

Building a 'university of the future'



A reflection paper on governance in
European Universities alliances



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Executive summary

The European Universities initiative presents alliances as “paving the way towards the universities of the future”. This paper argues that the innovation integral to realising this vision must extend to alliances’ governance models.

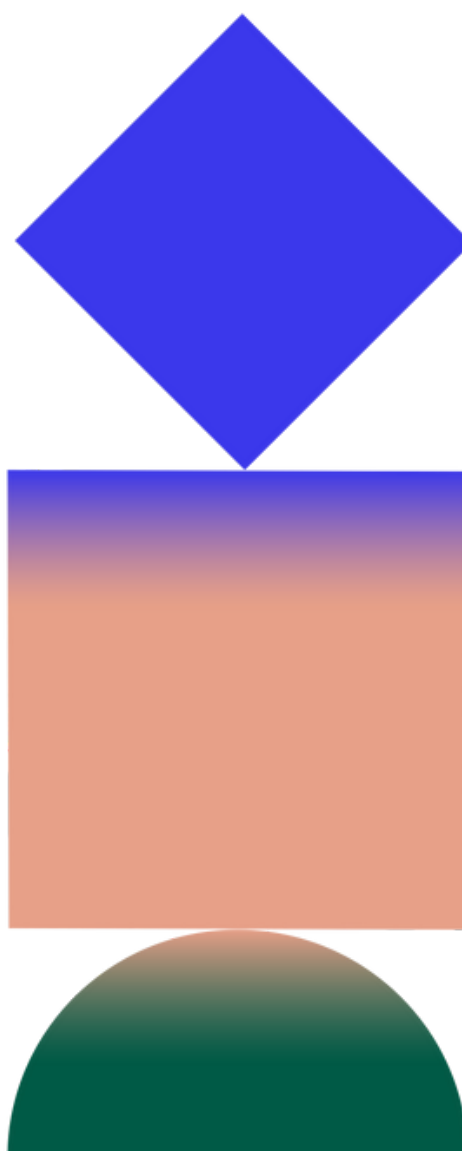
Alliances share common challenges. However, contexts mean that how these challenges are experienced is as diverse as Europe itself.

Therefore, Una Europa’s governance model does not aim to present a static model that can be replicated by fellow alliances. Rather, it proposes three fundamental governance principles that can be adapted by other alliances to their specific contexts:

- **Adaptability:** Structures evolve in response to emerging needs, enabling efficient decision-making.
- **Transparency:** Governance forums integrate partner universities’ strategies and enable co-creation with a shared vision.
- **Responsivity:** Governance deliberations are able to respond to pressing contemporary challenges by drawing on the wealth of expertise of partner universities, from both internal and external stakeholders and stakeholder groups.

Looking ahead, Una Europa is committed to remaining flexible and responsive by maintaining institutional memory, monitoring policy and funding developments and opportunities, and pursuing a robust internal communications strategy.

This paper reflects on the important role played by adaptability, transparency, and responsivity in creating universities of the future.



Introduction:

Common challenges, unique experiences

The European Universities initiative presents alliances as “paving the way towards the universities of the future”.

There are now 65 alliances active across the continent, each a hub of innovation in its own right. These alliances bring together partner universities and ask them to rethink traditional models for inter-institutional networking and cooperation, most notably in the areas of educational courses and programmes, but also in the areas of research and innovation and service to society. They bring with them new communities of practice, and call for renewed exchange on best practices both within and beyond the borders of any given alliance.

On the face of it, alliances share common challenges. In truth, their unique contexts mean that how these challenges are experienced is as diverse as Europe itself. In taking account of what they have done together in the past, each alliance establishes for itself a well-reasoned set of expectations concerning what they should and will do in the future. Each alliance establishes for itself a shared purpose and mission.

Based on the purpose, mission and composition of an alliance, challenges are framed and experienced differently. According to the October 2024 report from the French Senate [1], alliances can be grouped into three distinct categories:

- i. alliances which serve as another form of cooperation, akin to existing projects and networks, with no view towards incorporation of members;
- ii. alliances which serve as platforms for the full incorporation of all members;
- iii. alliances which serve as federations of members.

Drawing on these categories, let's consider three common challenges that have arisen in conversation with governance experts representing European Universities:

- Engaging partner universities
- Securing alignment between the governance of the partner universities and the governance of the alliance
- Communicating effectively.

[1] Rapport d'information n° 52 (2024-2025), déposé le 17 octobre 2024: *Proposition de résolution au nom de la commission des affaires européennes, en application de l'article 73 quater du Règlement, sur les universités européennes : Universités européennes : vers un acte II*).

Challenge 1: Engaging partner universities

Keeping universities and their senior leadership actively involved in an alliance can look different from one alliance to another. What counts as ‘sufficient engagement’ depends on the alliance’s mission and its unique goals.

For alliances that represent another form of cooperation similar to existing projects and networks, the level of involvement from partner universities is usually limited. Typically, this involves project managers and senior administrators who are making decisions within the constraints of a grant or project description.

In other words, each partner is only involved as much as the specific project requires.

On the other hand, alliances aiming for full integration of their members require more involvement, especially from senior leadership, as they negotiate the conditions under which they will coalesce.

Lastly, alliances that aim to create a federation of independent universities working together on shared goals need a strong governance structure. This structure should support decision-making both for individual projects and for the alliance as a whole. In these cases, the alliance is not a single project but a collaboration between partners working on multiple projects. It is crucial to have appropriate governance bodies to ensure proper decisions are made in pursuit of common goals. The governance of an alliance should satisfy those decisions that need to be made, based on the role of the alliance and its projects.

Challenge 2: Aligning governance

Each alliance has its own approach to aligning the governance structures of the partner universities. What 'alignment' looks like, and how much of it is necessary, varies significantly depending on the alliance's focus.

To fully understand the level of engagement required, it is important to make clear how the governance of an alliance maps onto (or not) the governance of partner universities. Significantly, each alliance has its own approach to aligning the governance structures of the partner universities. What 'alignment' looks like, and how much of it is necessary, varies significantly depending on the alliance's purpose and focus.

Does the purpose of an alliance require representation on the part of senior leadership in order for effective decision making to take place? Which members of senior leadership? Should the governance of an alliance mirror the governance of partner universities where possible?

Should the governance of an alliance itself consist of an exercise in innovation?

This last question should be answered with a resounding affirmation. The other questions should be addressed only from within the clearly established purpose of a given alliance.

Challenge 3: Communicating effectively

Effective internal communication of decisions is essential. However, the methods and clarity needed for internal communication vary greatly from one alliance to the next.

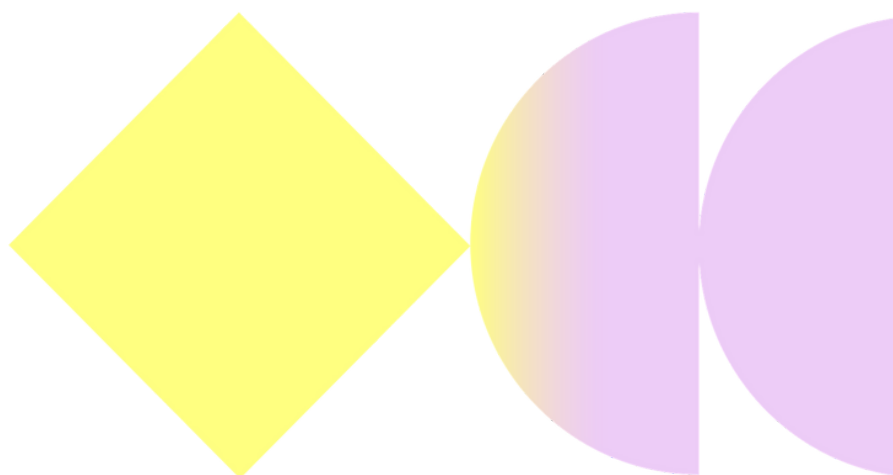
It is vital that the purpose and mission an alliance establishes for itself is effectively communicated to relevant stakeholders. The successful communication of decisions is essential to successful future deliberations on the part of different governance groups.

However, and in line with what has already been discussed, the methods and clarity needed for communication vary greatly from one alliance to the next. With this in mind, alliances should develop internal communication strategies carefully. These strategies should ensure that appropriate actors are kept informed of relevant discussions, deliberations, and decisions that impact their collaborative work.

These issues, despite being presented as common challenges, cannot be solved with a 'one-size-fits-all' governance approach.

Alliances' governance models should reflect their future-oriented approach.

There is no static model for alliances to replicate. We therefore rather propose fundamental governance principles that can be adapted by other alliances to their specific contexts in offsetting challenges as outlined above.



Una Europa's governance

The formal establishment of Una Europa vzw/asbl distinguishes the governance of the alliance from the governance of its projects. The alliance pursues a long-term deep, broad and integrated cooperation between its university members in high-quality education, research, and service to society. It develops and implements strategies in order to make this integrated cooperation a sustainable reality, including through applications for subnational, national, European and international funding. The alliance serves as a federation of its members.

At the level of the alliance, Una Europa has two effective decision-making bodies, in line with its ambition to maintain a lean, efficient, and meaningful governance structure.

The alliance itself is formally established through the **General Assembly**, which brings together the **Rectors** (or equivalent) from each of the partner universities as well as **University-Related Members** (legal entities related to a University Member). It is the highest decision-making authority. Its decisions set the financial, institutional, and, in the form of partnership agreements and statutes, legal constraints for the management of the association. These also set the strategic objectives of the association and adopt work plans for activities to be implemented.

The General Assembly appoints directors to the **Board of Directors** and members to Una Europa's **External Advisory Board**. The External Advisors serve as strategic council for the association.

The management of the association is entrusted to the **Board of Directors**, which brings together the Vice-Rectors International (or equivalent) from each of the partner universities. It has the most extensive powers to manage the association and to carry out those actions it deems necessary or useful for the realisation of the objectives of the association. It is also responsible for developing and overseeing the strategies of the alliance and implementing activities on the part of the association.

The Board of Directors currently benefits from the input and proposals of additional governance bodies, including the **Research Strategy Group**, the **Student Board**, and the **Teaching and Learning Strategy Group**.

The **Research Strategy Group** brings together Vice-Rectors Research and Innovation (or equivalent) from each of the partner universities. They are responsible for the development, implementation and promotion of the Una Europa Research & Innovation Strategy, which incorporates sub strands relating to priority research themes, research funding, research collaboration, research culture and careers, research infrastructure and resources, open research, research engagement with business, industry and the third sector, and citizen engagement with research. They provide strategic advice and direction to the Board of Directors on matters relating to research and innovation.

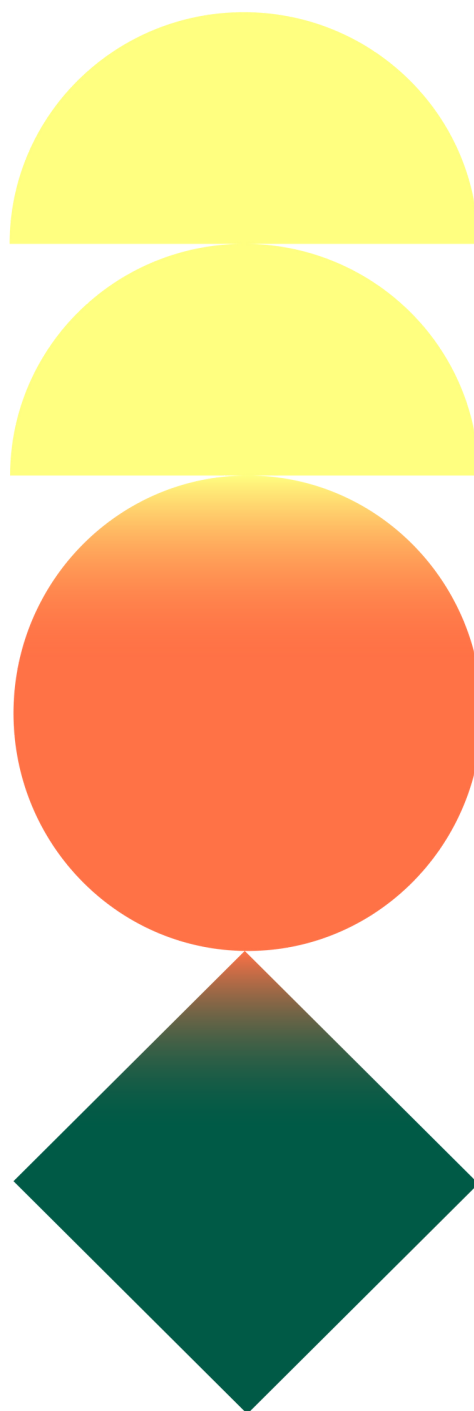
The **Teaching and Learning Strategy Group** brings together Vice-Rectors Educational Policy (or equivalent) from each of the partner universities. They are responsible for the development, implementation and promotion of the Una Europa Teaching and Learning Strategy. They provide strategic advice and direction to the Board of Directors on matters relating to educational policy.

The **Student Board** brings together two student representatives from each of the partner universities. They are responsible for ensuring that students are represented in the deliberations of the Board of Directors, in line with Una Europa's explicit commitment to involve students in co-creating the European University consistently and systematically. They are responsible for the development, implementation and promotion of the Una Europa 2030 Student Board Strategy. They provide advice and direction to the Board of Directors on matters relating to students and the student experience.

Chairs of these groups are regular invitees and attendees at the meetings of the Board of Directors. Their impact on the deliberations of the Board of Directors is facilitated through strategic proposals that are submitted to the Board of Directors for validation.

The meetings of the Board of Directors are also attended by the **representatives for Project Coordinators**. These representatives inform the deliberations of the Board of Directors through reporting on ongoing projects.

At the level of its flagship project (Una.Futura), Una Europa currently has two effective decision-making bodies. **The Executive Committee** acts as the highest decision-making body. It considers and decides upon the validation of all project deliverables. **The Steering Committee** is the steering centre of the project and serves as the forum for alignment on the project's objectives. It is responsible for planning, monitoring, evaluating the project outputs, and validating project milestones.



Una Europa's governance principles: Adaptability, transparency, responsiveness

Una Europa takes a dynamic, adaptable approach to governance that enables the alliance to respond effectively to challenges as they arise.

This approach is underpinned by the following principles:

- Adaptability
- Transparency
- Responsivity

Principle 1: Adaptability

As Una Europa evolves, it is able to introduce new forums to allow for more specialised discussions and deliberations.

Case study

Una Europa Research Strategy Group and Una Europa Teaching and Learning Strategy Group

When Una Europa took up its Una.Resin project proposal, which was successfully funded by the EU's Horizon 2020 Programme for Research Innovation, it became clear that research had not been included initially in the scope of Una Europa's activities and therefore did not fall within the existing remit of the Board of Directors.

It was therefore decided to promote a new governance body dedicated to research.

The Una Europa Research Strategy Group was created to develop a long-term joint-strategy for research in cooperation with the thematic working groups and the partner universities.

Similarly, during the transition from the 1Europe pilot project to the Una.Futura roll-out project, it became clear that there was a deficiency in educational policy and that, alongside the Board of Directors and the Research Strategy Group, it was necessary to create a new body with expertise in this area. This led to the creation of the Una Europa Teaching and Learning Strategy Group.

The case study of the Research Strategy Group and the Teaching and Learning Strategy Group highlights how Una Europa adapts according to what needs to be deliberated and by whom. It assesses the extent to which similar deliberations will be necessary and whether or not new formats or governance groups are required in order for the realisation of its established purpose.

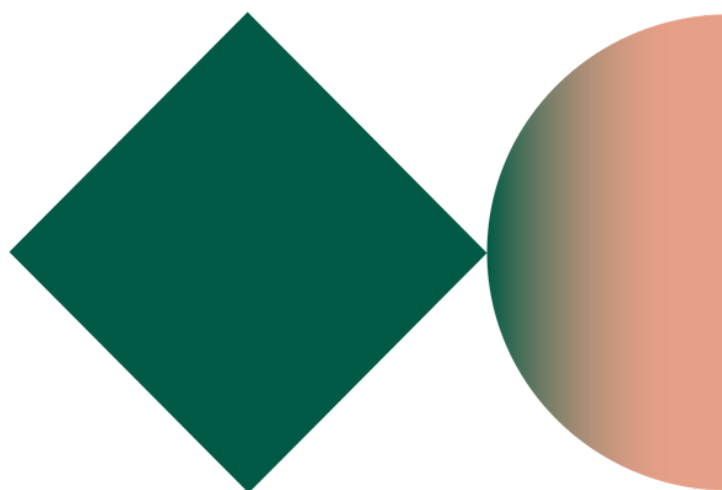
This allows for Una Europa to scale its governance, either through its projects and related partnership agreements or through its legal association on a more permanent basis.

Principle 2: Transparency

To remain adaptable, and to ensure that appropriate discussions take place between appropriate actors, partner universities need representatives who can participate in transparent deliberations. Una Europa works to ensure transparency through open communication, shared documents, and clear decision-making processes.

Meeting minutes, governance documents, strategy papers, and policy positions are circulated internally and, where relevant, made available to appropriate stakeholders. This promotes a culture of informed engagement across all levels of the alliance.

Una Europa's governance bodies are designed to allow for the strategic goals of each partner university to be made transparent, by serving as forums in which the strategies of partner universities can be aligned and contribute to the development of the strategies of the alliance. This approach is reinforced through joint meetings between different governance groups, as well as focused interventions in the different groups which allow for direct updates concerning the deliberations and decisions of the other groups.



This approach to transparency has successfully resulted in our 2030 Strategy, our Research and Innovation Strategy, our Joint Strategy for Education, and our Student Strategy.

These joint strategies result from incorporating the aligned strategies of partners, without undermining or distorting these strategies as they have been established at the level of each partner university.

Case study

Una Europa 2030 Strategy: Shaping our shared future for the better

Una Europa's [2030 Strategy](#) is the culmination of a year-long consultation with the senior leadership of each university, together with students, academics and professional services staff to set the alliance's course for the future, together.

Rooted in the alliance's [Manifesto](#), the Strategy sharpens partner universities' collective focus on shared opportunities and challenges that transcend the scope of individual projects.

Championed by the central Una Europa vzw team as Strategy guardians, the 2030 Strategy fosters transparency and strategic alignment through the establishment of bi-annual milestones, developed in consultation with relevant stakeholders across the alliance, to measure progress and demonstrate impact.

Una Europa's joint strategies determine alliance priorities and which actions are to be piloted and developed. These actions are integrated into each partner university, and, where appropriate, are eventually incorporated into their structures and work, without undermining or distorting the strategic priorities of the alliance. This approach creates common ground where universities can work together to achieve shared objectives.

Principle 3: Responsivity

As European Universities alliances and the international higher education context at large continue to change, Una Europa remains responsive.

Una Europa's Board of Directors is able to respond to pressing contemporary challenges by drawing on its wealth of expertise, from both within and beyond their universities. Our partner universities can call upon existing networks and collaborations to ensure that deliberations account for the most relevant positions and interests.

Case study

Una Europa External Advisory Board: Leveraging external expertise

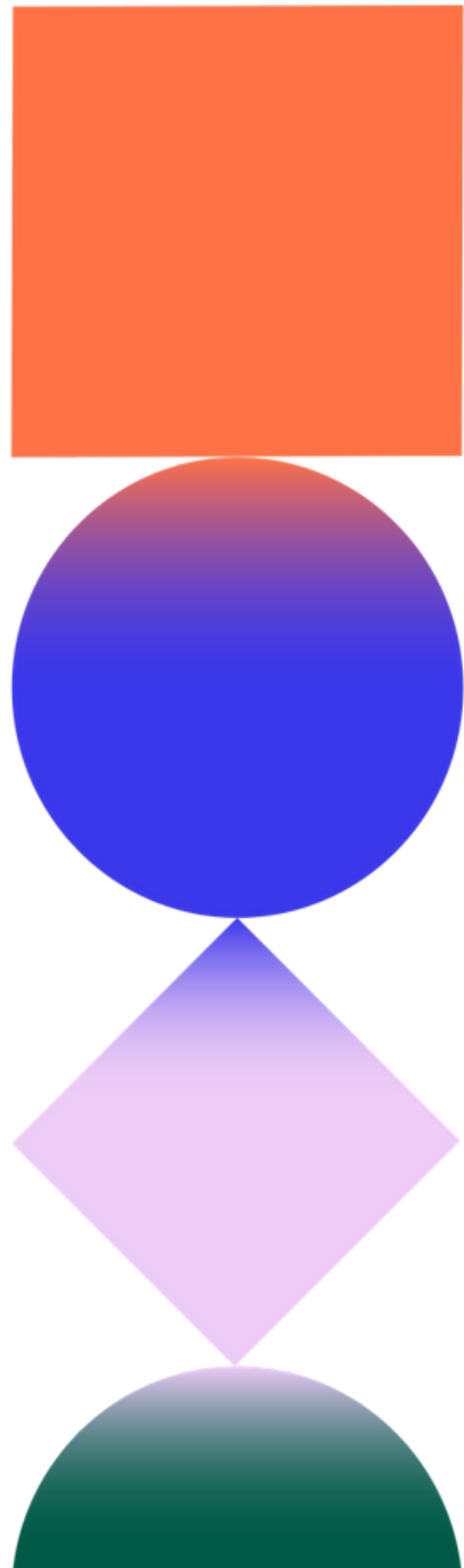
Comprising 10 senior leaders with expertise in diverse fields, the Una Europa External Advisory Board is appointed to provide counsel to the Board of Directors on the strategic direction of the alliance. External Advisors are expected to possess a fundamental understanding of strategic issues affecting the university sector within a global context and the dynamics of international collaboration.

The creation of an External Advisory Board also reflects Una Europa's desire to open up to society and benefit from the expertise and experience of individuals from other fields. Through the breadth and depth of their expertise, and active dialogue with the Board of Directors (via biannual 'deep dive' meetings), Una Europa's External Advisory Board contributes to the alliance's agility and ability to respond to internal and external challenges.

This flexibility is made possible in part by the prioritisation of key issues assigned to the External Advisory Board, allowing for the General Assembly and the Board of Directors to benefit from the specific expertise that External Advisory Board members bring to the deliberative process on a given issue.

It is also owed in part to the rotation of its members, enabling the appointment of appropriate experts to specific deliberations prioritized by the alliance at a given time.

The Una Europa model for governance accounts for dynamic complexity and evolution by prioritising adaptability to changing circumstances at the level of the alliance, its projects, its partners, and the ecosystems relevant to each of these. It focuses on facilitating the right deliberations, by the right people, and this in the service of decisions appropriate to a clearly communicated purpose.



Looking to the future

Looking ahead, Una Europa is committed to remaining adaptable, transparent, and responsive.

We believe it is important that alliances understand where they are coming from, where they are going, and the context in which they are making their decisions. It is therefore important that they value their past, monitor their unique context, and successfully communicate governance bodies' decisions and what the implications of those decisions are.

Valuing the past

Despite only existing since 2019 at the most, European Universities alliances have developed a strong sense of self and purpose, in part owed to the successful development of different ways of collaborating effectively in different contexts and projects on the part of partner universities in the past.

Each partner university has staff ensuring that relevant support is afforded to governance representatives in terms of appreciating the context in which a deliberation takes place. Through onboarding, bilateral meetings, and interventions in the meetings of governance groups, this staff facilitates institutional memory and helps to ensure that the ground covered to date is accurately mapped as the way forward is planned.

Monitoring policy and funding

Alliance deliberations benefit from purpose and foresight. They benefit from successful monitoring of and engagement with trends concerning policy and funding, especially when these can be accomplished with a view to those deliberations.

Experts in policy and external funding working in each of the partner universities, together with experts in the central office in Brussels, feed into the deliberations of all governance groups. It is a particular strength of Una Europa that these dedicated experts on policy and funding are able to work in tandem, each feeding into and informing the other.

For matters concerned with external funding, these colleagues participate e.g. in a Research Coordination Cluster, responsible for supporting the design and implementation of joint research projects and activities. For matters concerned with policy, these colleagues are often the Senior Local Leads, responsible for the effective implementation of Una Europa activity across their respective university and for coordinating the development and overseeing the operationalisation of strategies at a local level to ensure effective engagement in the alliance.

This shared responsibility ensures information is sufficiently communicated to decision-makers with an eye towards local, national, European, and international developments. Tailored and complementary input from these dedicated experts at the central office and partner universities enable a clear reconciliation of purpose, strategy, and opportunity. Insights and guidance are provided to governance bodies on securing funding, for instance through a holistic external funding strategy, and shaping policies in line with an alliance's strategies.

The complementary expertise of the central office and partner universities in policy and funding helps to make transparent to governance groups what is relevant for the sake of their discussions and deliberations. They help to make clear precisely where there are opportunities for realising their joint strategies.

Ensuring transparency through effective internal communications

One indicator of successful governance is the extent to which decisions emerging from different governance bodies are clearly communicated to relevant stakeholders. This includes a clear communication of the implications of these decisions.

Communications managers in the Una Europa central office have developed and oversee the alliance's regular internal newsletter, Una.Update, which includes the communication of all deliberations and decisions of different governance bodies. Together with Communications Leads at each of the partner universities, these colleagues ensure sufficient amplification and clarification of the broader impact these decisions have on the alliance.

Colleagues from partner universities and the central office are also responsible for reporting on the outcome of governance meetings in other governance meetings, ensuring that decisions are directly communicated to relevant stakeholders.

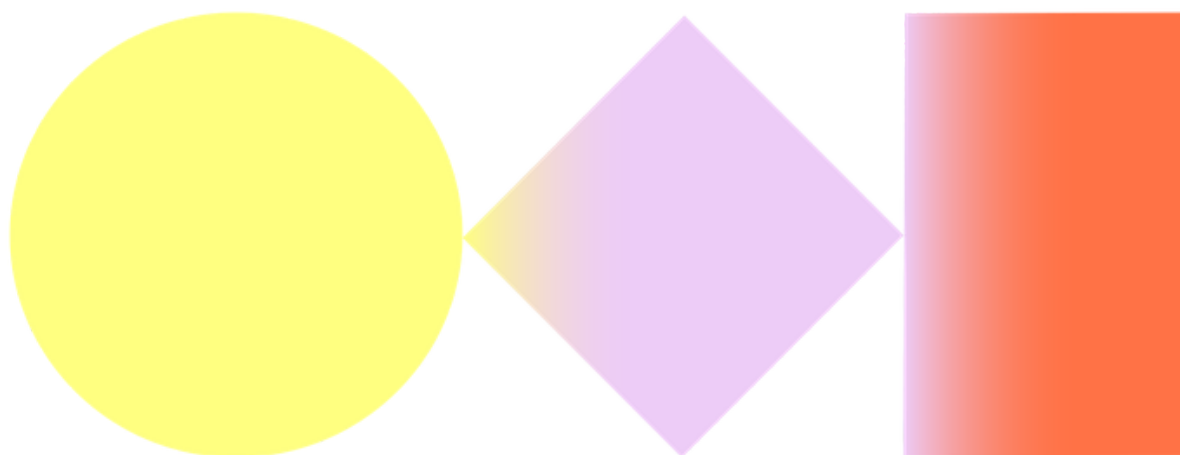
A robust internal communications strategy helps to ensure that the governance of an alliance remains transparent to its stakeholders writ large and effective in disseminating value. The Una Europa model for governance outlined above is only as effective as the internal communications strategy that facilitates its functioning and ensures that decisions come to bear on the operations of the alliance.

Conclusion:

Building a 'university of the future'

Una Europa demonstrates that effective alliance governance is not a static process but a space for continuous innovation. By embracing adaptability, transparency, and responsiveness, Una Europa exemplifies how alliances can both evolve and embrace the opportunities of contemporary higher education.

Building 'universities of the future' requires alliances to forge their own paths, borrowing inspiration from others but tailoring solutions to their unique contexts. Each alliance, and in turn its governance, is bespoke. The European Universities initiative is evolving quickly.



About this publication

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