

FROM DEFENSIVE NORMS TO CONSTRUCTIVE CLIMATES: ASSESSING INCLUSIVE ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE IN A EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY ALLIANCE

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Abstract

European university alliances are expected to foster inclusive academic environments that support collaboration, mobility and shared educational innovation. However, translating these strategic ambitions into everyday institutional practices requires significant organizational and cultural change. Understanding how organizational culture and climate influence the development of inclusive academic environments has therefore become an important research and policy concern in higher education.

This study investigates the relationship between organizational culture, institutional climate and perceptions of inclusion within a European university alliance. The research was conducted within the Erasmus+ project eBelong2: Sense of Belonging in the Context of New Higher Education Alliances, coordinated by the University of Bucharest through the UB Learning Centre and implemented in partnership with five universities from the CIVIS alliance: the University of Bucharest, Aix-Marseille Université, the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid and Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen.

The study used a mixed-methods design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. Organizational culture and climate were assessed using the Organizational Culture Inventory (OCI) and Organizational Effectiveness Inventory (OEI), instruments developed by Human Synergistics. In addition, focus group discussions with academic staff from partner universities explored perceptions of collaboration, leadership, institutional support and inclusion within the alliance context.

Results reveal a pronounced gap between existing and desired organizational cultures. Current norms are dominated by defensive orientations including avoidance of risk, conventional patterns of operation, and limited inter-unit collaboration. Academic staff envision an alternative culture characterized by mutual respect, shared purpose, empowerment, and constructive engagement. The findings suggest that strategic ambitions for inclusion within university alliances are not automatically reflected in everyday practices, governance structures, or human resource systems. Key organizational levers identified for fostering inclusive cultures include clarifying and operationalizing alliance mission and values, empowering academic stakeholders through participatory governance, redesigning reward systems to recognize collaborative and inclusive practices, enhancing job design to support autonomy and interdependence, and developing leadership capacity aligned with constructive norms.

These results highlight the importance of organizational design, leadership practices and institutional support mechanisms in shaping inclusive environments within higher education alliances. By providing empirical evidence on cultural dynamics across partner institutions, the study contributes to ongoing discussions on how European university alliances can move from formal collaboration frameworks to genuinely inclusive and collaborative academic communities.

Keywords: Higher education alliances, organizational culture, inclusion, sense of belonging, CIVIS.

1 INTRODUCTION

European higher education is undergoing a profound transformation, driven by processes of internationalization, digitalization, and increasing attention to equity and inclusion. One of the most significant developments in this context is the emergence of European university alliances, which aim to foster transnational collaboration, enhance academic mobility, and create integrated educational ecosystems across institutions. These alliances, including CIVIS, are expected not only to promote

academic excellence but also to contribute to the development of inclusive, participatory, and socially responsive higher education systems [1].

Within this landscape, inclusion has become a central institutional priority. Contemporary research highlights that inclusion in higher education cannot be reduced to access or formal participation; it must be understood as a multidimensional and systemic process encompassing recognition, emotional safety, and the capacity to meaningfully engage in academic life [2], [3], and aligned with equity-based and intersectional perspectives that address structural inequalities across gender, socioeconomic status, disability, and migration background [4]. Yet the literature consistently points to a persistent gap between institutional commitments to inclusion and the lived experiences of academic communities, as inclusive values articulated in strategic documents are not always reflected in everyday practices, decision-making processes, or organizational structures [5], [6].

Organizational culture plays a crucial role here. Defined as the shared values, norms, and behavioral expectations that shape how individuals interact and perform their roles, it influences both institutional effectiveness and the extent to which inclusive practices are embedded in academic environments [7]. Cultures characterized by trust, collaboration, and psychological safety are associated with higher engagement, innovation, and inclusion, whereas defensive or hierarchical cultures inhibit participation, limit voice, and reinforce existing inequalities [8], [9]. These dynamics are amplified within European university alliances, which bring together institutions with different cultures, governance models, and traditions and therefore require alignment of values, practices, and expectations to support meaningful inclusion [10], [11].

Closely linked to inclusion is the concept of belonging — the subjective experience of being valued, accepted, and able to contribute within a community [12] — which is fostered not only through institutional policies but also through everyday interactions and organizational climates that support recognition and participation [13].

Against this background, the present study examines the relationship between organizational culture and inclusive academic environments within the CIVIS alliance, drawing on data collected during the Erasmus+ project *eBelong2 – Sense of Belonging in the Context of New Higher Education Alliances*. It addresses how organizational culture is perceived by academic staff across CIVIS partner universities, the differences between current practices and desired cultural norms, the structural and organizational factors that shape inclusive environments, and the institutional mechanisms that can support transition toward more inclusive and collaborative academic cultures.

2 METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a mixed-methods design combining a quantitative assessment of organizational culture and effectiveness with a qualitative exploration of academic staff perceptions of inclusion and collaboration, allowing for triangulation between standardized cultural indicators and the lived experiences of academics across the five partner universities.

Two validated diagnostic instruments developed by Human Synergistics International were employed: the Organizational Culture Inventory® (OCI®) and the Organizational Effectiveness Inventory® (OEI®). The OCI, developed by Cooke and Lafferty, measures the shared behavioural norms members perceive as necessary to "fit in and meet expectations", assessing twelve cultural styles organized into three clusters: Constructive (Achievement, Self-Actualizing, Humanistic-Encouraging, Affiliative), Passive/Defensive (Approval, Conventional, Dependent, Avoidance) and Aggressive/Defensive (Oppositional, Power, Competitive, Perfectionistic). The OEI complements the OCI by measuring the causal factors that shape culture — mission and philosophy, structures, systems, technology and skills/qualities — and outcomes at the individual, group and organizational levels, including motivation, teamwork, adaptability and intention to stay. Both instruments have an established record of reliability and validity in higher education contexts [7].

The OCI/OEI survey was administered digitally between June and November 2024. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and respondents completed a single combined questionnaire covering the OCI Current form and the OEI items. A total of 325 academic staff members from the five partner universities participated. Respondents represented teaching staff (n = 144), staff with combined teaching and research roles (n = 156), researchers (n = 16) and technical staff (n = 3). The OCI Ideal profile used as a benchmark in the analysis is the historical normative profile compiled by Human Synergistics from previous studies, rather than a project-specific Ideal administration.

Qualitative data were collected through focus groups conducted at each of the five partner universities, with approximately 30 academic participants per institution and a total sample of around 150 staff members. Sessions lasted between one and two hours. A common semi-structured discussion guide titled "Organizational Culture and International Collaboration", translated into the five working languages, explored five thematic areas: context and background, organizational culture, international collaboration, impact of collaboration, and recommendations for the alliance. An online training session was organized in advance to align facilitators on the protocol, ethical considerations and note-taking strategies.

The OCI and OEI data were processed through the Human Synergistics diagnostic system, which generated percentile scores, circumplex profiles and benchmarks against historical and Constructive references. The qualitative material — based on national narrative reports produced by each university team — was analysed thematically following an inductive approach, leading to three cross-cutting themes: understandings of inclusion, actors and relationships supporting inclusion and collaboration, and opportunities and barriers to collaboration and inclusion. Participation was voluntary in both components of the study. Anonymity was guaranteed for the survey, and confidentiality was assured for the focus groups, with informed consent obtained at the start of each session. No personally identifying information was retained in the analysis or reports produced.

3 RESULTS

The findings reveal a complex and, in many respects, contradictory picture of organizational culture within the CIVIS partner universities. While institutional discourse emphasizes inclusion, collaboration, and academic empowerment, the empirical data indicate a significant misalignment between current cultural realities and the values and practices academic staff consider necessary for inclusive environments.

3.1 Current organizational culture

The OCI data show that the dominant cultural profile across the five institutions is characterized by Passive/Defensive and Aggressive/Defensive norms. Behaviors associated with Avoidance and Conventionality are highly prevalent, indicating that academic staff perceive expectations to conform, minimize risk, and avoid responsibility or visibility. These patterns suggest a work environment where self-protection takes precedence over initiative and where innovation or critical engagement is discouraged — conditions typically associated with low psychological safety [9]. Aggressive/Defensive behaviors, particularly Oppositional tendencies, are also present, reflecting criticism, resistance to others' ideas, and a focus on weaknesses rather than consensus, which further undermines trust and collegiality.

Conversely, Constructive norms — Humanistic-Encouraging, Self-Actualizing, Achievement, and Affiliative behaviors — are significantly underrepresented. These norms are typically associated with inclusive, high-performing organizations [7], [8], and their absence highlights a fundamental misalignment between institutional aspirations and everyday practices.

3.2 Ideal organizational culture

In contrast, the ideal culture envisioned by academic staff is strongly Constructive. The highest-ranked norms are Humanistic-Encouraging and Self-Actualizing, reflecting a desire for environments where individuals feel supported, valued, and empowered to grow. The emphasis on Humanistic-Encouraging norms suggests a strong demand for empathy, recognition, and open communication, while the prominence of Self-Actualizing norms points to autonomy, creativity, and meaningful engagement. Achievement and Affiliative norms also feature prominently, suggesting that staff envision academic environments that balance individual excellence with collective responsibility. Defensive norms are consistently rejected, indicating a clear normative shift toward cultures that support inclusion, participation, and belonging.

3.3 Causal factors and structural barriers

The OEI data identify several structural and organizational factors that sustain the current cultural configuration. Institutional missions lack clarity and coherence, particularly regarding inclusion and collaboration, with staff reporting limited understanding of how these values are operationalized. Governance structures are perceived as highly centralized, with limited opportunities for participation in decision-making, which contributes to disempowerment and reduces engagement in institutional

initiatives [8]. Human resource systems are often misaligned with inclusive values: practices related to evaluation, recognition, and professional development prioritize individual performance over collaboration and inclusion, reinforcing Defensive norms [14]. Leadership practices are frequently described as distant or bureaucratic, with insufficient support for dialogue, feedback, and professional growth, which limits the potential for cultural transformation.

3.4 Effectiveness outcomes

The impact of these cultural and structural conditions is visible in several effectiveness outcomes. While intention to remain within institutions is relatively high, this is accompanied by low motivation, weak teamwork, and limited adaptability — a form of institutional stability not supported by engagement or innovation, leading to what can be described as "passive retention". At the group level, low teamwork and departmental effectiveness indicate fragmented structures and limited cross-unit collaboration. At the organizational level, low adaptability suggests that institutions may struggle to respond to emerging challenges in rapidly changing higher education environments.

3.5 Qualitative insights

The qualitative findings provide important context and depth to the quantitative results. Across institutions, participants describe inclusion as an important but inconsistently implemented concept: while there is strong individual commitment to inclusive values, institutional support is often perceived as insufficient or fragmented. Common barriers include centralized governance, lack of resources, limited recognition of inclusion-related work, and inconsistent communication, with inclusion frequently described as dependent on individual initiative rather than embedded in institutional systems. At the same time, participants emphasize the importance of leadership, collaboration, and shared responsibility in fostering inclusive environments — insights that align with the quantitative findings and reinforce the need for systemic approaches to cultural transformation.

4 CONCLUSIONS

4.1 The cultural gap

The dominance of Avoidance, Conventionality and Oppositional norms in the current cultural profile, contrasted with the strong preference for Humanistic-Encouraging, Self-Actualizing, Achievement and Affiliative norms in the ideal profile, points to a configuration misaligned with the inclusive ambitions of the alliance. The literature on cultural change in higher education suggests that such misalignments are not unusual: institutional cultures often lag behind strategic discourse, particularly when inclusion is framed as a value to be declared rather than a practice to be enacted [5], [6]. Defensive norms tend to be self-reinforcing, as they reduce the perceived costs of conformity and make initiative, dissent and innovation appear risky [7], [8], reflecting a broader pattern in which psychological safety, voice and meaningful participation remain structurally underdeveloped despite their centrality to inclusive academic life [9].

The present results are consistent with previous OCI studies in higher education and other public-sector contexts, which typically report a predominance of Passive/Defensive norms and a strong staff preference for Constructive cultures [7]. The novelty of the present study lies in its cross-institutional and transnational scope: while existing literature on European university alliances has focused on governance, strategic frameworks or analyses of the European Universities Initiative [10], [11], comparatively few studies have systematically examined the organizational cultures of partner institutions. Theoretically, the study reinforces the argument that inclusion in higher education must be conceptualized as a relational and systemic process rather than a discrete policy domain [2], [3], [12]. The convergence between the OCI/OEI results and the qualitative themes — particularly the recurring perception that inclusion "depends on individuals" rather than on institutional systems — supports an integrated model in which organizational culture, governance structures and human resource systems jointly shape the conditions for inclusive practice. The affective dimension of belonging [12], [13] cannot be disentangled from the structural features of academic work: where defensive norms prevail, the relational fabric required for belonging is weakened.

4.2 Practical implications for CIVIS and other alliances

The findings point to a coherent set of organizational levers for cultural change. Five interrelated areas appear particularly consequential: clarifying and operationalizing alliance and institutional missions around inclusion and collaboration; expanding participatory governance and faculty voice in decision-making; redesigning reward and recognition systems to value collaborative, mentoring and inclusion-related work; enhancing job design to strengthen autonomy, feedback and meaningful interdependence; and developing leadership capacity aligned with constructive norms, particularly at mid-management levels [8], [14]. These levers are mutually reinforcing and unlikely to produce sustained change if pursued in isolation. For CIVIS and similar initiatives, strategic ambitions for inclusion cannot be realized through formal frameworks alone; they require coordinated investment in the cultural and structural infrastructure of partner institutions.

4.3 Limitations and future research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study focuses on academic staff and does not include students or administrative staff. The quantitative sample, although substantial, is unevenly distributed across institutions, with the University of Bucharest accounting for the majority of respondents, which constrains institution-level comparisons. The OCI and OEI rely on self-reported perceptions and may be subject to common-method bias, and the OCI Ideal profile used as a benchmark is the historical normative profile rather than a project-specific administration. Finally, the focus on five CIVIS universities limits transferability to other alliances. Future research could extend the present study by including students and non-academic staff, administering a project-specific OCI Ideal, and conducting longitudinal assessments to track cultural change over time, while comparative work across European alliances would clarify whether the patterns identified here are specific to CIVIS or characteristic of the broader alliance landscape.

4.4 Final remarks

This study examined the relationship between organizational culture, institutional climate and perceptions of inclusion within the CIVIS alliance, drawing on OCI and OEI data from 325 academic staff and on focus group discussions across five partner universities. The central finding is a pronounced and consistent gap between current and desired cultures. Everyday academic life is shaped by defensive norms — particularly Avoidance, Conventionality and Oppositional behaviours — that constrain initiative, voice and cross-unit collaboration. In contrast, academic staff articulate a strong and shared vision of a constructive culture grounded in mutual support, empowerment, achievement and affiliation. This gap is not only behavioural but also structural and ethical, as it reflects the disjunction between institutional commitments to inclusion and the conditions under which academic work is actually carried out.

By providing empirical evidence on cultural dynamics across five universities in four national systems, the study contributes to an underexplored area in the literature on European university alliances, where comparatively few studies have systematically assessed organizational culture and effectiveness. The take-home message is that strategic ambitions for inclusion cannot be realized through formal frameworks alone: moving from defensive to constructive cultures requires systemic transformation through coordinated action on the organizational levers identified — mission clarity, participatory governance, reward redesign, job enrichment and leadership development. For CIVIS and similar alliances, this means treating cultural change not as a by-product of cooperation, but as one of its central tasks.

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