization for their members still seems intact. These shifts are theoretically interesting as they indicate that processes of convergence and divergence are not constant as suggested in neo-institutional theory [Scott 2001], but shifts over time dependent on the dynamics taking place in the field the alliances are embedded within. As such, the transformational perspective appears as very relevant to understanding alliance developments over time.

## Conclusions and possible implications

The current article has offered different theoretical perspectives regarding the establishment, function and effects of university alliances. As illustrated by the keywords of control, capacity and creativity, university alliances may have different ambitions, and as illustrated by our case study of the AAU, purposes and roles may shift over time triggering both processes of diversity and conformity within the field of higher

education. As such, one conclusion is that meta-organizations such as university alliances represent a dynamic element between macro- and micro-level structures. These alliances may shape both the environment they are part of—for example as when the AAU managed to enhance the reputation of US higher education—as well as the individual member universities—for example by forcing them to comply with the joint academic standards of the AAU. However, alliances do operate in an environment and contextual changes—for example when funding regimes and streams changed in the US after WWII—can effectively transform an alliance in a radical way. As suggested by Selznick [1957], such institutional changes may be more radical when new actors come in and take over responsibilities and important functions such as when the AAU became an association for university presidents in the early 1950s. As such, university alliances can be seen as interesting instruments for purposeful agency. What is often considered as a weakness of meta-organizations—their problems in joining forces [Ahrne, Brunsson 2008]—can actually represent an `open` structure for those willing and able to exercise power (see also [Gunn, Mintrom 2013]).

The case study offered has provided empirical evidence of dynamic shifts between periods of convergence and divergence in university alliances, and as such, has offered nuances regarding the convergence theses which tend to dominate the discourse concerning the future landscape of higher education [Hazelkorn 2011]. It seems that issues of differentiation are more likely to take place when the focal meta-organization perceives it has become too similar to other alliances. This may suggest that processes of convergence and divergence are related to the dynamic and ongoing processes of comparisons between organizations [Stensaker 2004]. Of course, as the current research has only studied one particular case, and as the AAU is a geographically quite distinct alliance, more research is needed on how other national and international alliances potentially shape the global higher education landscape.

Nevertheless, if we are to speculate about the future ways university alliances may impact higher education, our case study indicates several possible implications. First, university alliances are dynamic entities that may shift purpose and roles over time. As such, they represent an interesting instrument for institutions to join and to influence. Second, the fact that the AAU is currently heading towards its 120th birthday also suggests that these alliances perhaps can be rather permanent constructions, although their membership may shift over time. As such, we may face the emergence of a new layer in the ways higher education sectors are organized both nationally and globally. Third, the fact that the AAU for some time has included two Canadian universities as members, may also hint to a future where the categorization of university alliances into either being domestic or international, is of less relevance, not least due to how globalization may impact the traditional boundaries of higher education.

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