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REVIEW

of the doctoral dissertation by Ms. Magdalena Sikorska, M.A., titled "Collaborative strategies for consolidation of higher education institutions within European Universities Initiative Alliances", prepared under the scientific supervision of PUT Professor Agnieszka Misztal, PhD, DSc, Prof. at Poznań University of Technology, in the field of social sciences, the Discipline of Management and Quality Sciences.

The basis for this review is a letter from PUT Professor Marcin Butlewski, PhD, DSc, Prof. at Poznań University of Technology, Dean of the Faculty of Management Engineering at Poznań University of Technology, dated July 9, 2025, requesting a review of Ms. Magdalena Sikorska's doctoral dissertation. This request is grounded in Resolution No. 59/2024-2028 dated June 30, 2025, by the Council of the Discipline of Management and Quality Sciences at Poznań University of Technology, appointing me as the reviewer.

1. The significance of the issue in the context of science and practice

The doctoral dissertation presents a comprehensive and innovative approach to the issue of collaboration strategies for the consolidation of higher education institutions in Europe within the framework of the European Universities Initiative (EUI) from the perspective of strategic analysis of university alliances. The significance of this issue in both academic and practical contexts is multifaceted, as the EUI plays a crucial role in the consolidation and integration of higher education institutions in Europe. This has significant implications for both academia and socio-economic practice.

In the academic realm, the EUI supports the development of interdisciplinary research and the creation of innovative solutions that can contribute to technological and scientific progress in Europe. Joint research projects undertaken by partner universities enable the achievement of ambitious research goals, which, in turn, enhances the quality of scientific research. The exchange of knowledge and experiences among universities also fosters the development of new theories and research methodologies, enriching the European scientific landscape.

From a practical perspective, the EUI promotes collaboration and mobility, leading to increased competitiveness of universities on the international stage. Students and academic staff gain access to a richer educational offering and professional development opportunities in an international academic environment. The mobility of students and staff contributes to cultural exchange, which is invaluable in the context of globalization and the growing need to understand cultural diversity. Furthermore, the EUI supports the building of stronger relationships between universities, promoting values such as openness, tolerance, and cooperation, which form the foundation for creating a unified European educational space.

In the context of socio-economic practice, this initiative supports the mobility of students and academic staff, contributing to the development of human capital with high competencies. This impacts the competitiveness of European economies and fosters the creation of innovative solutions addressing current social and economic challenges. Additionally, the integration of

educational institutions can lead to better alignment of curricula with labor market needs, increasing the employment prospects of graduates.

The doctoral dissertation also includes a set of strategic recommendations aimed at European policymakers. These recommendations are crucial for effective project and investment management. They encompass long-term financing, strengthening strategic partnerships, optimizing management processes and legal regulations, and supporting alliances through shared infrastructure, regulatory coherence, and transparent mechanisms for monitoring effectiveness. Their implementation can help achieve intended goals and maximize benefits.

In summary, the European Universities Initiative is of significant importance for both the development of science and socio-economic practice, contributing to the construction of a stronger and more integrated European educational space.

2. The aim of the doctoral dissertation and research problems

The aim of the dissertation is to present collaboration strategies for the consolidation of higher education institutions in Europe within the framework of the European Universities Initiative (EUI). The study analyzes 41 strategic university alliances using a triangulated methodological approach, which combines a systematic literature review, document analysis, in-depth interviews with alliance coordinators, and the Delphi method involving experts. Additionally, cognitive and applicative objectives have been developed and are presented as follows. Cognitive objectives:

- 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

Furthermore, the author has formulated 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?

The conducted research allowed for answering the posed research questions and served as a basis for in-depth analysis. The research methods are presented in Table 1. The aim of the study was to develop three models of collaboration strategies: thematic, typological, and general, which support effective consolidation and long-term integration of universities within European university alliances. Each model was operationally developed using the Business Model Canvas - a strategic management tool that enables a structured visualization of value propositions, stakeholder relationships, key resources, and revenue streams. These models were validated by selected experts who confirmed their practical applicability. Furthermore, they provided valuable insights for decision-makers and practitioners in the field of higher education.

The findings of the study indicate that diverse collaboration strategies can be effectively utilized within EUI alliances. A key element is tailoring the collaboration model to the specific needs and goals of the institutions, which allows for efficient consolidation and integration of

higher education institutions in Europe. Further research and practice may contribute to the development of new collaboration models that will foster long-term integration and development of the European Higher Education Area.

The work fills a research gap concerning the lack of structured frameworks and collaboration strategy models for higher education institutions in Europe participating in the European Universities Initiative (EUI). The literature lacks scientific studies on the effective integration of management models and operational strategies within this initiative. An additional advantage is the author's professional experience in building alliances within the European Universities Initiative.

In summary, the dissertation's aim and the formulated research problems deserve a positive evaluation. They are logical and comprehensive, covering various aspects of the topic, which enables an in-depth analysis of the issue. Qualitative, quantitative, and heuristic methods were employed.

3. The structure of the dissertation and substantive evaluation of individual chapters

The doctoral dissertation has a theoretical-empirical character. It consists of 230 pages and includes an abstract, introduction, five chapters, conclusions, bibliography, list of figures, tables, and appendices. It contains 147 bibliographic entries, 11 tables, 59 figures, and 5 annexes.

Titles of the individual chapters:

Chapter 1: Theoretical framework of strategic management

Chapter 2: European Universities Initiative context

Chapter 3: Research methodology

Chapter 4: Study process

Chapter 5: Research results

The introduction outlines the purpose of the work, the research problem, research questions, the method of conducting the research, and the structure of the dissertation. Table 1 presents an overview of the research methods and their contribution to achieving the objectives and research questions.

In the first chapter, a comprehensive review of the essence of strategic management is conducted, considering both its theoretical foundations and practical applications (section 1.1). Attention is drawn to the dynamic nature of this field and the need for continuous adaptation of strategies to the changing environment. Defensive and offensive strategies and their application in various contexts, including higher education, are discussed. The author emphasizes that higher education institutions, despite their specificity, face similar challenges related to strategic management as other organizations.

In section 1.2, the author discusses strategic alliances, which are a significant element of contemporary management, offering companies the opportunity to increase competitiveness through collaboration. Effective management of such alliances requires consideration of many factors, including the selection of appropriate partners, legal aspects, communication, and the specifics of cross-border cooperation. Although many aspects of strategic alliances are discussed in the work, insufficient attention is given to the potential risks and challenges associated with such collaborations.

The work encompasses a variety of issues related to project management, including both traditional and agile methodologies. However, it lacks specific recommendations for the practice of project management in an academic environment. The dissertation presents the network paradigm as an indispensable element of contemporary strategic management. Its application in both the corporate and academic sectors underscores its universality and growing significance in the context of building competitive advantage. The author has presented various

forms of international cooperation and strategic alliances as an integral part of development and innovation strategies (Figure 5). It is indicated that alliances not only provide access to new technologies and markets but also help companies maintain competitiveness in a dynamic environment. Networking is a key strategic option for companies aiming for internationalization, offering new opportunities, resource sharing, and risk reduction. Some aspects, such as the role of managerial controlling in networks, are merely mentioned but not elaborated upon. Expanding on these topics could enrich the work. There is a lack of a critical approach that considers potential threats and difficulties that may arise in practice.

Discussion question: Although the work discusses many aspects of strategic alliances, it does not devote sufficient attention to the potential risks and challenges associated with the international collaboration of higher education institutions. What, then, are the potential risks and challenges related to the international collaboration of higher education institutions?

Chapter Two, titled The context of the European Universities Initiative, provides a detailed account of the genesis of the European Universities Initiative, allowing the reader to understand the political and institutional context in which the initiative was established. A valuable aspect of the work is the comparison between the French and German visions of European universities. Although the work focuses on France, Germany, and Poland, it could benefit from including perspectives from other EU member states that are also participating in this initiative. The author emphasizes the innovative nature of this initiative, which goes beyond traditional forms of academic cooperation.

The author conducted an analysis of 41 alliances, which allowed for a better understanding of the potential of these institutions. The work includes specific recommendations for improving the financial situation of the alliances, eliminating economic disparities, and enhancing regulatory conditions, which could be useful for policymakers and institutions involved in the EUI. The need to consider the perspectives of academics, students, and other stakeholders is highlighted, as it is crucial for a fuller understanding of the impact of the EUI. Discussion question: Although the work provides valuable insights into the initial phases of alliance development, an important question is: what is the sustainability of these initiatives, and what might be the long-term strategies for cooperation?

The research methodology is described in the third chapter. Denzin's methodology was applied, along with various research methods such as a systematic literature review, in-depth interviews, and the Delphi method. By combining different research methods, the author ensures a comprehensive and multifaceted approach to analyzing phenomena related to European university alliances. The analysis covered 41 European university alliances selected by the European Commission in 2019 and 2020. The author employed a five-step research process, providing a solid foundation for formulating conclusions and recommendations regarding the functioning of the European Universities Initiative (EUI). The use of the SLR model allowed for a comprehensive view of EUI implementation and the identification of key areas requiring further research. Among the successes are increased international cooperation between universities and the development of innovative educational programs. However, challenges include cultural and administrative differences between member countries and the need to adapt to different educational systems. These findings can contribute to a better understanding and effective implementation of European educational initiatives in the future.

Chapter four provides a detailed description of the sequential stages of the research process. This process begins with a systematic literature review, which served as the foundation for further empirical research. Subsequently, a content analysis of alliance websites and information sheets prepared by the European Commission was conducted. The next stage involved collecting data through in-depth interviews, which allowed for obtaining more detailed information. In the final phase, the Delphi method was applied to verify the developed strategic alliance models. This chapter provides comprehensive information on the methods of

collecting, interpreting, and synthesizing empirical data, which contributed to achieving the research objectives.

The literature review reveals that the European Universities Initiative is perceived as a new dimension of international cooperation between universities, promoting deeper integration and innovation. Key questions regarding structured cooperation before the EUI and recommendations for new alliances have been partially resolved thanks to the identified articles. The use of Web of Science, recognized as a primary international scientific database, and Google Scholar ensures a broad search scope and increases the credibility of the collected data. Although the article selection process is described, there is a lack of detailed information on the criteria for assessing the quality of the articles, which could affect the final list of selected works.

An analysis of 41 websites and information sheets of European university alliances was conducted, providing a comprehensive overview of the functioning of these institutions. The process of conducting in-depth interviews (IDIs) was divided into four phases, demonstrating a methodical and organized approach to the study. Interviews were successfully conducted with 16 leaders of European university alliances, representing nearly 90% of all planned respondents, which enhances the credibility of the results. The selection of 16 experts from various nationalities and with diverse professional and academic backgrounds ensures a broad perspective and varied knowledge, contributing to a more comprehensive assessment of the models. Achieving a threshold of 75% positive responses indicates a high level of agreement among experts, reflecting the robustness and acceptance of the presented models. The model verification process was well-organized and divided into stages, facilitating its transparency and systematic nature. The interviews were conducted both online and in person, demonstrating flexibility in the data collection approach.

Chapter five, titled "Research results" presents the key findings of the conducted research. It outlines the empirical results obtained from in-depth interviews, providing insights into management models, partner selection criteria, roles in alliances, prior collaborations, the process of forming alliances, research initiatives, adopted approaches, added value, expected outcomes, achievements, the future of alliances, and the limitations of the European Universities Initiative. Additionally, the chapter identifies three characteristic models of European university alliances: thematic, typological, and cross-sectional (general), and describes their transformation into business models. In conclusion, these models were validated using the Delphi method with the participation of sixteen carefully selected experts.

The analysis of various approaches to forming academic alliances reveals the existence of multiple collaboration models that can be tailored to the specific needs and priorities of individual countries. An example is the extensive partnership networks like NeurotechEU, which, through a wide range of associated partners, enhance opportunities for collaboration and knowledge exchange. Alliances such as EUniWell and ENHANCE, characterized by a large number of students and staff, demonstrate their attractiveness and ability to attract talent. However, there are significant differences in the number of partners, research resources, and the number of students and staff among different alliances, which may affect their effectiveness and operational capacity.

Some alliances, with fewer research centers, may be more focused on specific academic disciplines, which limits their interdisciplinarity. The diversity of partnership models allows for a flexible approach to collaboration and adaptation to specific needs and goals. University alliances establish various partnerships with business organizations, educational institutions, research centers, and public organizations, enabling broad cooperation and knowledge exchange. Strong ties with the private sector, where business organizations are the most represented category of partners, indicate intensive collaboration between the academic

environment and the private sector. Partnerships with research centers highlight the importance of research and innovation within the alliances.

Statistical analysis, utilizing the Shapiro-Wilk test and Pearson's and Kendall's correlation coefficients, provides a solid methodological foundation, allowing for objective conclusions regarding data distribution and relationships between variables. However, the lack of strong and statistically significant correlations between the analyzed variables suggests that other factors, not included in the study, may influence the analyzed relationships.

The complexity of management structures and their diversity and multi-level nature can lead to complications and difficulties in coordinating actions between different bodies. In some cases, strong centralization may limit the autonomy of individual partner universities. The pursuit of deeper integration and cooperation within alliances encounters cultural, administrative, and legal barriers that hinder the achievement of full synergy.

The vision for the future of European university alliances includes integrated management structures, joint degrees, and seamless student mobility, reflecting their aspiration to create more unified and efficient consortia. The author decided to use the Business Model Canvas (BMC) and adapt it to the structure of a European university. This is an incredibly interesting approach that demonstrates the ability to adapt business tools to other sectors. BMC is a tool used for analyzing and designing business models, helping entrepreneurs better understand their operations and identify key elements of success.

Transferring BMC to the university setting can be a fascinating experiment because universities also operate based on specific business models. Modern universities face many challenges, such as changing student expectations, demographic decline, increasing competition, and the need to continuously adapt to a changing environment. Therefore, applying BMC could prove very helpful in analyzing and improving the university's development strategy.

In the context of a European university, adapting the Business Model Canvas (BMC) can help identify key areas of activity, such as educational offerings, research, and collaboration with the socio-economic environment. Analyzing these areas based on the BMC can contribute to a better understanding of the university's specific activities and identifying potential areas for development. Furthermore, the BMC can be useful in the strategic planning process and change management at the university. The application of this model allows for visual and systematic mapping of activities, resources, relationships, and values, which greatly facilitates the understanding and analysis of creating and delivering value to customers, as well as receiving value from customers.

In summary, alliances are characterized by inclusivity and flexibility; however, they may encounter challenges related to integrating diverse stakeholders and ensuring genuine student influence in decision-making processes. The adaptation of strategic management tools, such as project planning and resource sharing, is crucial for the functioning of alliances, highlighting the practical value of the study.

The evaluation of the dissertation's structure indicates a coherent framework, presenting a comprehensive approach to the issue of international cooperation in higher education. Each chapter accurately addresses the topic, both in terms of problem description and the definitions and concepts applied. The research methodology is presented, defining the aim and scope of the empirical research and describing the methods and research tools used. The research findings are presented in an engaging manner.

4. Comments and discussion points

Although the paper discusses many aspects of strategic alliances, it does not give sufficient attention to the potential risks and challenges associated with international collaboration among higher education institutions. What, then, are the potential barriers and risks related to such collaboration?

While the paper provides valuable insights into the initial phases of alliance development, a significant question remains: what is the sustainability of these initiatives, and what might be the long-term strategies for cooperation?

Chapter four presents a detailed description of the sequential stages of the research process. Although the article selection process is described, there is a lack of detailed information regarding the criteria for assessing the quality of the articles, which could influence the final list of selected works.

The contemporary developmental potential of universities is based on resources and competencies, with intangible assets gaining increasing importance as they enable the formation of unique competencies. In the context of developing international cooperation, it is crucial to consider the competencies of both employees and the university as a whole that promote effective intercultural communication, innovation, and adaptability. It is also important to have the skills to build and maintain partnership relationships on the international stage and the ability to work in culturally diverse teams. What competencies of employees and the university as a whole should be considered when developing international cooperation? Final question: How can the key processes of a national university be adapted to the Business Model Canvas (BMC), taking into account the key processes of a selected European university?

5. Conclusions

The dissertation in question is a comprehensive study on collaboration strategies for the consolidation of higher education institutions within the framework of the European Universities Initiative Alliances. The author systematically and thoroughly analyzed various aspects of this initiative, combining theoretical frameworks of strategic management with practical implications for transnational academic cooperation.

In summarizing the evaluation of Ms. Magdalena Sikorska doctoral thesis, it should be noted that it presents current theoretical and empirical specialized knowledge in the discipline of management and quality sciences. The presented considerations and results are characterized by scientific independence, conducive to solving key problems, and are based on the analysis of professional literature. They contain practical value resulting from conducted empirical research. They confirm the ability to independently conduct scientific work, including the development of methodology in preparing research procedure protocols, the use of statistical analyses, and skillful reasoning.

The merit of the doctoral dissertation lies in the Author's knowledge and competencies derived from professional experience, which are evident both in the development of the research methodology, the original approach to solving the problem, and the presentation of the obtained results. The objective of the work has been achieved. The Author has answered the research questions posed. Appropriate tools were properly selected and applied to gather data and information, and the results of the analyses were presented and interpreted. It is important to emphasize the relevance of the research topic and the potential for applying the research findings in socio-economic practice.

6. Final conclusions

Taking the above into consideration, I positively evaluate the reviewed doctoral dissertation due to its appropriate substantive and methodological level. In my opinion, the doctoral thesis by Ms. Magdalena Sikorska, titled "Collaborative strategies for consolidation of higher education institutions within European Universities Initiative Alliances" is an independent and original solution to the research problem. It confirms the Author's theoretical knowledge in the discipline of management and quality sciences, as well as her ability to conduct independent scientific work. The doctoral dissertation meets all the requirements set for doctoral theses, particularly those specified in Article 187 of the Act of July 20, 2018, Law on Higher Education and Science. Based on the above conclusions, I recommend to the Council of the Discipline of Management and Quality Sciences at Poznań University of Technology that Ms. Magdalena Sikorska be admitted to the subsequent stages of the procedure for awarding the doctoral degree.

Wiesław Daniłowicz