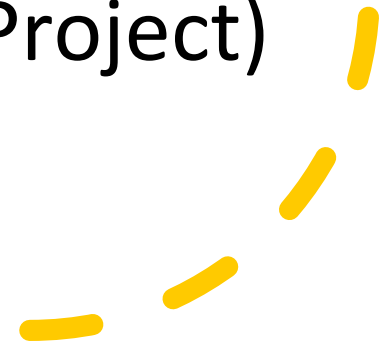


Systemic  
Governance  
Theoretical  
Session



Libyan Universities' Network  
for HE Reform and  
Management:  
which model of governance?  
(WP2 – T2.4 Wheel Project)





## Concept Note for Networking universities. Suggestions and ideas from research

- This analysis focuses on partnership governance and delves more specifically into the governance of universities networks established through a research. We focus on strengthening strategic and in-depth transinstitutional collaboration through the development of Networks involving universities from several Libyan areas.
- Thus, the question of these partnerships' governance is highly relevant in terms of structures, inclusiveness and processes. This analysis aims to provide an initial overview of these structures and to analyse relevant governance challenges.
- The aim is to provide a sort of guidelines for the establishment of the Libyan Universities' Network.

# The policy process

Zooming in more specifically on governance provisions, Network member institutions are invited to go beyond existing higher education cooperation models and test different innovative and structural models for implementing and achieving ambitious long-term visions.

Regarding implementation, the initiative requires that the joint activity work plan be supported by the design of relevant and efficient shared management structures.

# The Network

These consortia should consider a good number of HEIs; they can be public/private institutions and must be active in the area of higher education, research and innovation. These institutions can apply as full or associate partners and/or affiliate entities.

In practice, the institution's academic profile may be very diverse and includes different HEI types.

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The Networks can be formed by members with diverse legal statuses, including public and private institutions, foundations, and other non-university partners. Networks can have also different strategic choices regarding their focus, with some favouring a topic-oriented approach, focusing on sustainable development, health and well-being, digitalisation, art, engineering and space.

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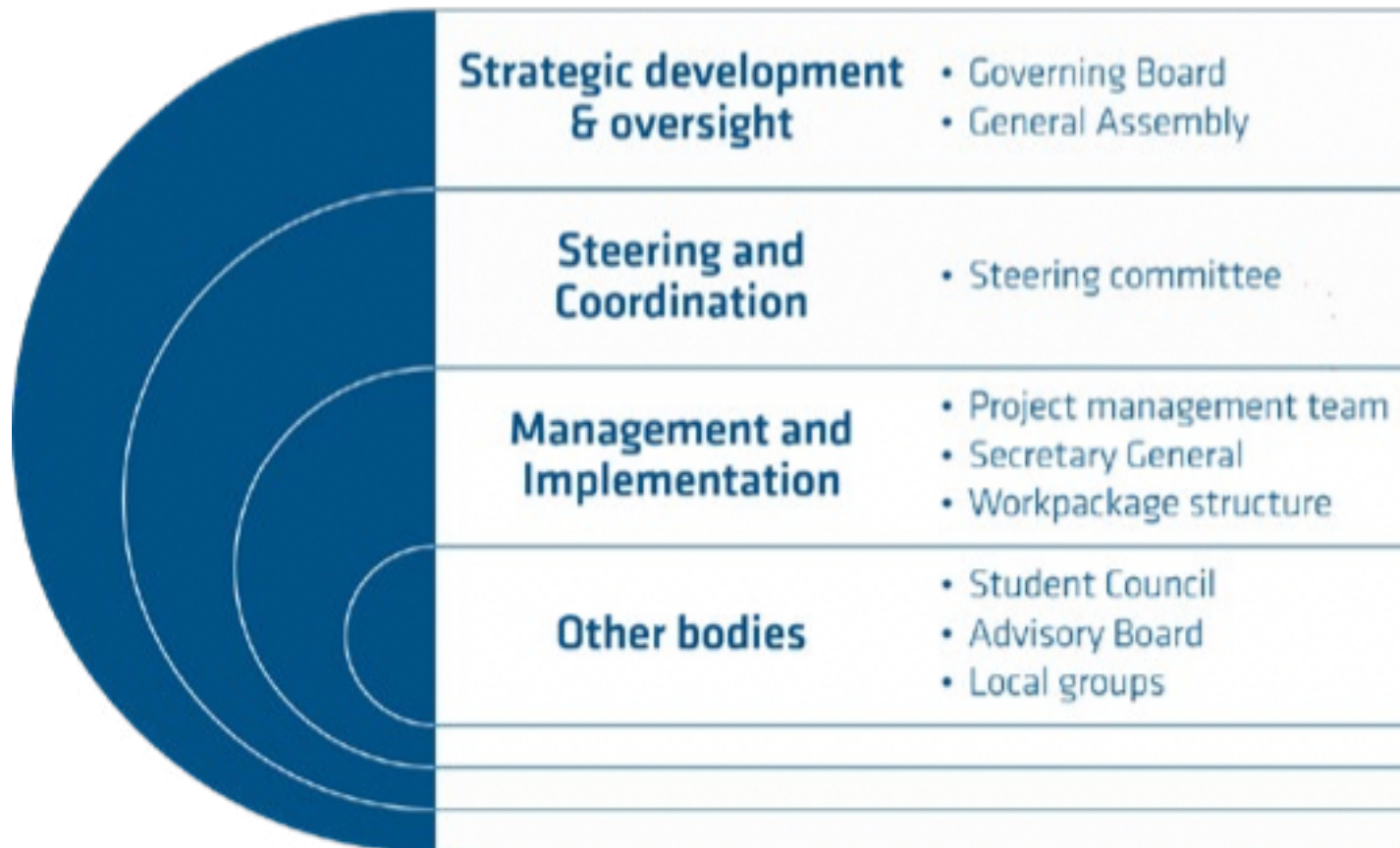
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- Networks can use a step-by-step approach, testing different settings, structures, and operational models, while looking beyond the project horizon to establish a sustainable model.
  - It is worth noting that Networks may define their bodies in a particular way, but our analysis is based on an evaluation considering the characteristics and composition of their governance bodies, the distribution of responsibilities and their dynamics.



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The governance structure usually includes a long-term strategic development and oversight body, responsible for defining the general policy, long-term strategies, and policy priorities; and a steering and coordination body more focused on achieving progress. It is not always possible to draw a clear line between these two, as governing bodies often have responsibilities connected to both aspects, but focused on one or the other. Day-to-day Network management and project implementation is then usually undertaken by a dedicated management team or a Secretary- General.

## Visual representation of Networks' governance structure





## Strategic development and oversight

All Networks analyzed in the research set up a top governing body (General Assembly/Rectors' Assembly/ Presidents Committee, Governing Board, etc.), which is usually in charge of the general policy, vision and long-term strategy of the network. This typically includes the executive leaders from each member institution (e.g. rectors, presidents, vice-chancellors); while some Networks include additional members, such as student representatives, the Secretary General, or associate members. This top decision-making body decides on major project changes, accepts new members, proposes alterations and advises the project management team. Meeting frequencies vary from once every four to once every six months, and extraordinary meetings can be convened at any time.



## Steering and coordination

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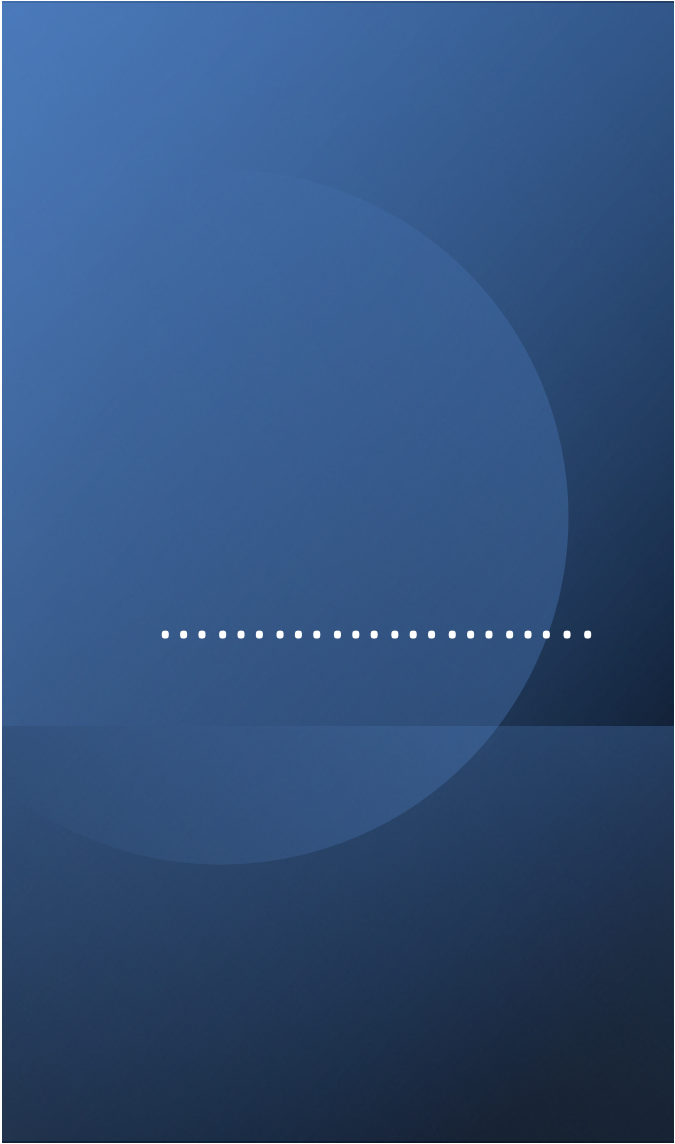
The top body is followed by the Steering Committee (or Executive Committee/Board), which is responsible for steering and coordinating alliance activities and objectives. Its members are usually vice rectors (or vice-presidents) or other senior representatives.

## Management and implementation

- The implementation of the Networks' aims, and day-to-day management is led by a management team (project management team) or secretariat/office set up especially for this purpose. This team often comprises managerial staff from the different universities, such as heads of administration, directors of services and departments, for whom the alliance represents an additional activity. In other cases, these posts are fully detached from their university roles.

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- The secretariat/office may be led by a secretary-general who oversees project activity coordination, while in other cases its role is to liaise with the Network's different strategic and operational bodies. A project coordinator may also be in charge of project activities and liaise with the member institutions and the funding authority. Some Networks choose to go down the route of a network, where a team of senior staff from each member institution regularly liaise about project activities, instead of there being a single contact point.



The shorter-term aims of the project and concrete activities are implemented by project managers and coordinators at the member institutions, work package (WP) leaders, thematic mission board members and other academic and non-academic players.

# Student involvement

Student involvement in all levels of governance is highly valued. Networks have to promote students involvement in their strategic governance.

The form of involvement ranges from observation of strategic governing body meetings to participation in the decision-making bodies and/or involvement in the implementation of the work packages

In some Networks, student involvement is deeply embedded in the governance structure, and elected student representatives also take part in the highest decision-making body.

## Other bodies

In many cases Network governance structure includes advisory bodies, although these are subject to different formulations. Advisory bodies are positioned at different levels to provide expertise to the Network governance. Some Networks can include a quality assurance component, while others simply account for diverse stakeholders' representation. The composition varies and reflects the Network's approach or focus. It may include non-academic representatives; representatives of associate partners; regional or local authorities; citizens' representatives; or national accreditation bodies, among others.



## Avoid conflated objectives

The Network's goal of being at the forefront of the university transformation agenda is so broad that it allows for various interpretations. It signals both internal and external dimensions: internally, ever-closer collaboration should generate (perhaps via institutional isomorphism or the socialisation of the communities involved) an impetus to transform processes and practices at the member institutions. While attractive to a certain degree, this vision tends to underestimate both the strength of institutional cultures and the relevance of funding and regulatory frameworks.

Externally, the networks should act as frontrunners, opening new paths for collaboration that would eventually benefit the higher education sector as a whole. It is too early to assess the transferability of the experience, but we can subscribe strongly to this narrative, considering ourselves 'format' builders. The networks who work to overcome obstacles to joint action (for instance in the field of curriculum design) can inform others, whether engaged in alliances or in different collaboration structures.



## From project governance to sustainable collaborative governance

- Some networks set their aim as the consolidation of a joint governance structure to facilitate the development of consensual joint policies and action plans, while others added another transformative agenda, wishing to overcome legal barriers that hamper cross-border cooperation, such as student and staff mobility and exchanges.
- To adapt to the long-term sustainability of the evolving governance model while being equipped to overcome legal barriers, some networks have established new legal entities or reported being in the process of establishing them to better anchor the collaboration structure.



## Complexity vs. sustainability 1

The examples found in many countries provide an idea of the variety and complexity of governance models. Nevertheless, they share common features, because they are inspired by existing institutional governance structures. Their significant diversity means that compromises must be agreed. Whether the progressive experience of slightly different governance models will affect governance culture at the member institutions and feed into a transformation of institutional governance, remains to be seen.



## Complexity vs. sustainability 2

Models have also sometimes emulated integration/change programmes developed in the context of university mergers or concentration measures. Both initiatives share common challenges, notably with regard to ensuring efficient implementation at all levels, achieving university community buy-in, and leadership commitment. Thematic working groups and cascading cluster structures reaching deep into the member institutions are an example of alliance approaches found in mergers.



## Complexity vs. sustainability 3

Overall, these set-ups are complex and go beyond previous cooperation structures. Other types of partnership may also go as far as setting up common governance structures, but the goals are usually less complex, more focused and unrelated to major institutional transformation. This could make these structures particularly vulnerable to asymmetric disruptions, i.e. important changes affecting some members and requiring strategic adaptations.

# The role of leadership 1

As mentioned previously, and like other large change management processes in higher education, the senior leadership teams of the institutions involved, supported by their governing bodies, have often been a driving factor for establishing alliances. However, Networks must accommodate the diverse lengths of leadership cycles and the recurrent changes in membership in institutional governing bodies across the different systems. Executive leaders' terms of office typically range from four to six years, usually renewable once, but can only be specified as a range in the national regulation or left for universities to decide.

## The role of leadership 2

A change in leadership teams and governing body membership can therefore lead to the identification of different institutional priorities. There is no embedded mechanism that ensures the permanence of the strategic relevance of the Network, aside from, crucially, its continued capacity to deliver on the agreed objectives and ability to communicate on these achievements to incoming leaders.

# Resource allocation

The question of funding for partnership also plays an important role in the context of changes in leadership and governance. The different funding situations and frameworks and the related decisions that institutional decision makers need to take will have an impact on the networks' future sustainability.

The uncertainty around access to funds and the amount of financial stimulus need to be given due attention when considering alliance sustainability.

## Resource allocation 2

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From an internal governance perspective, the allocation of resources to the alliance during the project lifetime and most importantly beyond, requires the sustained buy-in of the university community at each partner institution. Depending on the funding framework, universities may also have to consider medium term financial trade-offs. Differences as to accountability channels, and more concretely the players involved in financial decision-making processes at each institution, may also be important here.



## Inclusiveness of governance models

The active involvement of all relevant actors and stakeholders in the Network's governance model is an important factor in meeting the project objectives, and also to ensure the sustainability of its impact beyond the duration of the project itself. Getting all parties engaged, actively steering the project and contributing to the long-term objectives is an important challenge that needs to be considered to make the network sustainable and less vulnerable to change.



## Strategy and motivation alignment

- On the one hand, networks objectives are to some extent contingent on the context of its member institutions. As envisaged in each network portfolio and mission statement, the combination of institutions is not incidental, but based on the understanding that those institutions share a similar profile or academic specificities, have common experience and expertise and are committed to a joint vision to address future challenges.
- On the other hand, individual institutional priorities depend on each case, making it difficult to draw a common denominator.

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- Diverse initial motivations can also affect the initiative's sustainability. Some institutions may be interested in the opportunity to engage in cross-institutional collaboration in order to share common practices and acquire mutual benefits; while for others, the primary incentive is enhanced international recognition for future student cohorts.
  - Once the project has been completed and its financing ends, participants may have different expectations and attitudes to an opportunity to carry on.



# CAVEAT

- A close connection with institutional governing bodies is needed to ensure a seamless governance process that endures major institutional changes without losing sight of the network objectives and goals.
- Networks are already facing, and will encounter, various legal and regulatory barriers that need to be overcome in order to facilitate their transnational cooperation
- To achieve the ambitious objectives, the network also needs sustainable funding.
- Improved alignment with institutions' strategic priorities is essential to a clear articulation of how the alliance can support individual university goals.
- As with every large-scale transformation programme, attention needs to be paid to the opportunity costs and existing alternatives. As in merger processes, establishing deep, long-term collaboration structures requires significant resources and enduring commitment at all levels.