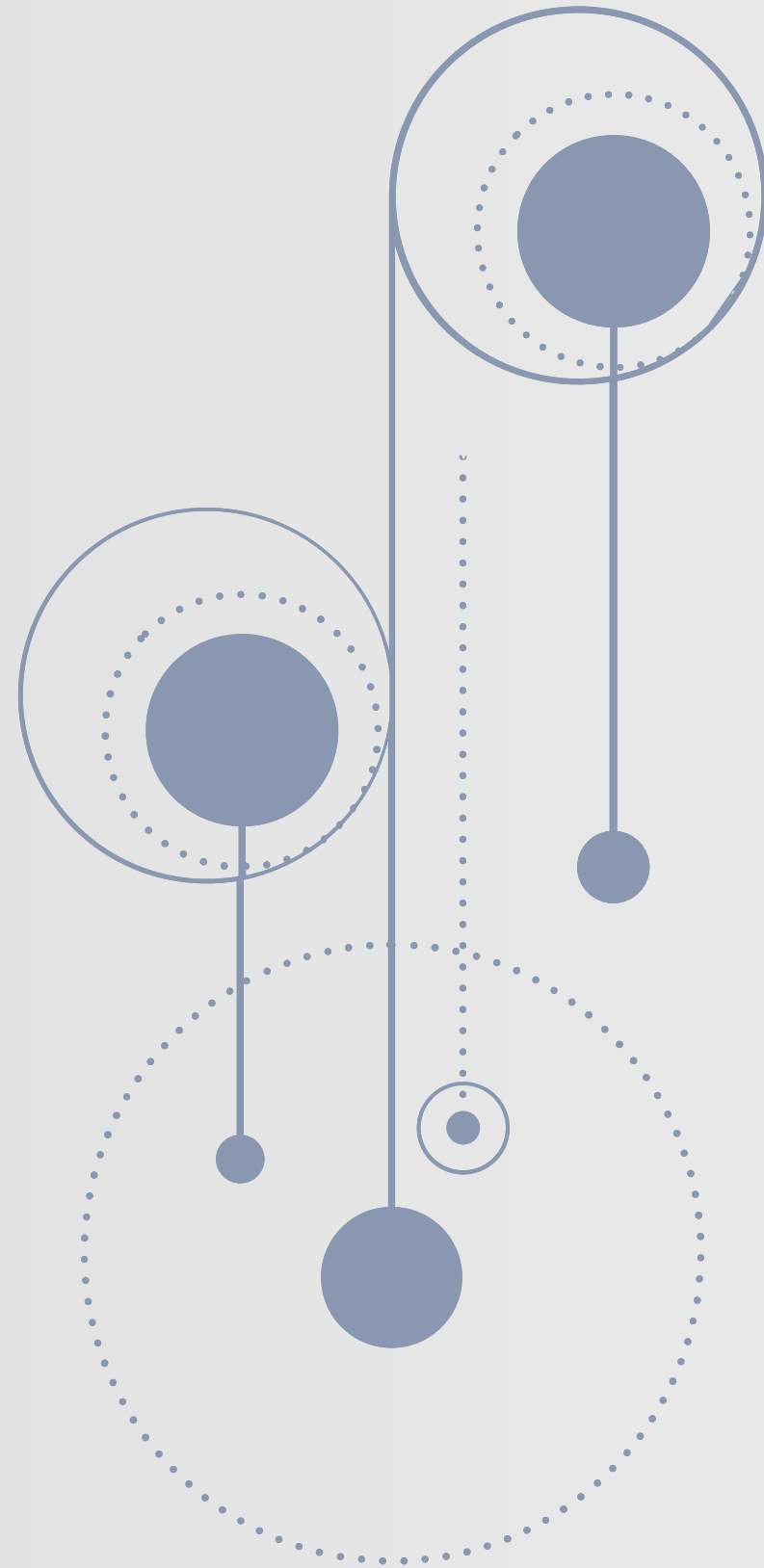




# TOWARDS AN INCLUSIVE CULTURE IN EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY ALLIANCES: Shared Practices, Aspirations, and Challenges in International Collaboration

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(ECER, Belgrad, 2025)

# Introduction



The CONTEXT:

*eBelong (2)- Sense of Belonging in the context of HE Alliances*

The PARTNERS:



UNIVERSITATEA DIN  
BUCUREȘTI  
VIRTUTE ET SAPIENTIA



National and Kapodistrian  
UNIVERSITY OF ATHENS



The PURPOSE:

1. Comprehend the role of belonging within a partnership;
2. Explore the impact of a common culture based on cooperation and support, on inclusion, equity and diversity behaviors;
3. Sustain the growth of learning communities within the alliance;

# Guiding questions

- Understanding practices, aspirations, and barriers to inclusivity in the context of European University Alliances starting from the case of CIVIS

## Shared Practices



What shared practices support inclusion and diversity within European university alliances?

## Common Aspirations



What common aspirations do academics have for fostering an inclusive culture within international collaborations?

## Challenges & Opportunities



What are the main challenges and opportunities for improving inclusion in European alliances?

# Conceptual Framework

## Inclusion

1

A multidimensional and systemic practice, extending far beyond traditional approaches focused solely on physical access or disability accommodations. Inclusion is increasingly understood not only as an institutional responsibility but also as an ethical, pedagogical, and relational commitment to ensuring that all members of the academic community (students, staff, and faculty) are **valued, visible, and empowered to participate** (Lopez-Gavira, Moriña, & Morgado, 2019; Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2020).

## University Alliances

2

Are ambitious transnational alliances of higher education institutions developing long-term structural and strategic cooperation.

## Explicit connection

3

The European Universities initiative aims at fostering excellence, innovation and **inclusion** in higher education across Europe and at accelerating the transformation of higher education institutions into the universities of the future with structural, systemic and sustainable impact. European Universities embody the freedom to learn, work together, research, innovate, share knowledge and capacity across borders [...](European Commission, 2024).

# Where we stand



## Opportunities

- Internationalisation brings mutual benefits (Egron-Polak & Green, 2015).

## Challenges

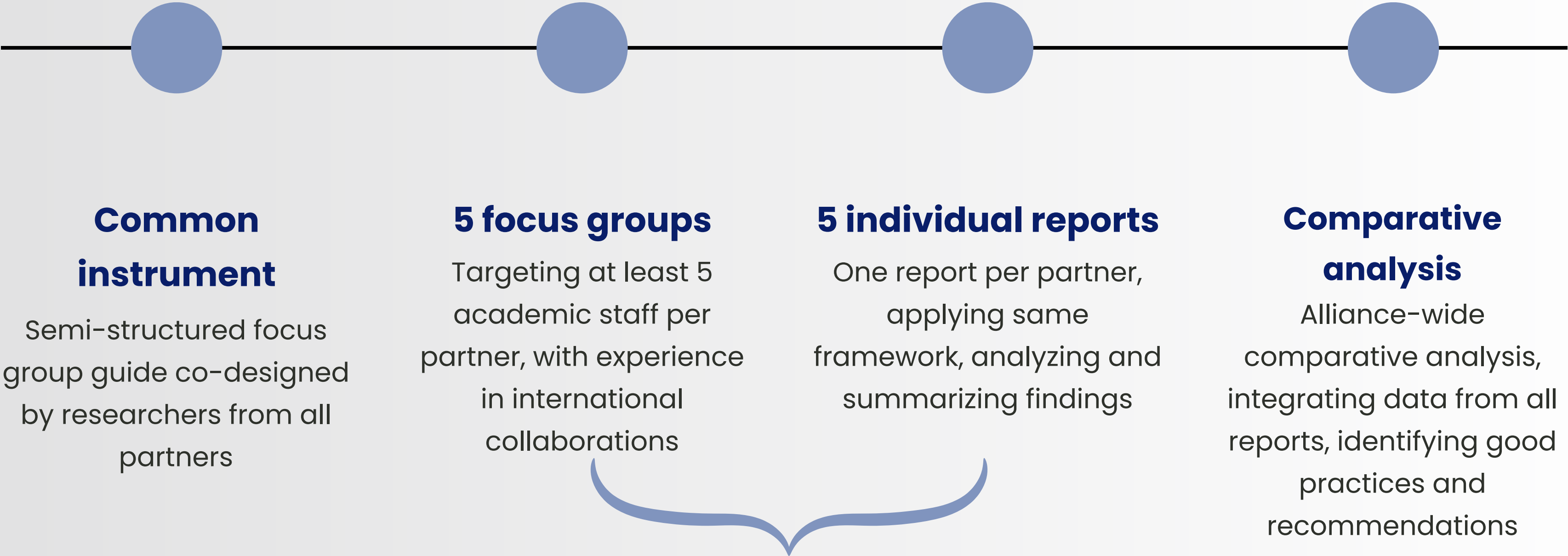
- Institutional differences & cultural diversity.
- Varying degrees of commitment and power dynamics between members.
- Face the same longstanding barriers to inclusivity that universities traditionally encounter, including institutional shortcomings (for example, lack of policies), faculty preparedness, administrative resistance, funding constraints, technological limitations, and societal attitudes (Dildora, 2024).

## The Path Forward

Need for a strategic plan for inclusivity (Martinez-Acosta & Favero, 2018) starting from:

- Strong institutional commitment at all levels.
- Proactive support for incoming students.
- Open dialogue on diversity & inclusion.
- Clear assessment & accountability measures.

# Data collection and analysis



**A unified approach by using the same instrument and framework across all partners.**

(ECER, Belgrad, 2025)

# Broad topics covered by the interview guide

01

Institutional values of inclusion and diversity

02

Organizational culture similarities and differences

03

Perceived benefits and challenges of international collaboration;

04

Strategies for enhancing inclusivity within alliances

05

Best practices

06

Recommendations for fostering a sense of belonging within European alliances

# (1) Shared practices

## Common definition

- Shared understanding of inclusivity framed in terms of equity, access, and human dignity.

## Institutional infrastructure

- Structures and policies that support inclusivity across partners→ **service-oriented+ needs assessment approaches.**

## Collaborative approach

- Commitment to cooperation within and outside the institution, including for sharing good practices.
- Limit: *several partners reported the absence of cross-institutional dialogue.*

## Different level engagement

- Engagement at institutional, faculty/department, and student levels to address inclusivity.
- A tension between individual initiative and institutional practices.
- Limit: *approaches are often fragmented, overlap, and resources are scattered.*

## (2) Common aspirations

### Shift away from traditional approaches

- Shift from a narrow disability focus → towards broader, intersectional inclusivity.

### Outlook beyond the institutional & national contexts

- Exposure to different cooperation and dialogue platforms made participants more aware of their institutional strengths and shortcomings.
- Participants increasingly moved from an exclusive identification with their own institution towards a broader sense of belonging.
- Transnational frameworks create additional pressure for institutions to adapt and innovate→. Academics discussed practices they incorporated in their own activity.

### Openness to Strategy

- Not all partners had an inclusivity strategy= the alliance might offer the context to adopt one.

(ECER, Belgrad, 2025)

# 3.1. Opportunities: European University Alliances as **Drivers** for Inclusivity

- 1 Appropriate internal structure**  
As HEIs from different national contexts come together, the principles of inclusion & diversity become inherent in their operations.
- 2 Resources**  
Pooling project-based funding (*temporary!*), digital infrastructure, and institutional know-how to support pilots and initiatives.
- 3 Facilitate transformative change**  
Leveraging combined resources & expertise to advocate change, fill institutional gaps, and leverage co-learning.
- 4 Capacity building**  
Transnational cooperation is used to put pressure at the institutional level to implement better services.

(ECER, Belgrad, 2025)

## 3.2.

# Challenges:

# **Struggles** with

# *centralization*

### 1 **Shared Practice**

Participants discuss common efforts, but institutional differences, bureaucracy, and communication gaps persist= lack of awareness.

### 2 **Differences in commitment**

Different people and different partners commit at different levels, with obvious (frustrating) discrepancies.

### 3 **Feasibility**

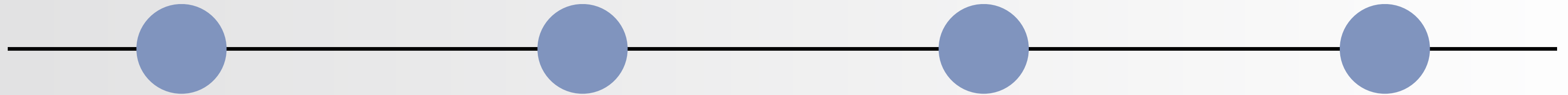
Academics' multiple roles must be considered to avoid overload.

Lack of resources in many institutional contexts.

### 4 **Beyond aggregation**

Addressing inclusivity within alliances should not be a simple aggregation of existing practices but a common commitment to a shared strategy.

# Conclusions



**Alliances serve as  
catalysts for  
inclusivity**

**Aspirations  
(*individual &  
institutional*) push  
the agenda forward**

**Opportunities are  
tangible but  
uneven**

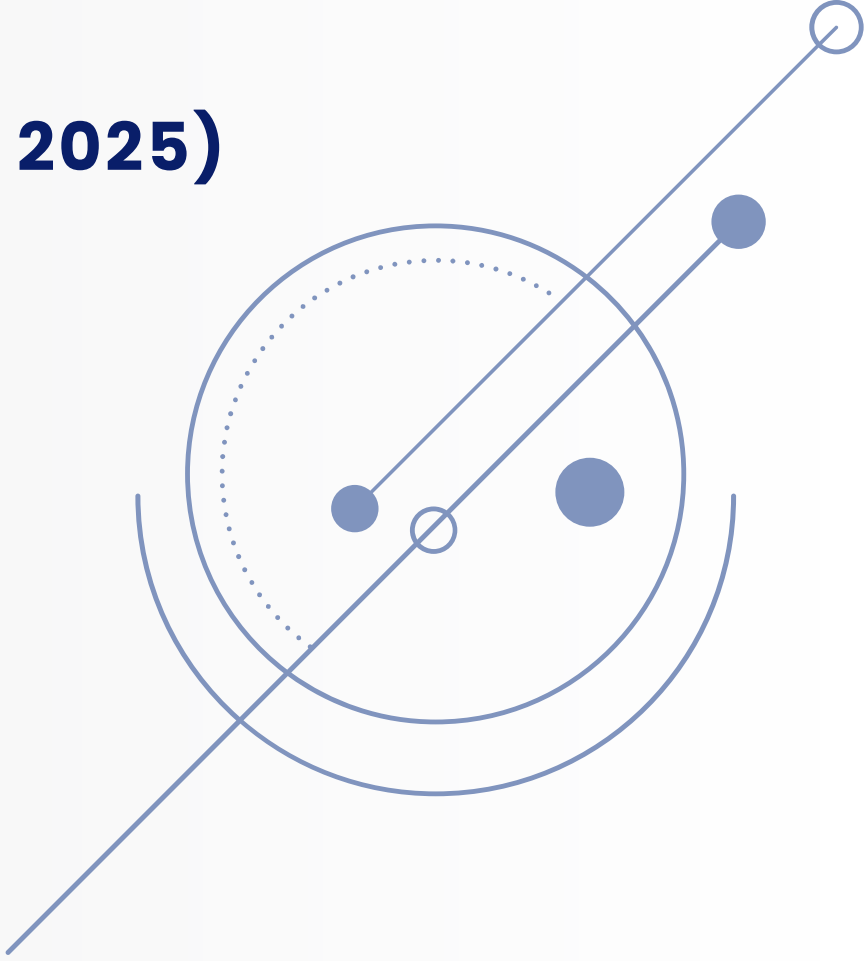
**Challenges remain  
significant**



What comes next for us? Proposing an inclusivity strategy for our Alliance!

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# Thank You

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