

Strategic Alliances in Higher Education within the Scope of Management and Organizational Theories

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Abstract: One of the developments we encounter in higher education is strategic alliances established for various purposes. These meta-organizations, created by institutional actors, have been the subject of numerous studies. However, there is a need for research grounded in theoretical perspectives. Strategic alliances in higher education can be linked to established theoretical perspectives in management and organization theory, as the validity of these theories in explaining the formation and continuity of organizational fields has been proven. Building on this inspiration, this study aims to relate the establishment objectives of strategic alliances in higher education to established theoretical perspectives in management and organization studies. This conceptual study provides theoretical insight into strategic alliances in higher education.

Key words: Strategic alliances, higher education, management theory, organization theory.

1. INTRODUCTION

Factors such as the ease of international travel, declining costs, and the increasing economic value of higher education have triggered the growth of international higher education (Gunn & Mintrom, 2013; Wildavsky, 2010; Stromquist, 2007; Tarbutton & Doyle, 2023). Along with this growth, alliances have formed in higher education (Beerkins, 2002). The desire of higher education institutions to attract high-paying students, the increasing complexity of global university rankings, the desire to gain academic talent, and increasing global competition have paved the way for the growth and increase in the number of these alliances (Gunn & Mintrom, 2013). These developments in practice have drawn the attention of scholars, and strategic alliances in higher education have become the subject of numerous studies (Fehrenbach & Huisman, 2024; Pinheiro et al., 2023; Callender et al., 2020; Bedenlier et al., 2018; Kehm & Teichler, 2007; Gunn & Mintrom, 2013; Wildavsky, 2010; Stromquist, 2007).

Harrison et al. (2016) noted in their research that high-performing research institutions can compete more effectively by forming alliances. Fahrenbach and Huisman (2024) point out that strategic alliances in higher education are established to advance institutions, overcome complex challenges, and provide members with a transformative space to resolve conflicts.

On the other hand, as a result of the field survey conducted within this study, it was determined that there is a significant gap in theoretically grounded studies focusing on strategic alliances in higher education. The findings obtained by Fahrenbach and Huisman (2024) in their study support this finding. The researchers systematically reviewed studies on strategic alliances in higher education. They concluded that most of the studies examined in this research were descriptive, lacked theoretical foundations, and used the term “strategy” in a general, unnecessary, and implicit manner, emphasizing the need for more comprehensive and theoretically grounded studies. Indeed, research topics such as the establishment objectives, formation processes, success and failure reasons, advantages and disadvantages of strategic alliances in higher education, and the dynamics affecting the partnership processes of members can be related to established theoretical perspectives in management and organization theory.

This is because the validity of management and organization theories in explaining the formation and continuity of organizational fields has been proven (Greenwood et al., 2011; Maassen & Olsen, 2007).

Based on the aforementioned gap and inspiration, this article aims to relate the establishment objectives of strategic alliances in higher education to established theoretical perspectives in management and organizational studies. In this context, after discussing the concept of strategic alliances, strategic alliances in higher education and their founding purposes will be elaborated upon. Subsequently, the founding purposes of strategic alliances in higher education will be discussed regarding management and organizational theories.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. The Concept of Strategic Alliance

Strategic alliances, which first emerged in the 1930s, have been one of the key topics in strategic management literature since the 1980s, as part of efforts to achieve sustainable competitive advantage (Narula & Duyters, 2004; Hagedoorn, 2002; Yasuda, 2005; Porter, 1989). Strategic alliances initiated and maintained by organizations in almost every sector aiming for mutual benefit (Agarwal et al., 2010; Das & Teng, 2000) have also attracted academic interest (Wohlstetter et al., 2005).

A strategic alliance is a voluntary collaboration formed by organizations coming together to learn the information needed to gain a competitive advantage and obtain complementary capabilities and resources (Agarwal et al., 2010; Das & Teng, 2000; Lei & Slocum, 1992). Organizations typically form strategic alliances for reasons such as solving a common problem, gaining access to a new market, reducing financial risk, exchanging information, combining resources, establishing organizational legitimacy, acquiring new capabilities, and strengthening their competitive position (Angwin & Sammut-Bonnici, 2014; Mitsuhashi & Greve, 2009; Whellen & Hunger, 2008; Stuart, 2000).

According to Silverman and Baum (2002), organizations prefer different types of alliances depending on the intensity of competition. Sales alliances, solution alliances, joint venture alliances, regional alliances, investment alliances, production alliances, design alliances, R&D alliances, outsourcing agreements, alliances with suppliers, and franchising are the most common types of alliances encountered in practice (Karakılıç & Öcal, 2008).

2.2. Strategic Alliances in Higher Education

The trend toward globalization and advances in communication and information technologies have led the world into a new era known as the information age (Doz & Hamel, 1999). Technological advances affecting all sectors have shaped our age and transformed established industries. Indeed, this era is not built on vertically integrated organizational structures like the previous industrial revolution. Instead, organizations must integrate all their capabilities, combine complementary strengths to reduce uncertainty, and accelerate learning.

This situation is pushing organizations in the higher education sector, like other sectors, to form strategic alliances. Higher education organizations, like businesses, operate in environments where change is inevitable and must respond to national and international waves of change (Fehrenbach & Huisman, 2024). On the other hand, they must act as strategic actors in terms of goals, accountability, structures, and management.

Higher education alliances are organizational forms that link macro and micro levels and can promote transformation. Organizations, rather than individuals are responsible for membership (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). They can be regarded as agenda setters that promote new standards and practices (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Torfing, 2012). Stark (2009) defines these alliances as heterarchical structures characterized by competition, complex collaborations, and mutual interdependence

A review of the relevant literature reveals that various higher education strategic alliances have been established at the national and international levels, both voluntarily and through government mandates (Fehrenbach & Huisman, 2024; Pinheiro et al., 2023; Callender et al., 2020; Bedenlier et al., 2018; Kehm & Teichler, 2007).

One such alliance is the Association of American Universities (AAU). A long-standing alliance, the AAU was founded in 1900 to address issues related to the reputation of American universities (AAU, 2025). The alliance has moved forward by developing academic standards to improve the quality of higher education and taking a series of measures to strengthen weaker institutions.

Another higher education alliance is the European Universities Initiative (EUI) network, which consists of universities across Europe (Stensaker et al., 2023). Despite a long history of cooperation between universities in continental Europe (Jungblut et al., 2020), the EUI was launched in 2017, inspired by French President Macron's speech in which he stated that European Universities would be the driving force behind educational excellence in Europe, and it has ensured that existing collaborations are transformed into institutionalized, long-term alliances (Stensaker et al., 2023; Maassen et al., 2023). EUI aims to promote common European values and principles, strengthen the European knowledge economy, ensure the equitable development of higher education and science across Europe, and achieve sustainability.

Of course, national and international higher education alliances are not unique to the United States and Europe. The Russell Group, GuildHE, and transregional university alliances in the UK, Australia's Group of Eight, Canada's U15, and SKY in South Korea are examples of national-level alliances (Pinheiro et al., 2023; Stensaker, 2018; Harrison et al., 2016). League of European Research Universities (LERU), the Guild of Europe, African Research University Alliance (ARUA), International Alliance of Research Universities (IARU), Alliance for Entrepreneurial Universities in Africa (AEUA), the US's University Innovation Alliance (UIA), the Association of Pacific Rim Universities (APRU), Universitas 21 (U21), and the Worldwide Universities Network (WUN) are examples of international higher education alliances.

Although the reasons for establishment vary, they include controlling the environment in a competitive and dynamic environment, being able to respond strategically to rapidly changing environments, strengthening organizational capacity, ensuring strategic development, improving performance, gaining a good image, improving quality, branding, reducing risk, sharing interests, gaining and/or maintaining competitive power, internationalize, gain international recognition, solve curriculum issues, achieve excellence, seize mutual learning opportunities, create opportunities for multilateral research collaborations, and increase creativity are among the main reasons (Fahrenbach & Huisman, 2024; Maassen et al., 2023; Lambrechts et al., 2023; Stensaker et al., 2023; Bedenlier et al., 2018; Stensaker, 2018; Kristensen & Karlsen, 2018; Wu & Chen, 2016; Kehm & Teichler, 2007; Beerkens & Van der Wende, 2007). Therefore, strategic alliances in higher education are important for members to achieve their goals easily.

2.3. Management and Organizational Theories with the Potential to Explain the Purposes of Establishing Strategic Alliances

As previously mentioned, the formation, continuity, and termination process of strategic alliances in higher education can be related to established theoretical perspectives in management and organization theory. This is because management and organization theories have proven their validity in explaining the formation and continuity of organizational fields (Greenwood et al., 2011; Maassen & Olsen, 2007).

The objectives of strategic alliances remain the same regardless of context, sector, and type of organization (Fahrenbach & Huisman, 2024). Therefore, strategic alliances in higher education can be linked to established theoretical foundations in management and organization literature

to gain an academic understanding. The following table (Table 1) presents the purposes of strategic alliances in higher education, linked to management and organizational theories.

Table 1. Basic Theories Regarding the Founding Purposes of Strategic Alliances

Basic Theories	The Objectives of Strategic Alliances
Resource Based Theory	Creating the best possible value by combining or utilizing resources
Knowledge Based Approach	The most strategic resource is pursuing information.
Dynamic Capabilities Approach	Gaining the ability to integrate, create, and restructure knowledge, skills, and competencies to adapt to unpredictable environments
Transaction Cost Theory	Minimizing production and transaction costs in the acquisition of resources and assets
Agency Theory	Sharing mutual gains by clarifying ownership, control, and incentives (risk management)
Resource Dependence Theory	Reducing uncertainty by forming alliances for power and control
Social Networks Theory	Gaining benefits from connections with actors within a network
Stakeholder Theory	Eliminate uncertainty regarding corporate reputation
Neo-Institutional Theory	Gaining status and legitimacy

According to the **Resource Based Theory**, organizations possess valuable, imitable, rare, and irreplaceable resources that can give them a competitive advantage (Konstantinos et al., 2002). According to this theory, strategic alliances are defined as collaborative relationships supported by the logic of strategic resource needs and social resource opportunities (Eisenhardt & Schoonhoven, 1996). Therefore, a strategic alliance is the potential of the combined resources to create value (Das & Tang, 2000; Gulati, 1998; Barney, 1991). Alliance members aim to maximize benefits by bringing together, using valuable resources, and gaining access to resources they do not have through the alliance. According to this theory, basic resource characteristics such as difficulty of imitation, scarcity, lack of substitutes, and mobility create value. Value creation involves sharing resources to gain knowledge, capital, and skills (Ireland et al., 2002). Value creation is the content produced, while the transformation that occurs over time is a process that changes both organizations due to joining the alliance (Fahrenbach & Huisman, 2024).

Knowledge Based Approach, Dynamic Capabilities Approach, Transaction Cost Theory, and Agency Theory are theories that expand Resource Based Theory. According to the Knowledge Based Approach, the purpose of strategic alliances is to facilitate organizational learning (March, 1991). Working with other organizations encourages the transfer of tacit knowledge (Eisenhardt & Schoonhoven, 1996). An organization gains strength by acquiring knowledge from outside sources to become more specialized in a subject or to expand existing knowledge (Cano-Kollmann et al., 2018).

Dynamic Capabilities Approach defines capabilities as the totality of abilities that enable organizations to respond to changing environmental conditions (Teece & Pisano, 1994). In other words, dynamic capabilities are the ability of organizations to integrate, create, and restructure their internal and external competencies to adapt to dynamic environmental conditions (Teece & Pisano, 1994; Helfat & Peteraf, 2009).

According to Williamson (1975), a leading scholar of **Transaction Cost Theory**, transaction costs include costs arising from making agreements, negotiating relevant issues, maintaining relationships, and increasing dependency. Therefore, organizations organize their activities in

accordance with minimum-cost options. According to this theory, strategic alliances are established to organize minimum-cost agreements. Strategic partnerships are seen as a tool to reduce uncertainties and the costs of non-performance by fostering cooperation, participation, and trust among the parties involved.

A principal-agent relationship is a relationship based on an agreement whereby one or more persons (principals) transfer their decision-making authority to another person (agent) to perform certain services on their behalf (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). **Agency Theory** focuses on the relationship between principals and agents, covering issues such as the protection of mutual interests and the regulation of uncertainties (such as information asymmetry and uncertainties created by conditions) between the two parties, and draws attention to the balance between agents and principals in the separation of ownership and control (Fernando et al., 2017; Parmigiani & Rivera-Santos, 2011; Ross, 1973).

Resource Dependency Theory explains how organizations depend on environmental resources to maintain their activities (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). From this perspective, factors such as power and authority in the organizational environment, the absence, abundance, or scarcity of critical resources, and uncertainty in resource acquisition closely influence interorganizational connections or relationships. Under these influences, strategic alliances are formed in three ways (Wisnieski & Dowling, 1997). The first type is formed by organizations that are competitors seeking similar resources (horizontal alliances). In horizontal alliances, organizations exchange or pool resources for joint use. The second type is formed by organizations that use each other's inputs or outputs, i.e., those in a supplier-customer relationship (vertical alliances). The third type is formed by organizations that share inputs and outputs such as ideas, employees, materials, and equipment (reciprocal alliances).

Social Network Theory is a powerful tool for explaining the relationships established by independent actors and the characteristics of these relationships (Wellman, 1988). Globalization, the need for access to information, the desire for professionalization, and the increasing use of external resources are reasons for organizational networks' growing importance. Research has shown that strategic alliances are related to social networks and that social networks can influence organizations in forming alliances (Meydan, 2011; Anderson, 2008; Fernández-Pérez et al., 2016; Hansen, 1999).

Stakeholder Theory explains the relationships between an organization and all actors in its immediate and extended environment affected by its activities, including shareholders, employees, suppliers, competitors, customers, the community, and regulatory agencies (Freeman, 1984). According to this theory, harmony among stakeholders will increase the power and influence of the alliance. Establishing various stakeholder collaborations forms strategic alliances (Solomon, 2001; Frooman, 1999).

The **Institutional Theory**, which is considered to be the totality of views that carry the concept of institutionalization into organizational theory (Özcan, 2011; Zucker, 1987), claims that organizational behavior is determined by the external environment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991) and that the survival of an organization is possible through adaptation to the external environment (Meyer & Rowan, 1991). According to this theory, organizations must develop reflexes to adapt to the external environment to gain resources and legitimacy (Özcan, 2011; Zucker, 1987). The ability of organizations to cope with external uncertainties by becoming compatible with the institutional structure of the external environment is considered institutionalization (Shulock, 1998). According to this assessment, institutionalization is determined by external institutional factors.

3. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In light of the above explanations regarding the founding purposes of higher education alliances, it can be seen that strategic alliances in higher education can be evaluated as

structures that provide a functional response in a competitive, dynamic, and complex environment, produce strategic solutions to problems that members cannot respond to individually, and transform the organizational field (Stensaker, 2018; Torfing, 2012). These assessments can be linked to established theoretical management and organization theory perspectives. This is because management and organization theories have proven valid in explaining organizational fields' formation and continuity (Greenwood et al., 2011; Maassen & Olsen, 2007). Every management and organization theory is a product of time and environmental conditions (Culpan, 2008). These theories address organizations within the framework of their assumptions. Therefore, these theories emphasize specific motivations behind forming strategic alliances.

Theories related to the Knowledge Based Approach, the Dynamic Capabilities Approach, the Transaction Cost Theory, and the Resource Based Approach (Parmigiani & Rivera-Santos, 2011). These theories focus on value creation, learning, acquiring knowledge and competencies, and developing and improving competencies (Fahrenbach & Huisman, 2024). These theories can be linked to the organizational objectives of strategic alliances in higher education, such as creating value, sharing resources to acquire knowledge and competencies (Gulati, 1998; Ireland et al., 2002), reducing risk (Inkpen & Tsang, 2007), ensuring organizational learning (Stensaker, 2018), and reducing transaction costs (Li, et al., 2011), and expanding operations in other countries (Fahrenbach & Huisman, 2024).

On the other hand, individuals who are stakeholders in strategic alliances, individuals who manage alliances, institutions that set guidelines for cooperation, and the relationships between them can be linked to Agency Theory (Fahrenbach & Huisman, 2024). Incentives, regulations, and monitoring mechanisms will be the primary management mechanisms focused on.

Resource Dependency Theory, Social Network Theory, Stakeholder Theory, and Institutional Theory serve to broaden our understanding of the relationships between higher education institutions and their environment (Parmigiani & Rivera-Santos, 2011). These theories can be linked to the following organizational objectives in higher education: forming strategic alliances by partnering with those who have power and control over resources to manage external uncertainty and reduce dependency (Hillman et al., 2009), gaining reputation, status, and legitimacy (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Torfing, 2012).

On the other hand, established social network connections enable collaborative work and facilitate sharing information and other resources (Fliaster & Spiess, 2008; Hoang & Antoncic, 2003). In addition, topics include how these organizational forms emerge, which ones survive, and how they spread (Palmer & Biggart, 2002).

A review of the relevant literature reveals that various studies have been conducted on strategic alliances in higher education, but there is a lack of theoretically grounded studies (e.g. Fehrenbach and Huisman, 2024; Pinheiro et al., 2023; Callender et al., 2020; Bedenlier et al., 2018; Kehm & Teichler, 2007; Gunn & Mintrom, 2013; Wildavsky, 2010; Stromquist, 2007). With this study, we have demonstrated that the establishment objectives of strategic alliances in higher education can be linked to established theoretical perspectives in management and organization studies. New empirical studies can be designed based on each of the above links. In this study, we have only addressed the establishment objectives of strategic alliances in higher education and the management and organization theories that can be linked to these objectives. In the future, all processes of strategic alliances in higher education, their successes and failures, how alliances expand or contract, their internal dynamics, advantages and disadvantages, the profiles of alliance members, relationships and bonds within alliances, and how these alliances shape institutions and the organizational environment can be the subject of theory-based research. These studies will contribute academically and provide new opportunities for higher education institutions in practice.

Conflict of Interest Statement

There is no conflict of interest among the authors in this study.

Ethics Statement

Interviews were conducted with the participants in the study. There is no situation that negatively affects human health. Therefore, I declare that there is no ethical violation.

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