

REVIEW

of the doctoral dissertation by Magdalena Sikorska, MSc
entitled „*Collaborative strategies for consolidation of higher education institutions within
European universities initiative alliances*”
written under the scientific supervision of dr hab. Agnieszka Misztal, Prof. PP
at the Faculty of Management Engineering, Poznań University of Technology
(field: social sciences, discipline: management and quality sciences)

1. Formal and legal basis for preparing review, general information about dissertation

The subject of the review is the doctoral dissertation by Magdalena Sikorska, MSc, entitled „*Collaborative strategies for consolidation of higher education institutions within European universities initiative alliances*”, written under the scientific supervision of dr hab. Agnieszka Misztal, Prof. PP at the Faculty of Management Engineering of the Poznań University of Technology in the field of social sciences, discipline of management and quality sciences (hereinafter referred to as the dissertation).

The basis for the review is a letter from the Dean of the Faculty of Management Engineering at Poznań University of Technology, Dr. Hab. Marcin Butlewski, Prof. PP, dated July 9, 2025, in accordance with Resolution No. 59/2024-2028 of the Council of Management and Quality Sciences at Poznań University of Technology.

The reviewed study consists of an Introduction, five chapters, and Conclusions, a Bibliography, a List of Figures, a List of Tables, and five Annexes (Annex 1 – Annex 5), and comprises 231 pages of typescript. The dissertation draws on 147 literature sources (including strictly scientific publications, informational studies, and reports). The discussion is illustrated with 59 figures and 11 tables and supplemented by 5 Annexes.

2. Assessment of the selection of topics, scope of the dissertation, and scientific problem

The issue addressed by the doctoral student is extremely important both for practice and science in the field of social sciences, discipline management and quality sciences. It concerns European higher education institutions (HEIs) and their ability and capacity to build alliances based on the principles of coopetition and their consolidation into strategic alliances within the framework of the European Universities Initiative (EUI).

First of all, for the sake of clarity, it should be emphasized that contemporary HEIs (including universities in particular, but not only) are organizations in the sense of management and quality sciences, but they have characteristics that significantly distinguish them from other organizations and, according to the theory of the contingency approach, taking into account

their specificity, they can (and even should) be the subject of research in management and quality sciences.

In turn, the need to address the issue of HEIs management in scientific studies and doctoral dissertations stems, in my opinion, from the changing needs and expectations of these organizations, induced, of course, by the volatility of the immediate and wider environment in which they operate. European HEIs also face challenges resulting from global conditions (both European and non-European) and the need to make changes that will determine, both now and in the future, the ability of these organizations to carry out their missions more effectively and efficiently, especially those parts of the mission that relate to the education, upbringing, and development of European communities (including national ones) in the spirit of universal values and with a view to the competencies of the future, as well as the creation and implementation of innovative solutions that will contribute to the development of the European economy in the context of its global competitiveness. The role of HEIs is also particularly important in the face of contemporary threats such as military, economic, environmental, and epidemic crises. **A conscious and educated European society, capable of critical thinking, innovation, and creative problem-solving on a transnational scale, is key to seizing opportunities and mitigating threats emerging in today's world.**

It is important to note that effective cooperation between HEIs and the ability to create value based on the synergistic effect resulting from this cooperation are critical in this process. Therefore, I consider the topic addressed in this dissertation to be important for the development of higher education in Europe. At the same time, I note that, so far, there is a lack of comprehensive scientific studies in the area under investigation, explaining the nature and character of the issues mentioned and the mechanisms that occur in them, hence I consider the topic discussed in the dissertation to be important and relevant from the point of view of management and quality sciences. I therefore agree with the conclusions of the Author of the dissertation regarding the **importance of the research topic**, in particular with the statement „*The EUI alliances aim to enhance competitiveness of European higher education institutions in the global environment and also strengthen European identity*” (p. 6), which highlights the critical role of strategic alliances within HEIs in Europe, although I believe that the importance of the issue raised goes far beyond the scope of the EUI – but I understand that in the dissertation, the research problem was limited to alliances formed within the EUI initiative.

The Author identifies a **research gap** by pointing out that „*While European Universities Initiative is perceived as one of the most transformative and ambitious developments in European Higher Education Area, academic research related to this topic still remains limited. Even though, there are number of studies and publications related to institutional participation, policy objectives and early implementation challenges of EUI, there seems to be a clear lack of structured frameworks on consolidation processes and collaboration strategies of higher education institutions in Europe within European Universities Initiative*” (p. 6). The systematic review of the literature conducted by the Author confirms the validity of this gap. However, it is puzzling why the Author did not also take into account strategic alliances or alliances with strategic characteristics (e.g., based on long-term, strategic bilateral agreements) implemented outside the EUI and EU programs. What arguments were taken into account in order to limit the research to the EUI? At the same time, I wonder to what extent the models of strategic aliases identified by the Author do not result from the requirements of the EUI competition, and therefore their shape is imposed and does not result from the rational grouping of HEIs in order to achieve the greatest possible effectiveness of cooperation? In my opinion, dispelling doubts in this regard will confirm the validity of the research problem that the doctoral student has undertaken to solve.

The identified research gap allowed the Author to pose a research problem (scientific - within the meaning of the Act of July 3, 2018, Law on Higher Education and Science

(hereinafter referred to as the Act)). The **research problem** was „*focused on identification and development of strategic models that can support effective consolidation and long-term integration of HEIs in the context of European university alliances*” (p. 4). The Author clearly states that **core research problem is „the identification and development of collaborative strategy models which support the consolidation of higher education institutions within the framework of the European Universities Initiative (EUI)”** (p. 6-7). I would like to point out that the research problem should be formulated in the form of a question referring to an issue that requires an answer to be found through research, for example: “What are the collaborative strategy models that support the consolidation of higher education institutions within the framework of the European Universities Initiative (EUI)?” In this case, the main objective of the research leading to the solution of the problem thus posed could be precisely „The identification and development of collaborative strategy models which support the consolidation of higher education institutions within the framework of the European Universities Initiative (EUI)”.

Notwithstanding the above and in the context presented above, in my opinion the research topic chosen by the doctoral student is appropriate. The chosen topic is important, topical, and cognitively interesting, as well as well-grounded in contemporary trends in management and quality sciences. The subject of the dissertation is therefore an important research problem (although, in my opinion, not entirely correctly formulated) concerning the identification and development of collaborative strategy models which support the consolidation of higher education institutions within the framework of EUI, the original solution to which may constitute the basis for obtaining a doctoral degree.

3. Assessment of the dissertation's objectives and research questions

In the dissertation, the Author formulated three cognitive goals and one application goal: „*Cognitive goals: - Identification of different European Universities Initiatives Alliances and their geographical balance; - Analysis of collaborative strategies – differences and similarities in cooperation approaches; - Recognition of various governance models within European Universities Initiatives; Application goal: - Developing state-of-the-art model of internationalization strategies among HEIs in Europe that strengthens European values, identity and international competitiveness and enhances the knowledge triangle and quality education*” (p. 7-8).

The study also posed the following research questions: „*Q1 – Can a finite number of EUI models be identified to categorize the consortia? Q2 – It is possible to differentiate features that indicate similarities within chosen models? Q3 – Is there a relation between the size of EUI alliances and the number of associated partners (AP)? Q4 – Can preferred governance models be identified within EUI?*” (p. 8).

When assessing the objectives adopted in the dissertation, I would like to point out that no main objective has been specified, which, in my opinion, may result from the inaccuracies in the formulation of the research problem, which I mentioned above. However, if we accept the main objective of the dissertation as directly resulting from the research problem (as I indicated above), we can conclude that the specific objectives defined in the work directly result from it and are formulated correctly. They correspond to the topic and the adopted research area of the dissertation. Furthermore, the thesis does not put forward any theses/hypotheses, but rather indicates research questions. In my opinion, they are correctly linked to the indicated objectives. I consider question Q4, referring to the recommendation of preferred governance models within EUI, to require clarification. It is not clear to me whether the “governance models” in Q4 are the same as the “collaborative strategy models” referred to in the research

problem. If they are not the same, or if the solutions recommended in Q4 do not coincide with “collaborative strategy models,” then what is the reason for indicating “governance models”? Personally, I believe that developing recommendations for “collaborative strategy models” from the perspective of their support for the consolidation of higher education institutions within the framework of the EUI is much more important (as emphasized in the application objective) and should be included in the cognitive objectives of the work as relevant to the expansion of knowledge in the discipline of management and quality sciences.

4. Assessment of the scope of the dissertation, sources of information, and research methods

The scientific problem and sequence of specific objectives adopted in the dissertation determine the scope of the thesis. The subject of the research is the issue of creating strategic alliances, and the subject is European HEIs operating within the EUI. The work is theoretical and empirical in nature.

Moving in the area of theory and cognition, the doctoral student used a systematic analysis of the literature on the subject as the basic research method. In her dissertation, the doctoral student used a bibliography of 147 items (including strictly scientific publications as well as informational studies and reports) in the field of broadly understood management. Approximately 85% of these are English-language publications. The bibliography is up to date, with only a few items published before 2000, and these are largely original texts concerning, among other things, statistical analyses. Over 50 items are studies from the last 5 years. The literature used covers all research areas relevant to the thesis's objective, i.e., strategic management (including strategic alliances) and project management. However, in my opinion, there is a lack of studies on the functioning of contemporary HEIs and cooperation between them other than within the EUI, especially since this issue was the subject of part of the empirical research (p. 133 ff.).

The achievement of the objectives of the dissertation required empirical research based on content analysis of documentation from 41 EUI alliances, in-depth interviews with alliances' coordinators (coordinators of 16 alliances from 18 alliances) as well as Delphi method applied to proposed models' verification by experts (16 experts). I consider the adopted research methodology to be correct – detailed comments are provided later in this review.

5. Assessment of the structure of the work and the content and substance of the chapters of the dissertation

The reviewed study is theoretical and empirical in nature and consists of an Introduction, five chapters, Conclusions, a Bibliography, a List of Figures, a List of Tables, and five Annexes (Annex 1 – Annex 5). The discussion is illustrated with 59 figures and 11 tables and supplemented with 5 Annexes. I consider the relationship between the theoretical and practical parts to be appropriate. The titles and content of the individual chapters and subchapters are also appropriate and arranged in a logical order, which provides the basis for a positive assessment of the structure of the work.

The entire dissertation comprises 231 pages of typescript, with the substantive content (excluding lists and appendices) comprising 203 pages. The distribution of pages within the individual chapters can be considered even, and in the case of disproportions, justified in terms of content.

Emphasizing at the outset the positive assessment of the content of individual chapters of the work below, together with the assessment of the content of the chapters, I have presented those elements that raise my doubts in both the theoretical and empirical parts.

In the **Introduction**, the Author presented the rationale for the subject and object of her research, identified a research gap and defined the research problem, set out the objectives of the thesis, and posed research questions. In addition, she characterized the research methods and summarized the content of each chapter of the thesis. My opinion on the proposed research gap and scientific problem has been expressed earlier. At this point, I would like to note that although the scientific problem has the shortcomings indicated earlier, it is clear and understandable to me and can serve as the basis for the preparation of a doctoral dissertation.

The starting point of the thesis is the **first chapter** entitled "*Theoretical Framework of Strategic Management*." It presents an outline of the basics of strategic management concepts. While it does present the doctoral student's general theoretical knowledge in the area of strategic management, I believe that it is not necessary, also from this perspective, as evidence of the doctoral student's proficiency in the research topic, which confirms her general knowledge, can also be found in other chapters. Moreover, the rather selective treatment of strategic management is more likely to raise questions about the criteria for selecting the issues described than to satisfy the reader. On the other hand, I consider the description of collaborative strategy as an "important example of offensive strategy," which fits directly into the research area, to be valuable. The Author also pointed out three types of alliances that perfectly match the university's goals: complementary alliance, close collaborative alliance, and additive alliance (after: Sikorska, Misztal 2020) – this immediately raises the question of how these types relate to the models specified by the doctoral student within the EUI. Later in the chapter, the doctoral student describes the concept and role of strategic alliances in more detail, concluding the chapter with the statement: „*Even though, strategic alliances are broadly discussed in business and management literature, there seems to be a little research presenting the context of higher education alliances, in particular in relation to international, cross-border partnerships like European Universities Initiative. There is not much literature on how universities make decisions together, communicate in an effective way and build trust between each other, especially when coming not only from different countries, but also representing different cultures. This demonstrates that there is a clear gap*” (p.19). I would like to point out that the identification of a research gap is not sufficiently related to the indication of work in the area of HEIs cooperation, including strategic alliances, which I consider to be a shortcoming, and I would expect a more detailed explanation in this area, with references to relevant publications in the field. The content of the first chapter is supplemented by a correct description of project management as a strategic tool in university collaborations, as well as the network paradigm in the context of strategic management, where the Author points to the role of the EUI: “*As the higher education sector adopts network-based approaches in order to respond to global competitiveness and achieve academic excellence, the European Universities Initiative seems to emerge as a key example of the institutionalization of strategic alliances in academia.*” However, I would expect a slightly broader description of the issue of cooperation (including strategic cooperation) between contemporary HEIs other than those within the EUI. It seems that such a description could provide the background for the description of the EUI (both in terms of the advantages and disadvantages of cooperation to date), especially since, as mentioned earlier, this issue was the subject of part of the empirical study (p. 133 fp.). I note that the historical background in this regard is partially presented at the beginning of Chapter 2.

The **second chapter**, entitled “*European Universities Initiative Context*,” appears to be an important part of the work. Here, the Author undertakes to characterize the EUI, outlining its historical background, including political aspects, as well as the general assumptions

underlying the EUI program. She also describes the current state of affairs regarding the functioning of alliances and related statistics. First of all, I would like to emphasize the Author's excellent knowledge of the subject matter and her deep understanding of the issues involved. But, at this point, I would like to ask for an answer to the question posed earlier in the review: to what extent do the strategic alliance models identified by the Author result from the requirements of the EUI competition, and therefore their shape is imposed rather than resulting from a rational grouping of HEIs in order to achieve the greatest possible effectiveness of cooperation? In this context, it can be said that the second chapter already has the characteristics of a practical chapter, where the basis for the activities of a certain (limited) group of organizations—European HEIs participating in strategic alliances within the EUI—is characterized. I would also ask the doctoral student to clarify and emphasize why, from a scientific point of view, the indicated group should be the subject of interest in the doctoral thesis. For example, according to the theory of the contingency approach, how does the studied group stand out among other HEIs (features, characteristics) and are the solutions in the field of management and quality sciences relating to this group unique, i.e., different from those for other HEI groups? I am not referring to an autitarian point of view, because there is no doubt that this group is crucial for the development of higher education and science in Europe.

Chapter Three, entitled "*Research Methodology*," opens the empirical part of the thesis. It primarily describes the basics of the adopted research methodology, which takes into account Methodological Triangulation, i.e., the use of 1) collecting primary data, 2) quantitative method, 3) qualitative method, as well as 4) heuristic method, and describes the individual research methods. I consider the concept of this particular selection of research methods to be correct. The in-depth interviews conducted among HEIs representatives deserve great recognition. But I have some reservations about the classification of the Analysis of European University alliances websites and factsheet by the EC as a quantitative method (the Author presents her justification in chapter 3.3). Is it not the case that these are, in part, mixed methods with a large proportion of inferences based on case studies (the results of this stage, in the form of the characteristics of 41 strategic alliances presented in tables, are presented, as the Author writes, in Annex 3 and Annex 4)? Quantitative methods in management and quality sciences research involve collecting and analyzing numerical data using mathematical and statistical tools. Typical techniques include surveys, experiments, and secondary data analysis. Regardless of how these methods are classified, I consider their use to be fully justified.

In **Chapter Four**, entitled "*Study Process*," the doctoral student presents sequential steps of the research process. The research part is based on a systematic literature review. This was followed by an analysis of alliances websites and alliances factsheets prepared by the European Commission. In my opinion, the key part of the study process are in-depth interviews, which were largely used to determine strategic models of alliance collaboration. I would like to emphasize once again that conducting in-depth interviews with HEI representatives was a not easy research process, which I highly value. The two-stage (spaced out over time) research was conducted among representatives of 16 out of 41 strategic alliances (due to the doctoral student's limited capabilities).

The selected models were verified using the Delphi method (the Author writes: "*This method allowed to increase the reliability of the developed models*" (p. 61) – I would ask for clarification of what the doctoral student means by "reliability of the developed models"), in which 16 experts were asked to verify three collaborative models of EUI alliances. The thesis presents the characteristics of the experts, and my question refers to the criteria used to select them, as the Author writes about "sixteen carefully selected experts." Why was it decided to include exactly 16 experts? Please also indicate how many rounds of questions were planned in the study. Regardless of the questions asked, I consider the description of the study process to be correct and understandable.

The main part of **Chapter Five**, entitled „*Empirical study findings*” concerns three strategic models of alliance collaboration: „*Thematic Model (focused on specific areas of education and research)*, *Typological Model (comprising institutions of similar type)* and *General (Transversal) Model (characterized by broader strategic scope and institutional diversity)*” (p. 169). Each model was operationalized using Business Model Canvas, which allow to visualize of value proposition, stakeholders relationships, key resources and revenue streams. Of course, the identification of models is preceded by the results of analyses carried out using the methods described above. Reading the course and results of the analyses leads to the following doubts and questions:

1) I do not understand why the analyses, for example Geographical Balance Analysis was limited to 18 selected alliances. I do not know on what criteria this selection was based.

2) I have doubts as to whether, on the basis of a comparison of 10 thematic alliances with 8 typological alliances, it is reasonable to make generalizations such as: “*Thematic alliances were more prone to create larger networks with bigger resources and much wider research environments. Typological alliances, particularly in the case of more creative fields, tended to form smaller, focused consortia which specialized in more niche academic areas.*” (p. 81).

3) Referring to the content of subsection 5.1.4. “*Relation between the Size of Alliances and the Number of Associated Partners,*” I note that, first of all, no research hypotheses were formulated (let alone derived in theoretical terms). Furthermore, the analyses were conducted on a sample of 15 alliances. Two types of variables were used in order to determine the size of alliances: the number of member universities and the number of students (see p. 89 ff.). However, I do not know what the Author's goal was in the context of the objectives of the study. In my opinion, with a total sample of 44 alliances, the conclusions should apply to the entire population, not to a selected (even if not random) sample of 15 alliances. I am not surprised that the analysis concluded that there is no statistically significant relationship between the number of member universities and the number of associated partners. I do not fully understand (because there is no hypothesis) what result the doctoral student expected. Is an increase in the number of partners accompanied by an increase in the number of students? However, I consider the statement “*A weak positive trend between the number of students and number of APs was observed visually in scatter plot, however, not supported with statistical significance, which suggests that other factors most likely influence partnerships within alliances*” (p. 104) as incorrect.

4) Why does the doctoral student devote almost the entire chapter of empirical analyses to describing two types of alliances: Thematic Model and Typological Model, and only in chapter 5.3 does she additionally distinguish the General (Transversal) Model? It would be helpful in understanding the Author's line of thinking to provide specific arguments linking the research results (interviews and characteristics of alliances) with the decision to distinguish an additional type of alliance.

5) Which of the proposed models should be the recommended solution from the perspective of achieving the objectives of HEIs cooperation within the EUI? Is it even possible to make such a recommendation?

The work concludes with a **Conclusion**, in which the Author refers comprehensively to the research process and the objectives set at the beginning. She specifies the scope of the work performed, indicates the research methods used, and summarizes the objectives achieved. In addition, she highlights directions for further research. I consider the conclusions contained in the Conclusion regarding the achievement of the objectives of the work to be duly justified and valuable for the development of management and quality sciences.

6. Comments and substantive concerns regarding the content of the dissertation as a whole

Underlining my positive assessment of the content of the work, I have presented below my comments and substantive concerns regarding the content of the dissertation as a whole.

The Author is using terms "company" and "organization" within the entire PhD thesis as equal. There is no explanation and definition of any of them and the Author seems to be unaware that they are depicting two different notions. In some cases, the term "company" is used incorrectly, like "company management system" (p. 16). What is more, those terms are used interchangeably also in case of performance - Author is writing about company performance (p. 18), while several pages before it was called organizational performance (p. 14).

The Author is not offering any definition of "higher education institutions" - a term used more than 60 times in the entire PhD and central for the HEIs discussed in it. Moreover, it seems that the Author is using the term "university" as equal to "higher education institution" without any discussion concerning their differences and without understanding that one is much more broad. As I wrote at the beginning of this review, there is no doubt that HEIs are organizations within the meaning of quality management science. However, they have certain characteristics that distinguish them from other organizations sufficiently to make them a subject of scientific interest. I would expect an explanation of what this specificity consists of. In the absence of an explanation, and even more so in the context of the statements contained in the work, such as, for example, „*The EUI alliances are parallel to business and corporate strategic partnerships, when it comes to the joint mission and goals, shared governance and coordinated operational mechanisms*” one may ask whether, in general terms, three types of strategic aliases can also be distinguished in organizations. Why, then, does the dissertation focus on HEIs, if they are similar to other organizations or even indistinguishable from them, and therefore there is no basis for applying the contingency approach and no basis for developing solutions dedicated to HEIs? Research should therefore be conducted on a sample of organizations as such. In summary: HEIs - which remains central for the PhD thesis - has not been properly defined in any place in the dissertation. The thesis offers historical background on its development, scientific reports concerning its implementation, but it is not preceded by proper definition and explanation what Authors understands as HEIs.

Moreover, in terms of the formal assessment of the work, I note that in various places Author is using acronym EUI, it is randomly given together with its long version (European Universities Initiative) in various places in the PhD thesis, not only in first occurrence (e.g. p. 48), it is also often left without an acronym. It creates chaos and shows lack of editorial final touches within the text. Moreover, in some places (eg. p.7) Author uses the term "European Universities Initiatives" - plural - not explaining anywhere what kind of initiatives she has in mind.

Additionally, I am concerned about provisions such as: „*Tab. 5. Comparison of data gathered from factsheets related to the 18 European university alliances (source: Author's own elaboration)*”. The table presents, as the Author herself writes, a summary of data based on information provided by the EC, so I believe the following notation is appropriate: “source: Author's own elaboration based on...”. I also note that Tables 6 and 7 essentially repeat the data contained in Table 5, which I do not consider to be correct.

In the end, there are various spelling errors and numerous errors concerning mixing singular and plural versions of the presented terms. The thesis should have been edited much more carefully to avoid those, which would increase the readability of the entire thesis.

7. Conclusion of the dissertation review

The reviewed doctoral dissertation is a research study on European HEIs and their capacity and ability to build alliances in the form of strategic alliances within the framework of the European Universities Initiative, which can be considered an original solution to the research problem (within the meaning of the Act: scientific) formulated as „*the identification and development of collaborative strategy models which support the consolidation of higher education institutions within the framework of the European Universities Initiative (EUI)*” in the field of management and quality sciences. The work is based on in-depth theoretical knowledge and empirical research, which contributes to its theoretical and practical value. In my opinion, the Author justified her choice of research area, defined the research problem, appropriately identified the objectives of the dissertation, and selected research methods that served to solve the problem in an original way, using the results of her own theoretical and empirical research. By conducting empirical research in a generally correct manner, she demonstrated her ability to **conduct independent scientific work**. Finally, she has effectively achieved the objectives of her work. Thus, the dissertation demonstrates the doctoral student's **good knowledge of the literature** on the subject of European HEI management, presenting general theoretical knowledge in this regard. The comments made in the review do not change my overall opinion of Magdalena Sikorska's thesis. In my opinion, the strengths of the reviewed work definitely outweigh the shortcomings noted during its reading. Therefore, in my opinion, the results achieved in the theoretical and empirical part of the dissertation constitute the basis for awarding Magdalena Sikorska, MA, the degree of Doctor of Social Sciences.

In light of the above, I conclude that the reviewed doctoral dissertation by Magdalena Sikorska, MSc, entitled „*Collaborative strategies for consolidation of higher education institutions within european universities initiative alliances*” written under the scientific supervision of dr hab. Agnieszka Misztal, prof. PP at the Faculty of Management Engineering, Poznań University of Technology, in the field of social sciences, discipline: management and quality sciences, meets the requirements specified in the Act of July 3, 2018, Law on Higher Education and Science. I hereby request that the doctoral dissertation be accepted and that Magdalena Sikorska, MSc, be admitted to its public defense.

Agnieszka Misztal

Wrocław, 12.09.2025