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Sensemaking in the Framework of the European Universities Initiative: The Crucial Role of Middle Managers

Coordinatore:

Ch.mo Prof. Antonella Marchetti

(firma in originale del Coordinatore)

Supervisors:

Dr. Fiona Jane Hunter

Prof. Catherine Montgomery

Tesi di Dottorato di:

Agata Mannino

N. Matricola: 5114907

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Ai miei genitori

*“The only way to make sense out of change
Is to plunge into it, move with it,
and join the dance.”
(Alan Wilson)*

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ABSTRACT

The European Universities Initiative (EUI), a recent keystone of the Erasmus+ programme, represents a transformative step towards advancing the European Education Area (EEA). With the ambitious goals of fostering institutional integration, harmonising national regulations and nurturing a shared European identity, the initiative presents both opportunities and challenges for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Within this complex framework, middle managers in international offices, who are responsible for translating the message related to change from leadership to stakeholders, play a pivotal role in interpreting, mediating and operationalising EUI objectives within institutional contexts. Previous research, however, has predominantly focused on policy and senior leadership roles, leaving a gap in understanding the lived experiences and strategies of middle managers during the implementation of transformational initiatives such as the EUI.

This study addresses this gap by exploring how middle managers make sense of internationalisation when implementing the EUI at their institutions. Guided by sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995) and its critical extensions, it examines how they interpret and communicate EUI goals, mediate between diverse internal stakeholders needs and foster engagement and motivation. Additionally, it investigates the influence of institutional contexts on these processes and the organisational changes that emerge.

Researching sensemaking in the context of internationalisation is inherently complex, due to the varied ways individuals interpret and respond to the same message. To accommodate this complexity and explore it in depth, a qualitative methodology was adopted, grounded in case study research. The study focused on a first-generation EUI alliance, using semi-structured interviews with middle managers from partner universities. These interviews provided rich insights into how meaning is created, engagement is fostered and understanding of the EUI is disseminated across the institutions. Participants were selected from international offices and project-related roles due to their pivotal position in driving internationalisation efforts.

The findings reveal that middle managers act as key translators and mediators, adapting EUI objectives which align with institutional cultures while building relational trust with stakeholders. Key approaches include tailoring communication for diverse audiences and creating shared meanings to bridge

divides. However, challenges arise due to inconsistent institutional priorities and the complexities of navigating change in universities.

The implications of these findings are twofold. Theoretically, the study advances the understanding of sensemaking as a relational and contextual process in HE internationalisation, highlighting the agency of middle managers in shaping institutional responses to change. Practically, it provides actionable insights for HEIs seeking to implement transversal internationalisation, including investing in professional development for middle managers, prioritising stakeholder engagement and adapting communication strategies to enhance participation.

By positioning middle managers at the centre of internationalisation efforts, this study underscores their crucial role in navigating the complexities of initiatives like the EUI. It calls for a shift away from traditional top-down approaches toward collaborative strategies that empower institutional change agents. As HE continues to evolve, these findings offer valuable guidance for institutions aiming to adapt and thrive in an increasingly interconnected sector, through research, teaching and collaborative mindsets, while navigating a politically fragmented global landscape.

Keywords: Internationalisation of HE – Sensemaking – Critical Sensemaking – Middle Managers – Internal Stakeholder Engagement – European Universities Initiative as change process – European Alliances.

ASTRATTO

La European Universities Initiative (EUI) è una recente azione di eccellenza nell'ambito del programma Erasmus+ e rappresenta un ulteriore passo con forte potenziale trasformativo verso la costruzione di uno spazio europeo dell'istruzione superiore. L'iniziativa persegue obiettivi ambiziosi, quali l'integrazione istituzionale, l'armonizzazione delle normative nazionali con quelle europee e lo sviluppo di un'identità europea condivisa, offrendo così sia opportunità che sfide alle istituzioni di istruzione superiore. In questo contesto complesso, i *middle manager* degli uffici internazionali, incaricati di tradurre i messaggi legati al cambiamento dalla leadership verso i portatori di interesse, assumono un ruolo cruciale di interpretazione, mediazione e implementazione degli obiettivi dell'iniziativa europea a livello istituzionale. Mentre la letteratura ha finora concentrato l'attenzione prevalentemente sulle politiche e sulla leadership apicale, permane un gap di conoscenza rispetto alle esperienze vissute e alle strategie adottate dai *middle manager* nella fase di implementazione di iniziative di trasformazione come la EUI.

Questo studio si propone di colmare tale vuoto, esplorando i processi di costruzione di significati legati all'internazionalizzazione da parte dei *middle manager* coinvolti nell'implementazione della EUI. Facendo riferimento alla teoria del *sensemaking* (Weick, 1995) e alle sue successive elaborazioni critiche, la ricerca analizza in che modo questi attori interpretano e comunicano gli obiettivi della EUI, mediano tra diversi stakeholder e promuovono coinvolgimento e motivazione. Indaga inoltre come il contesto istituzionale influenzi tali processi e le trasformazioni organizzative che ne derivano.

Studiare il *sensemaking* implica affrontare una complessità intrinseca, data la molteplicità di interpretazioni e risposte possibili ad uno stesso messaggio. Per approfondire questa complessità è stato adottato un approccio qualitativo di tipo case study, focalizzato su un'alleanza di prima generazione della EUI. Sono state condotte interviste semi-strutturate con *middle manager* provenienti dalle università partner, principalmente da uffici relazioni internazionali o con ruoli connessi al project management, con posizioni chiave nell'implementazione dell'iniziativa.

I risultati rivelano che i *middle manager* agiscono come traduttori e mediatori, adattando gli obiettivi della EUI alle culture istituzionali attraverso la costruzione di relazioni di fiducia con i diversi portatori di interesse. Tra le strategie principali emergono la comunicazione mirata e la costruzione di significati

condivisi, utili per colmare i divari di comprensione. Tuttavia, si evidenziano anche criticità legate a priorità istituzionali non allineate e alle difficoltà di gestire il cambiamento nel contesto universitario.

Le implicazioni dello studio sono di duplice natura. Sul piano teorico, la ricerca contribuisce ad approfondire il *sensemaking* come processo relazionale e contestuale nell'internazionalizzazione dell'istruzione superiore, sottolineando l'importanza del ruolo dei *middle manager* nell'adattamento al cambiamento. Sul piano pratico, fornisce indicazioni operative per le istituzioni che vogliano attuare una strategia di internazionalizzazione trasversale: tra queste, l'investimento nella formazione dei *middle manager*, il coinvolgimento attivo e in fase iniziale degli stakeholder nei processi di internazionalizzazione e lo sviluppo di strategie comunicative efficaci per promuovere partecipazione e motivazione.

Ponendo i *middle manager* al centro dei processi di internazionalizzazione, lo studio evidenzia il loro ruolo essenziale nel fronteggiare la complessità di iniziative come la EUI e propone un superamento degli approcci top-down tradizionali, a favore di strategie collaborative che valorizzino tali agenti del cambiamento istituzionale. In un panorama dell'istruzione superiore in continua evoluzione, questi risultati offrono spunti concreti per le istituzioni che intendano crescere in un contesto sempre più interconnesso, basato su ricerca, didattica e collaborazione in uno scenario politico frammentato.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EEA	European Education Area
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
EP	European Parliament
ERASMUS	European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students
EUA	European Universities Alliance
EUI	European Universities Initiative
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution

CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

Navigating change within complex organisations, such as Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) often resembles a finely tuned act of coordination, demanding adaptability, balance, and a constant awareness of multiple moving parts. In such settings, particularly within the evolving landscape of Higher Education internationalisation, certain institutional actors must respond to shifting expectations, bridge communication across silos, and maintain focus amid uncertainty. This balancing act calls to mind the image of a juggler: someone who manages competing priorities, adapts to the rhythm of change, and maintains flow even when the surrounding environment becomes unpredictable.

Like the juggler, these individuals are not simply executing tasks, they are interpreting and reinterpreting meaning within dynamic institutional ecosystems. Their success depends not just on skills, but on sense and institutional knowledge, on their capacity to make sense of complex demands and help others do the same. It is precisely this often-overlooked, meaning-building work that lies at the heart of this study.

My assumption when beginning this research journey, therefore, centred on whether meaning building would support the implementation of (HE) internationalisation that very often encounters persistent obstacles in its transversal implementation within HEIs. If so, this raises an essential question: How do these meanings influence daily communication about internationalisation in HEIs? And can communication failures, misunderstandings or adverse reactions to change within organisations be mitigated through meaning making?

The answer is complex, as interpretation of a word or sentence involves not only the speaker's personal experiences, style and background, but also the unique perspective of the listener. Even when sharing the same context, during communication the receiver may interpret a message within a different frame of reference, potentially altering the intended goal of the speaker.

This inquiry gains further significance in the section of this study which looks at the European Universities Initiative (EUI), a pivotal project under the Erasmus+ programme that aims to enhance the European Education Area (EEA). The initiative envisions establishing European Universities with recognised European degrees, fostering harmonised regulations across institutions in different countries and

cultivating a genuinely European identity grounded in shared values. As a complex and transformative action, the EUI profoundly impacts participating institutions' structure, organisation, work balance, rules and mindset.

However, the questions that remain are: Will examining how middle managers make sense of and navigate change processes - through the lens of sensemaking – help make these often-invisible actors (here referred to as mainly administrative staff acting in international offices or project-related activities who work in the background of institutions) more visible? Will it contribute to giving relevance to the crucial role of administrative staff in implementing internationalisation and the EUI?

This study originates from years of first-hand experience observing the persistent gap between the rhetoric of internationalisation espoused by HEIs and the tangible strategies and actions implemented to bring it to life, a gap widely recognised in the literature as well (Stier, 2006; Hunter & Sparnon, 2018; Stein, 2019). This disconnect prompted an exploration into the role of communication initially and, later, a deep dive into sensemaking theories, with the aim of bridging this divide and enabling HEIs to become more receptive to the transformative changes that internationalisation, when comprehensively implemented, entails. During this PhD journey, the global HE landscape underwent unprecedented shifts, including growing emphasis on critical perspectives (Stein, 2021), increased focus on the Global South (Altbach & de Wit, 2022; de Wit & Jones, 2022), and a rethinking of international mobility flows in a world increasingly shaped by disruption, rigidity and the rise of populist movements (Brandenburg, 2020; Hudzik, 2020; de Wit & Jones, 2022).

These complexities have reframed the rationale for internationalisation and challenged traditional models, urging HEIs to adapt to an increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world (Stein, 2021). This evolving context underscores the need to rethink internationalisation within HEIs, moving away from conventional approaches that prioritise mobility metrics and prestige (Marinoni et al, 2024), towards more inclusive, sustainable and resilient strategies. Within this shifting environment, this study seeks to provide new insights, particularly into how middle managers navigate these changes and reinterpret internationalisation goals in light of emerging challenges and opportunities.

In the beginning stages of this research, I assumed – based on my professional experience in the internationalisation sector of HE - that communication would play a pivotal role in addressing internationalisation challenges within HEIs. From this practitioner’s perspective, effective, well-rounded communication appeared essential to driving success and internal stakeholder engagement, while poor or unclear communication risked leading to failure and misalignment. Yet, as the study unfolded, it became apparent that the phenomenon is far more intricate, operating on multiple layers, intersecting with a wide array of global, national, institutional and personal dynamics.

The research focuses on the EUI as a complex and transformative project in HE. Launched by the European Commission, the EUI aims to foster deep integration among participating universities, causing a reshaping of institutional mindsets and operational processes (Council of the European Union, 2022). Its implementation aligns with the concept of transformational change, which involves altering institutional culture through shifts in underlying assumptions, behaviours and processes (Eckel et al., 1999). As the initiative progresses, alliances have experienced distinct phases, from initial excitement to a more tempered awareness of its complexities (Claeys-Kulik et al., 2022).

This thesis investigates how sensemaking processes mediate these complexities and influence the implementation of the EUI in HEIs. Specifically, it examines the role of middle managers in this context, focusing on how they interpret, translate and act upon the EUI implementation and its project goals, and how they foster institutional engagement with the initiative. The term middle managers refers here to individuals occupying intermediate positions within the organisational hierarchy of HEIs. Drawing on Dutton and Ashford’s (1993) definition, middle managers are understood as those located two or three levels below executive leadership, with formal responsibilities for managing units, translating strategy into action, and coordinating across institutional layers. Within the HE context, this includes individuals in both academic and administrative roles who play a pivotal part in enacting institutional change. For the purpose of this study, middle managers are operationalised as those who hold formal responsibility for implementing aspects of the EUI within their institutions. In the HE literature, middle managers are often defined broadly to include positions such as faculty deans, heads of departments, directors of administrative or academic units, and other coordinators who operate between senior leadership and

frontline staff (de Boer & Goedegebuure, 2009; Mahdzir, 2022). In the specific context of this research, the focus is primarily on administrative middle managers, those professionals situated between institutional leadership and academic or administrative staff who are responsible for coordinating, communicating, and operationalising the EUI. The roles represented among interviewees include Heads of International Offices, Directors of International Units, Heads of alliance-specific units, Vice-Rectors for Internationalisation or Education appointed as alliance coordinators, Project Managers, and Heads of HR units. This focus on administrative middle managers emerged naturally during the research process, as the majority of individuals holding formal responsibility for implementing the EUI within their institutions were members of the administrative staff. Nevertheless, the study also includes a smaller number of participants who combined academic and managerial responsibilities, and the analysis therefore considers both groups in exploring how middle managers mediate between strategic objectives and local institutional realities.

Understanding how middle managers interpret and implement the EUI is not only academically valuable, it is practically vital for the long-term viability and success of the initiative itself. The EUI's ambition to reshape the EEA depends on consistent, deeply embedded institutional change, which in turns hinges on how meaning is built and shared across university systems. By uncovering how meaning is negotiated, translated, and acted upon by middle managers (Alvesson & Jonsson, 2022) – those who are often overlooked yet central to implementation – this research sheds light on the hidden infrastructures that make-or-break complex reforms. As the EUI moves from initial momentum to long-term institutionalisation, this thesis offers insight into the sensemaking practices that can sustain or stall its transformative goals. Thus, the findings not only address theoretical gaps but also provide practical guidance for enhancing stakeholder engagement, communication strategies, and policy alignment within and across universities engaged in the EUI.

The study is guided by the following overarching research question:

Main Research Question (MRQ):

How do middle managers make sense of internationalisation when implementing the European Universities Initiative at the institutional level?

This overarching question guides the inquiry into the interpretive and mediating roles of middle managers in a context of institutional transformation. Specifically, this study seeks to explore how middle managers' sensemaking processes influence internal stakeholder engagement and shape institutional responses to internationalisation when transversally implemented. To unpack its various dimensions, the following additional questions are posed:

Additional Research Questions:

Research Question One (RQ1): *To what extent do middle managers act as mediators in understanding different stakeholder needs in context?*

Research Question Two (RQ2): *Which mediation approaches are supportive of stakeholder engagement?*

Research Question Three (RQ3): *How does the institutional context intersect with middle managers' sensemaking approaches?*

Research Question Four (RQ4): *What changes, if any, does this sensemaking lead to?*

These sub-questions are structured to progressively explore the layers of the main question. RQ1 and RQ2 delve into relational and communicative mediation, while RQ3 foregrounds the organisational context, and RQ4 explores the transformational potential of sensemaking processes in the implementation of internationalisation.

The objectives of this research are aligned with these questions and are designed to guide the analytical approach:

- To analyse the strategies middle managers employ to interpret, translate and apply the EUI within their organisational structures and power dynamics (addresses MRQ, RQ1, RQ3).
- To investigate how middle managers build and communicate shared meaning about the EUI to diverse stakeholders (addresses MRQ, RQ1, RQ2).
- To identify factors that facilitate or hinder effective sensemaking processes (addresses MRQ, RQ3, RQ4).

The EUI is recognised as a transformational change process, as reaffirmed by the 2025 Report on the European Universities Initiative (EC Report, 2025). Yet, large-scale initiatives like the EUI continue to face significant implementation challenges, often due to low levels of internal stakeholder engagement. While much research has focused on leadership, strategy, and policy in HE, the role of middle managers as

sensemakers, communicators, and institutional change agents has been largely overlooked. This study addresses that gap by examining how these actors translate complex initiatives into locally meaningful actions. By foregrounding communication and meaning-building processes, and by leveraging sensemaking theory, this research provides a more context-sensitive perspective on how transformational change can be more effectively enacted and sustained within HEIs.

The thesis has adopted a qualitative case study approach. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with participants employed across HEIs in one selected European Universities alliance. This interpretive methodology is guided by sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995) and its critical extension (Mills et al., 2010) to understand how middle managers address “novel, ambiguous, or confusing” issues or events (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014, p.57) by building new meanings within organisational change processes. The chosen methods support the aim of uncovering lived experiences, communication patterns, and institutional dynamics that quantitative approaches might overlook. By focusing on the perspective of mainly administrative staff, this research foregrounds the situated, relational, and contextual nature of sensemaking within HE internationalisation.

The research is framed within the broader perspective of HE internationalisation as a transformational change process that alters institutional culture through deep shifts in assumptions, behaviours, mindset, structures and processes (Schein, 2017).

1.1. Dissertation Structure

The dissertation is organised into six chapters. Following this introductory chapter, the literature review in the second chapter provides a comprehensive exploration of existing literature on the internationalisation of HE, change as a common process in organisations, change in HE (specifically applied to internationalisation), middle managers’ role as change agents, stakeholder engagement, institutional culture, change communication and, finally, the concepts of sensemaking and critical sensemaking, before contextualising the EUI as a complex internationalisation tool while taking a deeper look at sensemaking and stakeholder engagement. The third chapter is dedicated to the methodology used to conduct this qualitative case study approach. It also presents and describes the research design, data collection and

analysis process adopted, which follows an interpretive epistemological approach grounded in a constructivist worldview.

Chapter 4 discusses the findings. The analysis highlights middle managers' roles as mediators and change agents, their tailored approaches according to stakeholder groups and needs, and their efforts at building trust and crafting narratives, the influence of institutional culture and, finally, different types of changes originating from the implementation of the initiative. Using a metaphor as a tool to share meanings, Chapter 5 discusses the implications of these findings, situating them within the broader literature on sensemaking in organisational change and HE internationalisation. It further explores how middle managers' sensemaking processes contribute to transforming institutional mindsets and cultivating a European sense of belonging within HE. The conclusion Chapter 6 synthesises the key insights of this study, addresses its limitations and proposes directions for future research. It emphasises the critical role of middle managers in fostering stakeholder engagement and institutional transformation, underscoring the importance of sensemaking in navigating complex internationalisation initiatives. Finally, I'll conclude the thesis with an account of my personal journey and transformative process in pursuing the doctoral dissertation.

CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is framed by several bodies of knowledge that informed my research questions on how middle managers in HEIs make sense of internationalisation within the framework of the EUI. Specifically, it examines their role, the approaches they adopt to support internal stakeholder engagement and the institutional changes that emerge from their sensemaking processes, also in consideration of their specific institutional context.

The process of meaning-making is particularly relevant in the context of internationalisation, which requires institutional actors to navigate shifting priorities, diverse stakeholder perspectives and evolving policy landscapes (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). To capture this complexity, this study draws on sensemaking theories as conceptual lenses to examine how middle managers interpret and implement internationalisation. Sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995) provides a framework for understanding how individuals construct meaning in ambiguous or uncertain situations, while critical sensemaking (Mills et al., 2010) highlights the role of power, identity and institutional constraints due to power dynamics in shaping these interpretations. By applying these perspectives, this study aims to investigate how middle managers' sensemaking processes affect internal stakeholder engagement and guides institutional reactions to internationalisation when transversally implemented.

However, given the complexity of internationalisation as a concept and a practice, it is essential to first establish the broader historical and conceptual context in which these middle managers, and HEIs generally, operate.

To do so, this section begins with the contextual setting of the problem, followed by an exploration of the internationalisation of HE, tracing its evolution, key definitions and underlying drivers. Understanding how internationalisation has evolved over the decades is critical because it provides insights into the shifting expectations, policies and institutional strategies that shape the roles and responsibilities of middle managers today. The mutability of internationalisation - its changing definitions and its responsiveness to global, political and economic forces - creates both opportunities and challenges for those tasked with its implementation (de Wit, 2020). By situating this study within the historical trajectory of HE internationalisation, we can better understand the tensions between traditional interpretations of

internationalisation (e.g. mobility-driven approaches) and emerging models that call for structural and cultural change within institutions and societal impact.

For those middle managers under the microscope in this study, this evolving landscape necessitates constant adaptation and interpretation (Weick, 1995; Weick, 2005; Samra-Fredericks, 2003). Their sensemaking is influenced by institutional priorities, external pressures and the broader discourse surrounding internationalisation in HE. By tracing the evolution of internationalisation, this section highlights how shifting paradigms impact the way middle managers perceive and enact their roles, ultimately shaping how they engage internal stakeholders and navigate change within their institutions.

The review then goes deeper into the exploration of internationalisation as a transformational change process within HEIs, highlighting how its implementation requires not only strategic vision but also deep organisational shifts that challenge established structures, cultures and practices. While internationalisation is often framed as a strategic goal (Stein, 2019; Stier, 2006), its realisation depends on internal processes that are shaped by institutional context, leadership and stakeholder engagement. Middle managers play a critical role in translating broad institutional strategies into actionable steps, bridging the gap between top leadership and internal stakeholders (Gornitzka & Larsen, 2004).

Given their central role in navigating and facilitating this change, the next section examines their positioning within HEIs and their function as mediators between leadership and internal stakeholders. Their ability to make sense of internationalisation and communicate its implications across different institutional levels is essential for fostering engagement, mitigating resistance and ensuring that internationalisation is not merely a policy directive but a meaningful, embedded practice (Hunter et al., 2022; Robson, 2011). By linking internationalisation to organisational change, this section establishes why middle managers' work is pivotal in shaping how internationalisation unfolds within their institutions.

Building on this, the review delves into the role of communication to show how essential communication is in reducing ambiguity and aligning stakeholders within institutional goals (Lewis, 2008). Change communication plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions, addressing concerns and aligning diverse institutional actors with new directions (Elving, 2005 in Matos et al., 2012). Research suggests that ineffective communication strategies often contribute to resistance, as stakeholders may feel excluded or

uncertain about the implication of change (Wood, 1999; Thomas et al., 2011; Matos et al., 2012). In the context of internationalisation, communication strategies need to be tailored to the diverse interests, experiences and expectations of internal stakeholders (Hudzik, 2015). Middle managers, positioned between institutional leadership and staff act as crucial mediators in this process, translating high-level internationalisation policies into meaningful, context-specific messages (Gornitzka & Larsen, 2004). Effective engagement strategies, including participatory decision-making, two-way communication channels and ongoing dialogue, are essential for fostering institutional alignment and overcoming resistance to involvement (Ford et al., 2008; Mast & Stehle, 2015). This section, therefore, explores the intersection of communication, change management and internationalisation, indicating how strategic engagement can enhance the success of internationalisation initiatives.

However, while communication facilitates the transfer of meaning, it does not fully account for the social and institutional contexts that shape how individuals interpret and engage with change. In complex organisational settings such as HEIs, meaning is not simply transmitted but actively constructed through interaction, experience and negotiation (Weick, 1995).

This study explores how internationalisation processes are understood and enacted by internal actors, with a particular focus on the role of middle managers in navigating change.

The EUI serves as a clearly defined context for this exploration. As a flagship initiative of the European Commission, the EUI exemplifies strategic transformational change, a planned, large-scale effort to align institutional practices and structure with ambitious international and policy-driven goals, going beyond routine or incremental adjustments. It represents both an opportunity and a challenge for HEIs, requiring them to align with broader European education and policy priorities while managing the internal complexity of institutional reform. By situating this study within the EUI framework, it is possible to examine how internationalisation is enacted at multiple institutional levels, including central leadership, middle management, and operational staff, and how middle managers make sense of and respond to these transformational change dynamics across their local organisational contexts..

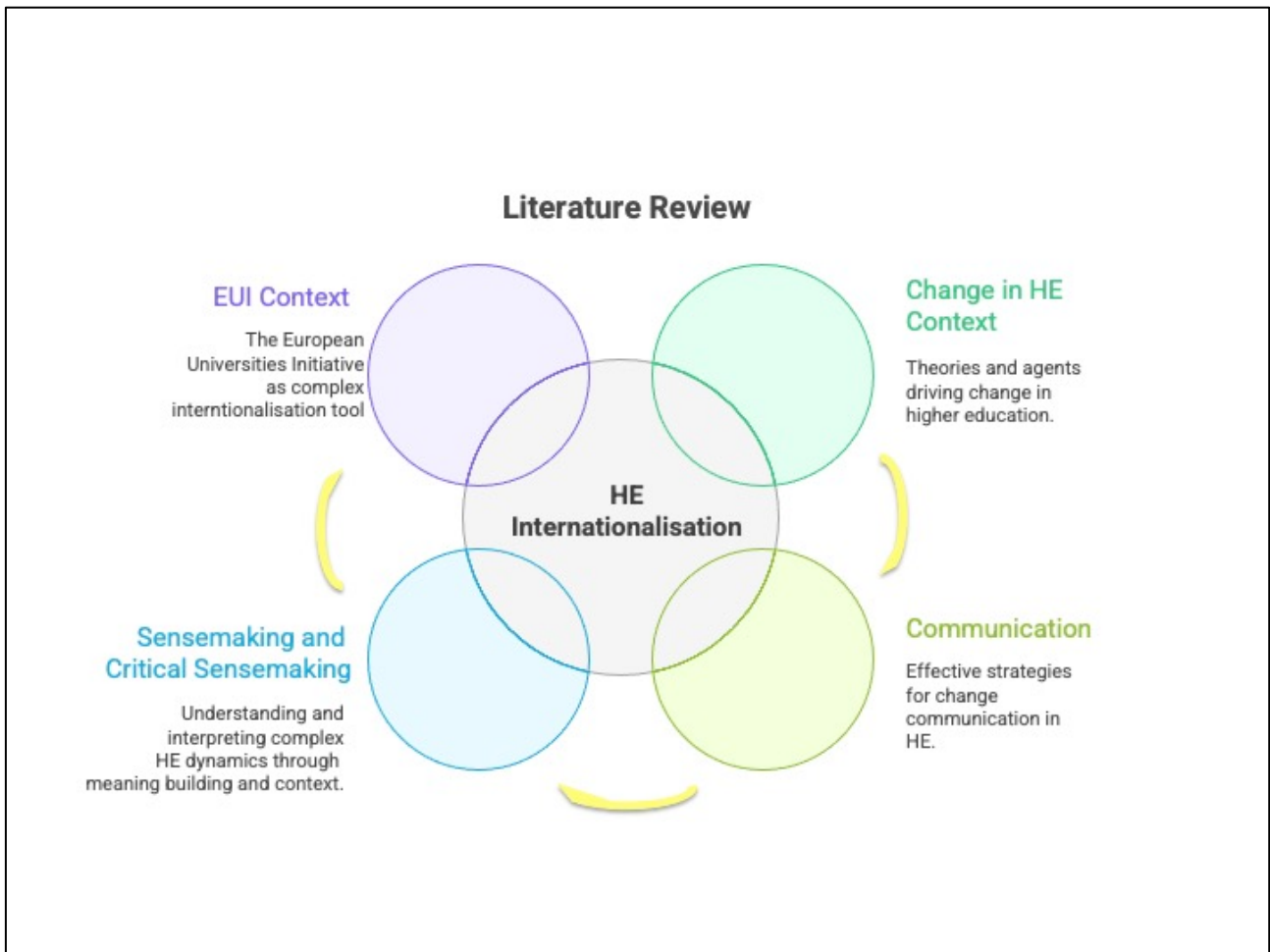


Figure 1 – Literature Review Topics

Each section addresses a distinct sub-theme that collectively builds the case for the research questions presented in Chapter 3.

2.1. The Conceptual Foundation of Internationalisation

In recent decades, the concept of internationalisation in HE has mostly become an overall term to describe anything linked to an apparently international dimension (de Wit et al., 2015). This superficial usage stems from the expanding scope of internationalisation, which historically centred on student and staff mobility, but has since evolved to include curriculum internationalisation, transnational education, internationalisation at home, global partnerships and, finally, adapting to “better reflect local needs and priorities” (de Wit & Jones, 2022, p.143). As a result of this multifaceted evolution, the term internationalisation has been increasingly applied as a broad umbrella to encompass any activity or initiative with an apparent international dimension (Teichler, 2017). It has often been applied

inconsistently, sometimes combined with globalisation or used as a rhetorical tool rather than a clearly defined strategic objective (Stier, 2006; Stein, 2019).

One reason for this conceptual vagueness is the growing pressure on universities, especially at European level, to demonstrate their international engagement as a marker of prestige and competitiveness. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of internationalisation has evolved and transformed itself in multifaceted ways, and many critical reflections have arisen to include different perspectives, more inclusive and responsible (Deardorff, 2022).

Reflecting on this complexity of internationalisation, already more than three decades ago Senge (1990) asserted that adaptation to change in HEIs has been constantly growing, requiring a quick reaction. Indeed, with a similar speed the international dimension of HE has increased and has become more important, but also more complex and challenging. This growing complexity stems from a range of factors, including the diversification of international partnerships, the intertwining of political agendas with academic objectives (Altbach & de Wit, 2015; 2022; Robson & Whilborg, 2019), the rise of digital and blended mobility formats, and the need to navigate differing national policies, governance systems, and quality standards (Ledger & Kawalik, 2020). These developments require institutions to manage competing priorities, coordinate across multiple layers of administration, and balance global ambitions with local realities (Ge Rochelle, 2022).

Increasingly internationalisation has become part of institutional strategies and national agendas, as a key response to the challenges of globalisation (Rumbley et al. 2012). However, over recent years the global HE landscape has undergone unprecedented shifts. The COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, dramatically accelerated digitalisation in HE (Jensen et al., 2022), reshaping not only pedagogical practices but also international collaboration. What was once imagined as primarily physical mobility has increasingly been supplemented - or even supplanted - by virtual exchange, hybrid formats and digital partnerships (O'Dowd, 2021; de Wit & Jones, 2022). This has, as studies suggest (Marinoni et al., 2024), shifted the discourse of internationalisation strategies from mobility-centric models to broader frameworks emphasising internationalisation at home, intercultural competencies and inclusivity in the digital sphere.

Concurrently, wars and severe political disruptions such as the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and in Palestine, have triggered a broader revaluation of the openness that has traditionally characterised internationalisation in Europe and beyond. Rather than reinforcing the ideal of 'borderless' education, these crisis have in many cases, exposed the fragility of international collaboration by heightening geopolitical tensions and increasing the vulnerability of academic partnerships. While many European member states have responded by launching programmes to support scholars at risk (i.e. DAAD, Campus France, etc.) and uphold academic cooperation across borders, internal shifts in several other EU member states, including growing nationalism and more restrictive immigration policies, have nonetheless led to reduced mobility, tighter admission criteria for international students, and greater uncertainty around funding and collaboration (Altbach & de Wit, 2022). These dynamics continue to reshape the motivations, modalities, and feasibility of internationalisation initiatives, challenging the sector's resilience and adaptability.

Moreover, the climate crisis has added another layer of complexity to internationalisation. Institutions are increasingly scrutinised for the environmental costs associated with traditional internationalisation practices, particularly with regard to student and staff mobility. This has led to calls for more sustainable internationalisation, emphasising virtual collaboration, short-term mobility and local engagement as alternatives to the high-carbon footprint of traditional approaches (de Wit & Altbach, 2020; Rumbley, 2020; Roy et al., 2022).

What the world has confirmed through direct experience, was already stated by Knight (2004) when she highlighted the role of HEIs in the production and distribution of knowledge. She asserted that "global issues and challenges cannot be addressed at the national level only. International and interdisciplinary collaboration is key to solving many global problems such as those related to environmental, health and crime issues." (Knight, 2004 p. 28). This statement underscores both the potential of internationalisation to connect institutions and the tensions that can arise in the process, leading to division.

Despite the growing attention devoted to internationalisation, a lot of confusion persists around what internationalisation really means (Knight, 2012). The term itself has evolved over time, and while Knight's definition (Knight, 2004) received critiques over years, it remains one of the most widely

recognised. Scholars such as Marginson (2023) argue that this definition, while practical for policy and practice, is conceptually limited, a 'closed concept' (p.10) that lacks the theoretical openness needed to fully grasp the evolving and complex nature of internationalisation in a global context. Moreover, Marginson highlights that the issue lies not in the definition's practitioner focus, but in the inability to adapt to and reflect the shifting realities of cross-border education. However, as internationalisation continues to develop, there is a need to reassess its relevance in light of contemporary challenges. The evolution of various definitions clearly shows the complexity of internationalisation (Hunter et al., 2021), which encompasses diverse goals across different types of institutions, all of which interact with a constantly changing external world. Craciun (2019) describes internationalisation as a "universe of cases" (Hunter et al., 2021, p.57), highlighting its multifaceted nature.

A key barrier to effective and transversal internationalisation is the lack of shared understanding among institutional actors. Friesen (2013) notes that many key institutional actors remain unconvinced about the concept, making implementation more challenging. While recent literature has focused primarily on faculty engagement (Friesen, 2013; Calikoglu, 2022), other critical stakeholders - such as administrators - are often overlooked. Calikoglu et al. (2022) argue that aligning faculty perspectives with institutional priorities is essential for meaningful engagement. Consequently, defining internationalisation clearly within the context of this study becomes a crucial step.

Among the many existing definitions, this study aligns with Knight's (2015) perspective that "it is appropriate that there will never be one universal definition. Yet, it is important to have a common understanding of the term" (Knight, 2015, p. 2). While acknowledging Knight's (2015) position that no single, universally accepted definition of internationalisation can or should exist, this study adopts a deliberately blended conceptual approach. Rather than adhering to one fixed definition, it draws on the complementary contribution of several key scholars whose perspectives together build a nuanced and context-sensitive understanding. The extended version of Knight's definition as proposed by de Wit et al. (2015) provides a foundational framework, particularly for its emphasis on a comprehensive and transversal process that includes both academic and administrative staff, an essential dimension for this research, which focuses on the role of middle managers in its implementation:

“The intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff and to make a meaningful contribution to society.”
[p. 281]

Additionally, one critical aspect missing from this definition is the transformational impact that internationalisation can have on institutions. If transformation in organisations is understood as a process that is deep and pervasive, as defined by Eckel et al. (2001), then only internationalisation that is implemented transversally - involving all structures and functions of the institutions – can be considered transformative. However, these transformations are unforeseen and often remain unstable, making them difficult to fully capture within standard definitions.

If internationalisation is truly a process touching on all aspects of an HEIs’ activities and, by extension, on all members of its community - including students, academic and administrative staff - then it must move beyond the traditional confines of international offices. Instead, it should become an integrated and pervasive force across the institution, aligning with the comprehensive manner of internationalisation.

The comprehensive approach to internationalisation has gained even more relevance in response to globalisation (Aw, 2017). However, recent global developments reveal a more nuanced reality. While globalisation initially drove the expansion of internationalisation in HE, contemporary challenges - including the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical tensions, economic instability, the climate crisis and the rise of nationalism and populist movements as mentioned above - have forced institutions to reconsider their internationalisation strategies (de Wit & Altbach, 2022). In this shifting landscape, the emphasis has moved from simply expanding internationalisation initiatives to adopting more targeted, sustainable and resilient approaches (Ilieva et al., 2014; Filho et al., 2023).

A significant dimension of comprehensive internationalisation is its implementation at the level of curriculum and pedagogy, which necessitates the active involvement of academic staff. Scholars such as Leask (2015) have articulated the crucial role of academics in translating institutional internationalisation strategies into meaningful students learning experiences. Leask identifies both affordances and constraints that shape the internationalisation of teaching and learning, highlighting the need for alignment between

institutional objectives and faculty engagement. Similarly, Jones (2015) as well as Beelen and Jones (2019) emphasise Internationalisation at Home (IaH) as a complementary strategy to mobility, underscoring the responsibility of all staff, not only those in international offices, in promoting inclusivity. While this study does not focus primarily on IaH, it recognises that institutional change cannot be achieved without engaging educators, whose teaching practices operationalise the values and goals of internationalisation.

The HE sector must now adjust to the continuous reshaping of the world. This adaptation requires not only institutional reforms but also deeper transformation in identity, values and policy at both national and international levels. For example, the shift toward digital and blended mobility programmes, the prioritisation of equity and inclusivity and the growing emphasis on IaH illustrate how institutions are balancing global ambitions with local realities (Stein, 2021). As a result, comprehensive internationalisation must now integrate flexibility and contextual sensitivity in order to remain relevant in an increasingly uncertain and fragmented world.

Despite this recognition, several critical barriers continue to hinder effective implementation of internationalisation. These include lack of “environmental awareness...institution’s own tools and resources...and (especially) leadership” as Hunter (2013) argues, successful internationalisation requires “leaders who can envision the future, inspire institutional engagement and empower universities to become agents of their own change” (Hunter, 2013, p.70).

Hudzik’s (2015) concept of “comprehensive internationalisation” adds a strategic imperative to embed internationalisation throughout institutional missions, recognising the diversity of motivations and actors within HEIs.

An additional attempt to add a further view on the future of internationalisation has been made by Laura Rumbley who, when introducing the concept of intelligent internationalisation, was of the opinion that it grew from “enormous disconnects between key actors in higher education enterprise generally, and the internationalisation agenda in higher education more specifically” (Rumbley 2015, in Godwin and de Wit, 2020, p.3). And Hunter (2020) further contributes by framing internationalisation as a cross-functional, transformative process that must be embedded in all areas of institutional life, and spaces must be created to allow all stakeholders to come together, recognising that each of them has a role in changing the

organisation. In other words, she emphasises the need of starting to pro-actively implement internationalisation and not leave it only in strategy papers, by considering it a process that, purposefully managed, brings real, broad, long-term change. Only by doing so universities may offer the proper pathway to becoming “genuine places of learning for all” (Hunter, 2019, p. 143).

It is precisely in the attempt to constantly adjust to change, that it became clear that internationalisation as a transformational process would have to involve all stakeholders of an organisation in order to be more effective. It has to enter into the institutional mission and not be a parallel group of activities to bring forward; internationalisation activities have to interconnect and create synergies within the institution and beyond it.

This concept of comprehensive internationalisation is now supported by wider trends in HE and its environment and, in turn, it shapes HEIs, leading us to a broader and updated meaning that considers internationalisation, a means to achieve institutional goals and connect globally across all missions (teaching, research, organisational structure and services) (Hudzik, 2015).

Taken together, these perspectives provide a rich, multilayered lens through which internationalisation is understood in this study: as an intentional, embedded, and inclusive institutional transformation process involving diverse stakeholders and requiring sustained commitment beyond rhetoric.

So far, internationalisation has been explained in many different manners, and mainly it has been confirmed by many of the considered authors that it is an unavoidable process adapting to external change and very often left on strategy papers because of a lack of institutional involvement at all horizontal levels in connecting more faculties and departments, and at vertical levels in ensuring sufficient dedicated staff can work on the implementation of internationalisation initiatives, such as the EUI (EP Report, 2025).

As it is ascertained that change processes very often encounter internal barriers (Aggerholm & Thomsen, 2020), the same happens in internationalisation ones. There is a need to face and overcome these barriers in order to implement internationalisation at all levels, and there is evidence that this is doable by means of stakeholder engagement through change agents (Ford et al., 2008). However, the question - as yet without an answer - is how to do so. Making the process understood to those internal

stakeholders reacting with resistance, building new meanings together and creating new identities might be part of the answer, but to explain this, there is a need to go first through the different fore- and background topics that constitute the complex picture of HE internationalisation.

2.2. Change in the Context of Higher Education

The literature suggests that if universities want to respond to challenges coming from a changing world, they must develop capacities to change.

While bottom-up change is possible, internationalisation as a change process is in many cases, initiated either by new leadership, or as a response to external drivers such as policy changes, funding schemes, or geopolitical pressures causes (Hunter, 2022). In a similar way, however, very often resistance is the first and main reaction to change, especially if change is based on learning anxiety, which is considered one stage of the cycle of change in change management (Schein 2017). Accordingly, innovative communication approaches might be required to address these negative conceptions of change processes, and to support and promote the development of innovative pedagogies and intercultural sensitive practices (Robson, 2011) at all levels of the organisation.

The theoretical background on employee resistance to change provides a relevant framework for this case study, as change often signifies loss for employees. This perceived loss is an emotional experience that can trigger stress and anxiety, making employees' reactions to change comparable to the process of grief (Carr, 2001). Given this emotional dimension, it is essential for organisations to go beyond mere communication. Instead of simply conveying information, organisations must actively engage employees in making sense, collaboratively constructing meaning in response to a changing environment (Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012; Hultin & Maehring, 2017).

As stated by Matos et al. (2012) change is an influenced, but not controlled, process in which sensemaking by leaders in organisations can generate disparate responses. If it occurs in the expected direction this becomes essential information to be considered and monitored by change leaders.

From this perspective, organisational change of HEIs will frequently occur and become more complex, especially if organisations start to consider the interplay of different interests and priorities deriving from internationalisation strategies (Henard et al., 2012; de Wit et al., 2015; Hunter et al., 2022).

Since internationalisation as a transformative process regards all aspects of an institution, and it involves or should involve all possible stakeholders, only a responsible approach in maintaining the positive benefits of it in an increasingly challenging environment will help to maintain, over time, the reputation gained in international markets and to put forward a deeply transformative agenda (Robson, 2011). The new context created by internationalisation shapes the process for change and change agents shall take into consideration the diversity of perspectives on campus.

Moreover, deep change implies a shift in values and necessitates that people think and act differently (Eckel, 2001). As Balogun (2001, p.1) puts it, “change is about changing people, not organisations.” However, this presents a significant challenge. In contrast, Sinek (2021) argues that “we cannot change people, we can only change our own behaviour.” By leading through example, fostering meaningful connections and engaging others effectively, individuals can inspire buy-in and encourage participation in change initiatives, ultimately leading to positive outcomes.

As stated above, the essence of an institution is the learned and shared assumptions about the organisation that drive individual daily behaviour (Schein, 1985), therefore an institution becomes transformed only after it has adopted a new institutional culture, comprehending the values of that organisation then, as Heyl and Hunter state, “the change literature sees values as the foundation of any successful change process.” (Heyl and Hunter, 2019, p. 17).

Current change literature in HE provides mostly generalised strategies about effective solutions, but if I take into consideration another aspect, namely that each institution has a specific organisational identity (Stensaker, 2015), a specific cultural background and is influenced by the local cultural environment (the macro-culture), then it seems that the challenge is to chart a middle ground between these two extremes: generalisation and specificity (Kezar and Eckel, 2002 (b)). For this reason, there is a need to apply change theories to HEIs and understand at what level change happens in order to find how to better support and implement it through cultural understanding and stakeholder engagement.

Change processes cause resistance and innovative communication is needed to overcome this through a collective creation of the process and the construction of new meanings. Internationalisation changes the context of HEIs and therefore change agents are needed to acknowledge different voices

coming from the community. This type of change process goes to an even deeper level of transformation, new values are created through change and this requires HEIs to think and act differently, there is a need of agents able to support and implement the creation and understanding of new values and identity and there is a need to apply change theories to HE to better understand how to act.

2.2.1. Change Process Theories Applied to Internationalisation

It is crucial at this stage to review change process theories in order to understand the various levels at which deep change can occur in HEIs. This allows for an examination of how deep and multifaceted these transformations are, ultimately reshaping institution's identity and image. In doing so, this review helps frame the research itself.

According to Schein's (2017) model of change management, the change process starts with disconfirmation of some assumptions, which produces two main anxieties: 1. Survival anxiety or guilt (the feeling that we must change) and 2. Learning anxiety: the realisation that we might have to unlearn something and learn new, maybe challenging competencies. These anxieties provoke resistance to it, and again according to Schein (2017) it is possible to overcome it by making people feel "psychologically safe" (p.328) and reducing barriers to change. He lists eight activities to be carried out by change agents, but the relevant aspect of how they are communicated to the organisation's community is not considered; this is as essential for change to be implemented and happen as the activities themselves.

In other research lines (Eckel, 2001), change is mainly analysed according to two parameters, depth and pervasiveness - the first referring to shift in values, the latter to how far reaching it is among the campus. By combining these two elements of change, four categories of institutional change result (fig.2):

1. Adjustment, roughly corresponding to improvement of a process.
2. Isolated change, indicating a deep change but limited to one unit.
3. Pervasive change that is extensive but does not affect the institution deeply.
4. Transformational change that occurs when change processes are deep and pervasive.

Only in this latter case a new institutional culture will be adopted. The major difficulty lies, however, in identifying institutional change through evidence.

Further on, among the long list of explicit indicators of change, for the scope of this research references will be made to changes in interactions, changes in the institution's identity and image and new relationships between the institution and its stakeholders, in the assumption that these are all supported by communication actions and are able to influence the final result.

		Depth	
		Low	High
Pervasiveness	Low	Adjustment (I)	Isolated Change (II)
	High	Pervasive Change (III)	Transformational Change (IV)

Figure 2 Typologies of Change (1) [Source: adapted from Eckel, Green, Hill (2001)]

Each theory highlights a different type of change, a different context relevant for analysing and responding to change and a different level of agency among leaders. These diverse perspectives provide a broader understanding of how organisational change unfolds, which is essential for situating the internationalisation of HE, and the specifically the implementation of the EUI, as a complex and potentially transformational change process.

There is also a model described by Isabella (1990) of how managers construe organisational events as a change advances, suggesting that interpretations of key events unfold in four stages: anticipation, confirmation, culmination and aftermath linked to the process of change.

Moreover, there are frameworks to change processes that may help to analyse the organisation in which the change process has to be implemented. Similar to Eckel's change process parameters, for instance, Balogun (2001) outlines different types of change - *evolution*, *revolution*, *adaptation*, *reconstruction* – and the routes that can be taken to deliver strategic change (fig.3).

		Extent of change	
		Transformation	Realignment
Speed of change	Incremental	<i>Evolution</i> : Transformational change implemented gradually through interrelated initiatives; likely to be proactive change undertaken in anticipation of the need for future change	<i>Adaptation</i> : Change undertaken to realign the way in which the organisation operates, implemented in a series of steps
	Big bang	<i>Revolution</i> : Transformational change that occurs via simultaneous initiatives on many fronts; more likely to be forced and reactive because of the changing competitive conditions that the organisation is facing	<i>Reconstruction</i> : Change undertaken to realign the way in which the organisation operates, with many initiatives implemented simultaneously; often forced and reactive because of a changing competitive context

Figure 3 Types of Change (2) [Source: adapted from Balogun, 2001]

Further on a framework is described, the change kaleidoscope (fig.4), in which a context sensitive approach can be developed, and the culture web frameworks (fig.5) that brings us back to the importance of knowing the organisational culture when considering organisational change.

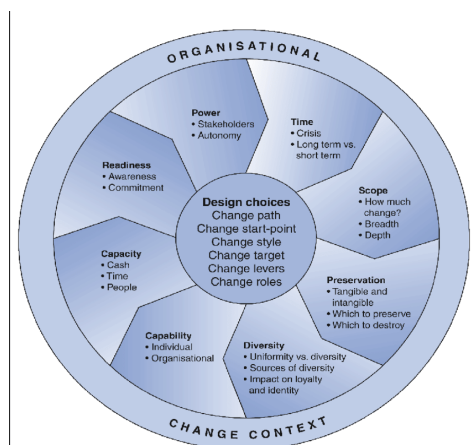


Figure 4 Change Kaleidoscope [Source: adapted from Balogun, 2001]

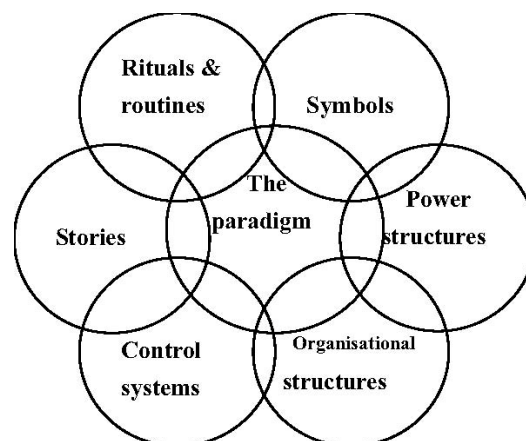


Figure 5 Culture Web [Source: adapted from Johnson and Scholes, 1999 in Balogun, 2001]

As already stated, however, change is more about changing individuals than institutions, and changing people means changing their beliefs and behaviours. This requires a considerable effort in terms of education and training, but also in communication through the individuals' own behaviour. Balogun's paper mainly focuses on change implemented in business companies, but the frameworks outlined might also be useful for change process analysis in HEIs.

As asserted by Eckel et al. (1999), change refers to the creation of new assumptions in organisations, which causes learning anxiety and surviving anxiety leading to resistance. To overcome this, many solutions

have been proposed through different theories. In particular, this study draws on Eckel et al.'s (2001) framework to analyse the EUI's depth and pervasiveness (fig. 2), aligning with their view of transformational change as a holistic and systemic shift across institutional structures, cultures, and practices (Eckel et al., 2001). Another relevant change model that fits to HE is a consideration of the parameters of speed and extent of change and affirming that internationalisation can be classified as revolutionary change. What I also bear in mind here - re-connecting to the previously mentioned necessity of change agents - is the need when acting in these change typologies to communicate through - and with - behaviour in order to create trust and emulation.

Finally, a relevant and recent perspective on institutional change comes from Hende's (2022) conceptualisation of curriculum internationalisation as a dynamic organisational change process. Hende positions curriculum work as deeply entangled with broader institutional structures and processes, framing internationalisation not as a series of discrete interventions but as an evolving change dynamic that implicates academic values, governance, and leadership. This approach supports the view that embedding internationalisation requires systemic change, reinforced by both formal leadership and distributed agency across the institution.

2.2.2. Middle Managers as Key Agents of Change

I affirmed the need for change agents when implementing internationalisation in HE, which is considered a transformational change. According to Olsen et al., leaders who inspire engagement build consensus through academic and administrative change agents (Olsen et al., 2005 in Hunter et al., 2022).

Following on from this concept, in this study I believe that very often in HEIs this role is taken on by middle managers acting in international offices or project-related roles. These, then, are the people who will have to translate the message related to change from leadership to stakeholders.

Kezar (2018) also asserts the need to engage change agents in the role of supporters and translators in HE, a context that has changed in complex ways.

Balogun and Johnson (2005) show that while middle managers seek to put the change plans of their seniors into action, their everyday experiences of the actions and behaviours of others, and the stories, "gossip, jokes, conversations and discussions" (Balogun and Johnson, 2005, p.1574) they share with their

peers about these experiences, shape their interpretations of what they should be doing. In short, change interventions and plans are translated into action through the medium of these inter-recipient processes, those personal interactions and relationships building through informal conversations.

Meaning, therefore, does not reside solely in the text but is conditioned by textual context and by the perceptions of the agents within that context (Palmer, 1969 in Heracleous and Barrett, 2001).

Therefore, the need of mediators - who may act as translators of different needs expressed in different languages - could be the solution to alleviate the pressure and ease a gradual implementation of change (Enders and Naidoo, 2019).

It has also been ascertained that under conditions of change, top management team members play a crucial role in the sensemaking process, acting as a bridge between the organisation's internal context and how team members interpret key issues (Gioia & Thomas, 1996). However, in the specific context of HEIs, I argue that middle managers, rather than top management, are more central to this process.

Middle managers, particularly those working in international offices, are uniquely positioned to facilitate change due to their dual role as both implementers of strategic directives and direct points of contact for staff (Balogun et al., 2015; Kihlberg, 2022). Findings suggest that employees rely primarily on their direct supervisors - who correspond to middle managers in this context - as the most trusted sources of implementation-related and job-relevant information during change, whereas senior management tends to provide broader strategic guidance (Allen et al., 2007). This distinction highlights the critical role of middle managers as both interpreters and communicators of institutional change, ensuring that top-down strategies are effectively translated into day-to-day operations.

Given their proximity to frontline staff, middle managers are not only responsible for disseminating information, but also for shaping how change is perceived and enacted (Rouleau, 2005; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Mahdzir, 2022). Their role in fostering engagement, reducing uncertainty and addressing resistance makes them essential to the success of internationalisation efforts in HEIs. Therefore, understanding their involvement in the sensemaking process is key to ensuring meaningful and sustainable change.

Rouleau and Balogun (2011) describe how middle managers contribute strategically to the development of an organisation by examining how they enact the strategic roles allocated to them, with

particular reference to strategic change. They show two situated, but interlinked, discursive activities, 'performing the conversation' and 'setting the scene', to be critical to the accomplishment of middle manager sensemaking. Language use is considered key here, and specific language use needs to be interwoven with the building of relevant social settings in which to perform the conversations, with the necessity for language use embedded in the specifics of the context. The context may be considered a setting in which to perform the language, and middle managers enact these two sets of discursive activities by drawing on contextually relevant verbal, symbolic and sociocultural systems to allow them to draw people from different organisational levels into the change as they go about their day-to-day work. Samra-Fredericks (2003) indeed assert that strategic sensemaking is accomplished through the ability of middle managers to craft and share a message by referring to a complex mosaic of underlying knowledge (Samra-Fredericks, 2003).

2.2.3. The Significance of Stakeholder Engagement in Higher Education Internationalisation

If internationalisation is understood as a pervasive and transformative process within institutions, it becomes essential to consider studies that identify faculty members and administrative staff as key agents of HEIs internationalisation. These studies explore how these stakeholders perceive their roles, how they can be effectively engaged, and how their involvement can inform the development of meaningful and strategic institutional internationalisation initiatives (Friesen, 2013).

To better frame the importance of their role, two main definitions of stakeholders are particularly relevant. First, Freeman's widely cited definition describes stakeholders as "...any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organisation's objectives." (Freeman, 1984 in Castro et al. 2015, p. 162). This highlights the reciprocal relationship between stakeholders and institutions: stakeholders not only experience the consequences of internationalisation strategies but can also actively shape them. This aligns with study's focus on middle managers and staff as change agents who influence institutional direction through sensemaking.

Second, Amaral and Magalheas (2002) define stakeholders as "...individual or collective person[s] with a legitimate interest in Higher Education that, as such, acquires the right to intervene." [in Castro et al. 2015, p. 163]. This definition underscores the normative legitimacy of stakeholder involvement, they are

not merely affected by institutional strategies but have a right to participate in shaping them. For this study, this perspective justifies the importance of investigating how internal stakeholders – particularly administrative middle managers – are engaged (or not) in implementing internationalisation and what strategies can support their more meaningful participation.

Hence, stakeholders within an organisation are not passive recipients of top-down decisions, but fundamental actors in achieving institutional objectives and in pursuing personal interest with the right to intervene. This means that in order to involve them effectively, internationalisation must be framed not only as an organisational goal but also as shared process aligned with values and professional identities. The main literature in the field confirms the importance of stakeholders in the internationalisation process by also pointing out that internal stakeholders have a prominent role in this, especially in some cultures more than others (Castro et al., 2015). For instance, Langrafe et al. (2020) emphasise the broader social contribution of HEIs, stressing the importance of developing best practices, strategies and processes that engage institutional actors as drivers of societal development. Similarly, Bedenlier et al. (2015) underscore the central role of academic staff in advancing internationalisation through their teaching and research activities, arguing that their commitment and agency are essential for meaningful implementation. Additionally, scholars such as Brandenburg and Federkeil (2007) highlight the importance of administrative staff in the internationalisation discourse of HEIs, noting that without their involvement, efforts to internationalise institutions may remain fruitless.

Turner and Robson (2007) assert the critical element of engagement for faculty with regards to the divergence between motivations and rationales for internationalisation processes. However, it seems that there are not any real solutions offered to reduce the divergence by responding to specific stakeholders' needs, and, more specifically, there are no suggestions on *how* this issue might be addressed in the context of HE internationalisation. However, research in management disciplines and in the context of HE explores the conditions under which staff engagement can be sustained, even in complex and demanding institutional environments. In this regard, Whitsed et al. (2024) offer valuable insights by highlighting how academics can continue to experience joy and commitment in their work when basic conditions are met, including "meaning, purpose, autonomy, physical, and psychological safety" (p. 1643). Such a supportive

working environment can foster sustained engagement of academics, even in the face of increasing workloads and systemic challenges.

Having ascertained that internationalisation processes involve - or should involve - many different stakeholders, and that success might depend on the spreading of the process among them, stakeholders may or may not succeed in achieving effectiveness. It is, therefore, fundamental to bear in mind the pivotal role of change communication when facing uncertainties, fear or resistance connected to change (Wittmann, 2013), another topic considered later in this Literature Review chapter (p.50).

When considering specifically this last critical factor, regarding engagement of the university community, leadership has to be brought into the discussion as the main actor in charge of driving internationalisation processes and being responsible for community engagement. According to Childress (2009, in Hudzik 2015), despite rhetoric in HE for internationalisation, significant barriers exist, many of them due to the lack of staff engagement.

Given that stakeholders are essential for the achievement of internationalisation goals, there are still no evident solutions for real engagement. However, some literature asserts that change communication may have a relevant role in overcoming resistance and ease involvement and effectiveness (Matos et al., 2012; Aggerholm & Thomsen, 2020; Yue et al., 2021). Even if leadership has an important role in this, here the focus will be more on middle managers, who are essentially at the forefront of stakeholder engagement. In considering stakeholder engagement, however, a deeper analysis of the context and the organisational culture of the institution has to be taken into account.

2.2.4. Organisational Culture in Higher Education Institutions

“You may say one thing—but they hear another. If you do not know how your employees listen, you are not in control of your communication.” (Quirke 1995, p. 107 in Wood, 1999)

In other words, Quirke (1995) suggests that culture refracts communication. In reflecting on innovative change theories, as discussed by van der Wende (1999), it is considered a good starting point to investigate how perceived values and needs may influence faculty engagement in internationalisation. She further suggests that individual actors in an institution are most likely to succeed in bringing forward institutional change, when the innovation they introduce

(internationalisation in this case) meets institutional needs and aligns with values. It becomes particularly important therefore to know and consider the culture of an institution in order to support internationalisation processes and involve stakeholders.

According to Schein's concept of organisational culture, groups and organisations within a society develop cultures that affect the way how the members think and act.

He specifically refers to three levels of culture to be analysed in order to understand how leadership acts in the considered organisation (Schein, 2017) and to understand the members' experience:

1. Artifacts (L1), meaning the physical and social environment.
2. Exposed beliefs and values (L2).
3. Basic underlying assumptions (L3).

This represents the base to analyse how to embed change (fig. 6).

Notably, at the third degree of culture I discover the essence of it - its DNA. This level provides members with a sense of identity; by recognising this function it is easier to understand why change in organisations, especially transformational change, provokes fear and anxiety (Schein, 2017).

In communication theories, organisational culture is defined as:

"the shared communicative process through which meanings are constantly employed, negotiated and contested to create a stable communication environment within which organisational life becomes patterned and persistent over time."(p. 57)

In a way, I may assert that organisational culture does not mean shared meaning, but shared process of meaning making (Martin & Siehl, 1983).

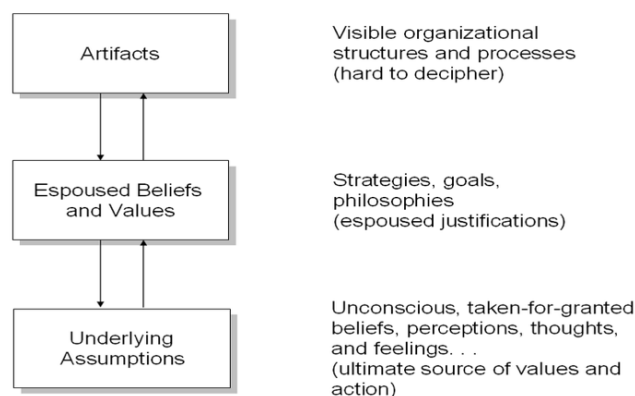


Figure 6 The Three Levels of Culture [Source: adapted from Schein (2017)]

And further:

“The culture of a group can be defined as the accumulated shared learning of the group as it solves its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, feel, and behave in relation to those problems.

This accumulated learning is a pattern or system of beliefs, values and behavioural norms that come to be taken for granted as basic assumptions and eventually drop out of awareness.” [Schein, 2017, p. 6]

It becomes clear that in this conception, culture is defined by what a group has learned in trying to adapt to external actions, and it also depends very much on the length and emotional intensity of the learning process.

Ten years after Schein’s first organisational culture theories (1985), mainly contextualised in enterprises, McNay’s model has built an interesting connection between the organisational culture literature (mainly in the private sector until then) and HE. His contribution is particularly relevant for this study, as it helps illuminate how different cultural configurations within HEIs can shape and constrain the implementation of transformational initiatives such as the EUI. McNay’s model distinguishes between two dimensions, the extent to which a university has loose versus tight operational controls and the relative emphasis on policy and strategy. Based on these, he identified four organisational cultural types within universities (fig. 7):

1. Collegium (loose policy and loose operational control) / key word: freedom.
2. Bureaucracy (loose policy and tight operational control) / key word: regulation.
3. Enterprise (tight policy and loose operational control) / key word: client.
4. Corporation (tight policy and tight operational control) / key word: power.

				Policy definition			
				loose			
Control of implementation		loose		Collegium	Bureaucracy		tight
				Enterprise	Corporation		
				tight			

Figure 7 Models of Universities as Organisations [Source: adapted from McNay (1995)]

All four cultural types coexist, in different balances in most universities. This framework is used in this thesis to help interpret how different institutional cultures affect the role of middle managers in implementing the EUI. For example, institutions leaning towards a collegial culture may allow greater autonomy in enacting change and implement the initiative, while those with bureaucratic or corporate cultures may require more structured, top-down alignment. These distinctions inform the analysis of how sensemaking processes vary across contexts, and the extent to which middle managers are empowered to mediate change or are constrained by institutional logics. The model will be revisited in the findings and discussion chapters to highlight how institutional contexts shape the sensemaking activities and role of middle managers within the EUI implementation.

It has been shown so far that by examining in depth these key elements of an organisation it might be easier to develop a clearer picture of the institutional culture. This then provides a tool for understanding the complexity of unique institutions and constitutes the basis for better interpreting the context in which change happens, and eventually finding proper tools for intervention by connecting this framework topic to the leading communication theme. Then, as stated by Yue et al. (2021) organisational culture can provide the context for internal communication to happen.

Not only engagement of stakeholders, but also alignment of institutional needs and values becomes relevant when putting forward innovation (internationalisation). If I understand assumptions underlying institutional culture, I understand how to embed change, and this role does especially suit those employees working on a daily basis with stakeholders. Here I look at organisational culture from the point of view of

communication theories, considering it a process of shared meaning construction. Applying McNay's theories to HEIs may provide a tool to connect the context created by institutional culture and communication actions to implement change.

This perspective aligns with broader reflections on how universities are evolving as institutions. Barnett (2013), for example, urges us to move beyond fixed models of the university by embracing its imaginative potential, seeing it not just as a structure, but as a dynamic space shaped by ideas, aspirations, and possibilities. His conceptualisation emphasises the need to acknowledge how institutional identity and practice are co-constructed through vision and engagement, offering a valuable lens through which to interpret and influence change processes.

Similarly, Trowler et al. (2012) highlight the importance of re-theorising life in response to the significant transformations that have shaped HE since the 1990s. They argue for new conceptual frameworks that better reflect the contemporary realities of universities, where traditional metaphors of 'tribes' and 'territories' may no longer capture the complexities of academic work. Their work emphasises the need to understand how institutional practices are situated within broader structural, cultural, and policy contexts, an understanding that is essential when designing meaningful interventions aimed at fostering change, including in the domain of internationalisation and the framework of the EUI.

2.3. Communication – The General Framework

"Our talk exchanges do not normally consist of a succession of disconnected remarks, and would not be rational if they did. They are characteristically, to some degree at least, cooperative efforts; and each participant recognizes in them, to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction". (From "Studies in the Way of Words" by Paul Grice, 1989 in: <https://effectiviology.com/principles-of-effective-communication>)

As Hudzik (2015) argues, while individuals need to understand and be motivated, organisations need to be sending and reinforcing the right message, and as seen, in order to find the proper way to send the right message, a deeper understanding of the organisation is needed, as well as of the impact and importance of communication as tool and channel.

It has already been discussed in the literature review so far that this deeper understanding of the organisation depends on its culture, on adopted change strategies and, consequently, on how many stakeholders are involved and how they are identified in the process of internationalisation, considered as a transformational change in HEIs.

The reasoning behind this connection, based on the literature review, is as follows: change theories, as previously stated, help us understand on how many different levels change in HEIs can occur, and accordingly, how deep this change happens and transforms the institution itself.

It is clearly and repeatedly asserted in the literature how the lack of certainty in understanding internationalisation among the institutions' main actors, and its absence within strategic papers reflect the lack of consensus, support or engagement (Friesen, 2013; Carfang, 2016). Therefore, a proper communication and narrative, starting from these needs and different experiences is necessary. This could clearly contribute to clarifying misunderstandings or even "explain" the process, its value and benefits, both on an institutional and personal level, so as to avoid anxiety (Schein, 2017) deriving from internationalisation processes.

Friesen (2013) indeed lists several recommendations in order to recognise some of the observed gaps and issues, by referring to the adaptation of an informed, clear and relevant internationalisation strategy and a clear communication on what internationalisation concretely means (for the institution), its purpose and underlying values. Whereas Carfang (2016) clearly describes how success in transformative processes depends on deep commitment by all stakeholders.

In this sense, and in line with what happens with innovation processes - according to literature - internationalisation can be considered a collective process in HEIs that involves the contextual re-ordering of relations in multiple social networks (as it is with innovation processes). Therefore, it is not sufficient just to diffuse or inform about ready-made innovation or, in this case, intentions to internationalise. I therefore need to think about communication as playing a role (Leeuwis and Aarts, 2011) in institution-wide internationalisation development.

It is understood that everyday communication is about exchanging meanings, but it is also a form of social action that is important in processes of transformational change. Due to the complexity of these

processes, change agents and communication professionals will have the role of facilitators of the potential for change that increases in a dynamic university setting (Leeuwis and Aarts, 2011). This means applying a range of process facilitation strategies in the sphere of network building, social learning and conflict management, as well as sensemaking processes.

Also, Kress (1996) confirms that communication and the language used to express deep meanings are coupled with a strong social significance.

With regard to the importance of meanings, as stated by Matos et al., communication is not only the transmission of meanings, it is mainly the joint construction of meanings. This concept implies that messages exchanged only have cognitive effects and create meaning because they are assigned meanings, and that such meanings depend on the general culture and context in which they occur. Communication then, is by no means limited to verbal or even written expressions; its range is larger, and includes gestures, actions and behaviours in general (Matos et al., 2012).

“Everyday communication among stakeholders is of critical importance for the reordering of social relationships and the emergence of space for change in networks.” (Leeuwis and Aarts, 2011, p. 10)

Further on, Leeuwis and Aarts (2011) assert that stakeholders may not succeed in coordinating their actions and achieve a contextually adapted balance between all the needed components for innovation to become effective. To solve this issue, they further suggest the adaptation of a ‘construction model’ of communication (fig. 8), where actors strategically mobilise meanings for social ends, this having direct consequences for the world. This study primarily draws on the proposed construction model of communication because it emphasises communication as a strategic and dynamic process in which actors co-create meaning with tangible effects on institutional practices, a perspective that aligns closely with the role of middle managers as change agents and sensemakers in EUI implementation. The model supports an understanding of communication not merely as information transfers, but as a strategic process in which

‘socially situated actors’ ‘mobilise meanings, relations, and communicative resources’ to influence change and achieve social ends. This approach highlights how communication can shape reality by engaging in all forms of action in a time horizon taking into account ‘past and present and anticipating the future’, and navigating differences in ‘values, interest, and power’ dynamics. Additionally, two features from the subjective model - ‘dialogue to arrive at shared meaning’ and ‘anticipation and empathy’ – are also considered particularly relevant, as they reinforce the importance of relational sensitivity and mutual understanding in stakeholder engagement, both of which are critical in navigating complex institutional change processes.

Table 2: Three conceptual models of communication

Aspect of communication	Objective model	Subjective model	Construction model
Parties involved in communication	individual senders and receivers	senders and receivers which are part of a community	socially situated actors, in a relational and historical setting
Meaning of message	is fixed, determined by sender	sender and receiver have different interpretations	actors strategically mobilise meanings to achieve social ends
Main cause of differences in interpretation	interference / noise in communication channels	different past experiences and life-worlds	different values, interests and struggle for power/influence
Theorists implicit communication ideal	effective transfer of particular meanings	dialogue to arrive at shared meaning	none (unless a partisan position is taken)
Relevant time horizon	present	past and present	past, present and (anticipated) future
Consequences of communication	more or less effective transfer of information	adapted meanings	adapted meanings, relations, and influence with various impacts
Key conditions for ‘effective’ communication	precision and quality of the channel	anticipation and empathy	strategy of combining communicative and other resources
Carriers of communication	symbolic signals transferred through channels and media	symbolic signals exchanged through channels and media	all forms of action that actors engage in that can be accessed through channels and media.

Figure 8. Conceptual Models of Communication [Source: adapted from Leeuwis and Aarts, 2011]

Internationalisation processes too, cannot then be considered as mere change processes; as stated by van der Wende (1999), they may even lead to innovation in HE. It has been demonstrated that innovation theory can provide a framework for an analysis of the impact of internationalisation policies on HEIs and for the factors that relate to the institutionalisation of these innovations.

In parallel with what has been applied in innovation studies where “multiple interconnected networks and dynamics have to be re-ordered in a defined context” through communication (Leeuwis and Aarts, 2011, p.4) - as this re-ordering activity is full of communicational moments to be planned and

designed - this can also be seen as a 'walkable' direction in the implementation of internationalisation in HEIs.

Indeed, there are research lines in the field of corporate communication demonstrating not only that personal communication is highly relevant to supporting leaders in building trust, confidence and sense of belonging among collaborators but, especially in internal communication, it significantly contributes in involving and motivating stakeholders, through dialogue instead of monologues (Mast and Stehle, 2015).

Having understood that stakeholder engagement through middle managers in order to successfully implement internationalisation very much depends on communication that considers the organisational culture context, I now explore the topic of communication, commencing from the concept of communication as an action of cooperative efforts to set common purposes. It becomes evident how consensus is connected to stakeholder identification with new beliefs and values of their institutions, and the necessity for making the process understandable while it unfolds. This is a complex process in a complex organisation type (the university), therefore social learning while going through change starts to come into play. To mobilise meanings to achieve social ends, I find it appropriate to look at Leeuwis and Arts' proposed communication models, recognising familiarity with both the subjective and constructive model. If stakeholders are to be involved through communication, personal communication is particularly useful in achieving trust and providing motivation. This is part of the next topic, namely change communication.

2.3.1. Change Communication as a Means to Involve Stakeholders

"Innovations in Higher Education Institutions may arise easily and often, but their diffusion will be difficult and will mainly take place through communication between colleagues." [Van Vught (1989), in van der Wende, 1999, p. 74]

Internationalisation is a way of innovating an organisation at a deep level (Hudzik's change of mindset, 2015); innovating means changing and this process very often fails or is not deeply implemented among HEIs.

There are many reasons underlying these objectives' failure, but it mainly concerns issues associated with typical reactions to change. Very often resistant reactions and critical responses among organisations,

stakeholders and involved communities become obstacles to change (Bovey and Hede, 2001). Lack of understanding, increasing feelings of being threatened in identity and work position and lack of engagement are some of the causes for these reactions.

According to Kanter (1997) and Kotter (2007), practitioner models of transformation are primarily aimed at an organisation's senior management. These models can be developed by both academics and practitioners (Carroll & Hatakenaka, 2001). Practitioner models 'tend to rely on illustrative anecdotes and opinion' and 'make concrete recommendations to managers' (Miller et al. 1997, p. 71). These models may also provide comprehensive instructions on how to initiate organisational change. Kotter (2007), and Carroll and Hatakenaka (2001), pointed out that when describing these models, only two stances are taken, namely, success or failure. However, according to Kanter et al. (1992), Connors and Smith (1999) and Beer and Eisenstat (2004), these models are often too simplistic in nature and involve the implementation of activities occurring on a straight timeline when bringing about change.

More challenges connected to communication in this context relate to how internal communication systems are used by leaders, and how this consequently influences stakeholders' perception of a positive emotional culture that leads - or doesn't lead - to positive outputs such as commitment. This communication flow is calculated not only to involve stakeholders, but also to enhance their sense of belonging to the organisation (Yue et al., 2021) and to overcome obstacles.

As also confirmed by Fiss and Zajac (2006), stakeholders' reactions to organisational change are significantly influenced by how change is communicated. In this sense, communication is not merely an operational tool but a strategic mechanism that shapes perceptions, fosters legitimacy and mitigates resistance. This is particularly relevant to my study, as internationalisation in HEIs is a complex and often criticised process that requires broad institutional buy-in. Resistance can emerge from various sources, due to uncertainty, perceived threats to existing roles or misalignment with institutional values. By examining how, in the framework of sensemaking activities, change communication is employed within internationalisation efforts - especially how middle managers convey and frame change to different stakeholder groups - this study can offer insights into effective engagement strategies. Understanding these dynamics is crucial in developing approaches that not only reduce resistance but also enhance

participation, ensuring that internationalisation is seen as an inclusive and transformative process rather than an imposed directive.

Especially when considering that studies of resistance to change often show that very often resistance is not a sign of disagreement to change, but more a reaction to not understanding its nature or its influence on the own work and role (Kezar, 2018), communication in this way becomes crucial in avoiding fear and reluctance.

As cited above - also in considering Schein's (2017) "psychological safeness" theory in order to solve resistance to change - this again necessitates proper communication activities. Again, "change experts agree that the key to the process of creating a plan (for internationalisation) is the process of engagement across the campus and beyond" (Heyl and Hunter, 2019, p. 18); this might only be effective through clear and meaningful communication.

Allen et al. (2007) show that, as change processes go through different phases, the participation of employees in these phases reduces feelings of uncertainty, gives them an opportunity to have an impact on the change and create readiness for change. Employees must believe that their opinions have been heard, respected and considered; this initiates greater commitment (Devos et al., 2007) and increases trust among stakeholders.

Worth mentioning here is how the concept of organisational culture again appears in the context of change communication. As Schein (2017) revealed, it is particularly explanatory how leaders' communication both explicitly and implicitly transfer the beliefs, values and assumptions that they hold and, as seen, this becomes part of putting forward change processes successfully.

There are studies by Agnew and Van Balkom (2009) exploring the cultural readiness at HEIs for internationalisation models and analysing multiple factors impacting on this readiness. They describe factors such as assurance of congruence between espoused and enacted values among the institution's membership, alignment of value congruence with the institution's mission, senior leadership's perception of the institution's community as local and/or global influenced the level of support for internationalisation, and finally, economic and political influences that can leverage the extent to which internationalisation is articulated as an institutional priority.

It is also ascertained that “change strategies tend to generalisations, such as ‘involve faculty’ and ‘improve communication’, and consider change as an isolated, distinct action, instead of presenting concurrent and interdependent strategies” (Kezar & Eckel, 2000, p.4-5). This leads to the perception that internationalisation processes too are very often still considered single activities (i.e. student mobility, international research, etc.) and that communication, especially internal communication with stakeholders at all levels of the organisation, very often is not considered part of internationalisation strategies. Furthermore, it leads to the notion that internationalisation strategies are not embedded in complex, general institutional strategies and long-term programmes.

To implement a change in this context, effective communication at all levels - different actors, different communities, different languages, different purposes - becomes crucial. Nevertheless, lots of references are made to intercultural communication (Stier, 2006), scientific communication, information and communication technologies, international communication in business and internal communication linked to cultural identity in business organisations (Kezar & Eckel, 2002). Rarely, however, are there specific research lines which interconnect the concepts of HE internationalisation and communication, defining the role of communication in HE internationalisation processes as it happens for the concept of innovation (Leeuwis & Aarts, 2011).

There are research assuming that producing intentional change, as internationalisation, is a matter of creating a new reality through communication that actually drives the process rather than being the tool (Ford and Ford, 1995). If so, internationalisation becomes “a process created and produced and maintained by and within communication” (Donnellon, 1986 in Ford & Ford, 1995, p. 542) and later asserted by Aggerholm & Thomson (2020) change is a “communicative challenge” (p. 207).

There are empirical studies on how internal communication is shaping organisational culture, and these can be adopted in analysing HEIs in this research. Yue et al., for example, explore in their study two specific types of internal communication (symmetric internal communication and motivational language) in the context of organisational identity and positive emotional culture in organisations helping to support and even enhance change processes. Finally, they assert how the concept of storytelling can also be used to connect employees’ individual goals to the organisation’s big picture (Yue et al., 2021).

Laufer (2019) argues that in response to critical and resistant reactions “despite the positive outcomes often associated with internationalisation” organisational storytelling has been found to be “a method for communicating internationalisation within universities” (Laufer, 2019, p.1). Yue et al. describe symmetrical internal communication as a communicative approach grounded in openness, mutual exchange, and constructive negotiation, where differing views between organisation and employees are acknowledged and respected. Leaders’ use of motivational language, which involves the employment of meaning-making language, empathetic language and direction-giving language is another form of communication considered critical in dyadic communication (Yue et al., 2021).

A lack of communication and engagement across policy, practice, academic and other stakeholder domains means that internationalisation actors are often highly siloed, whereas intelligent internationalisation (Rumbley, 2015) advocates for high quality professional and academic preparation among those working in this field, calling for clear lines of communication and effective synergies among the actors with interests and responsibility for advancing internationalisation agendas (Godwin and de Wit 2020).

As seen through the literature review so far, internationalisation of HE is central to the discourse of the sector, but it still is not implemented transversally in institutions in such a way as to effectively respond to globalisation and challenges of the society.

It appears that there is a gap when considering the connection between change processes to internationalise HEIs and communication as a means to involve, motivate and create the necessary change in mindset and behaviour specifically connected to HEIs. A clear and evident example for this is represented by the European University Initiative (EUI), an explicit internationalisation activity that enters HEIs and activates deep transformative change, as it requires transversal implementation across institutions – engaging faculties, departments, administrative units, and a wide range of internal stakeholders, including academics, administrative staff and students. However, very often internationalisation encounters internal resistance which strongly obstructs its implementation and slows it down (Matos et al. 2012).

Interestingly enough, there are research activities concerning international communication as an important tool used by business organisations, analysing the strict relationship between internal communication strategies there is, however, less research concerning HEIs' use of internal communication.

Based on this research, it is worth exploring whether there is a greater acceptance of organisational change processes such as internationalisation, when meaningful communication is intended to convey empowerment, collaboration and tolerance, story-telling or motivational language use (Yue et al, 2021).

These considerations about change processes and change led me to think that there might be a synergy between HE internationalisation and communication; specifically, it brought to mind the question about which role, if any, communication could have in facilitating HE internationalisation processes through actors' engagement.

It's been said and repeated that very often the first reaction to change is resistance due to fear. Through adequate internal communication, especially by leadership, this can be alleviated by enhancing understanding and stakeholder involvement in the change process (Welch & Jackson, 2007). These actions then increase the sense of belonging to the organisation and help drive the establishment of a positive emotional culture within it. Change communication becomes a tool to achieve this. To summarise, in order to advance internationalisation, synergies and clear communication is needed among actors, that is based on the idea of creating a new reality through the creation of new meanings; this leads me to the next highly relevant topic in this research, namely sensemaking.

2.4. Sensemaking - Involving and Motivating through Meanings

I have already outlined how internationalisation in HEIs is considered a change process deeply transforming the working environment, the social context and the attitude. It has also been demonstrated (Welch, 2012) how success in change processes might be connected to positive internal relationships, and how this is easier when communication between managers and employees is enabled. This potential of effectively communicating internally relies on appropriate messages that reach those people involved in formats acceptable to them. There is a clear connection between the implementation of change and communication.

Teulier and Roleau (2013), in trying to better understand how middle managers make sense of interorganisational collaborations, assert the importance of looking at language to perceive this sensemaking work and draw on translation studies investigating “how ideas travel from one context to another” (Teulier & Roleau, 2013, p. 309).

It is therefore relevant to clearly understand how to enact change by keeping in mind that there will be internal as well as external conditions shaping and framing the process (Kezar, 2018). Even if changes in HE mainly come from outside, there are important internal aspects that must be taken into consideration in change processes. One of these is trust, an important mechanism that would facilitate ethical change, but which is often missing (Van Dam et al., 2008). In order to comprehend trust in change processes it is important to consider relationships among groups, how decision-making processes work in that institution and how much these are based on sharing opinions and involving employees.

Also, Devos et al. (2007) describe five factors which support positive effects on openness to change and, among these, the two factors considered most important are history of change (of the institution) and trust in executive management. History of change refers here to past experiences that cause people to have expectations. Employees learn from outcomes and past experiences, and this learning helps to revise beliefs and expectations about future outcomes. It is demonstrated that in the context of change, knowledge of content is not sufficient to involve employees; trust in management is much more relevant. It then seems to justify change due to social accounts (reasons) and interpersonal factors.

These concepts are very much based on social cognition theories describing how people make meaning in organisations, and are focused on resistance to change and on the reasons why people do not engage with organisational change.

At this precise point, the topic of sensemaking becomes relevant and is also to be included when considering internationalisation of HE.

One main definition of sensemaking considers it to be the process through which people work to understand issues or events that are “novel, ambiguous, confusing or in some other way violate expectations” (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014, p. 57). It is about changing mindsets, which in turn alters behaviours, priorities, values and commitments (Eckel & Kezar, 2002 (a)). Therefore, it can be

acknowledged that making sense means giving to people the opportunity to explore change initiatives and what they mean for their role and for their institution. It means connecting to Weick's concepts that sensemaking is a recognition that perspectives are socially constructed with and through other people (Weick, 1995).

One can observe sensemaking on two layers, the individual one that makes people attach new meaning to familiar concepts and ideas, and the development of a new language to describe a changed institution.

Studies have showed that the most important individual characteristic impacting openness to change in the workplace is *locus of control* (Dulebohn et al., 2012), an individual's perception of his/her ability to exercise control over the environment. People with *internal locus* see themselves as active agents and believe they have control over their environment and personal success. People with *external locus* see themselves as passive agents and believe that events in their lives are controlled by external forces (Devos et al., 2007).

This brings us again back to Weick's (1995) theory, which posits that deep, lasting change within organisations occurs when a collective understanding of the specific institutional context is formed, shaping institutional sensemaking. Sensemaking, in its broadest definition, is a social practice through which groups of people interpret and give meaning to their environment and actions, allowing them to coordinate and navigate change (Weick, 1995). Unlike classical organisational theories that view institutions as rational, goal-driven systems with an ordered social structure defining roles and behaviours, Weick introduces a more fluid and dynamic perspective. He argues that organisations are inherently messy, adaptive and continuously evolving entities that emerge from human interactions rather than rigid structures. At the core of Weick's view is the idea that organisations function as sensemaking machines - social forms that generate, transform and sustain meaning over time. Rather than merely responding to external pressures, organisations actively shape their environments while also being shaped by them. This adaptive capability stems from the way organisations facilitate communication and meaning-making processes at different levels:

- Intra-subjective meaning - The personal beliefs and experiences of an individual.

- Inter-subjective meaning - Meaning that emerges between two or more people through social interactions, shaping shared ways of thinking and acting.
- Generic subjective meaning - Institutionalised meanings that apply beyond individuals, such as organisational rules, norms or cultural frameworks.
- Extra-subjective meaning - Concepts that exist independently of people, such as mathematical principles or universal truths.

Weick (1995) argues that organisations operate primarily between the inter-subjective and generic levels of meanings. They adapt by allowing individuals to collectively create meaning (inter-subjective) and then transform those meanings into institutionalised, stable frameworks (generic subjective), enabling new members to integrate into the organisation. However, organisations must strike a balance; they must allow enough flexibility for people to create meaning, but also maintain enough structure to prevent fragmentation of inefficiency.

In the context of HEIs, sensemaking becomes a crucial process in navigating internationalisation (Kezar & Eckel, 2002). Shared processes must be enacted to facilitate a collective understanding of change, ultimately creating a new institutional reality. Change agents play a vital role in this process - particularly middle managers in international offices or in international project-related roles who, through communication and strategic framing, help employees make sense of evolving institutional priorities (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). These middle managers act as intermediaries, translating abstract institutional strategies into actionable meanings for faculty and staff, fostering engagement and reducing resistance to change. By examining how sensemaking unfolds within internationalisation efforts, this study seeks to uncover how HEIs construct, sustain and legitimise change in an increasingly globalised landscape.

As stated by Isabella (1990), even if reality in organisations is actively enacted and created by all its members, the collective, managers are at the heart of this social group. They serve a significant cognitive function by interpreting events and using those interpretations to frame meaning for other organisational participants as clearly expressed by a manager in following excerpt:

“As the decision maker you move your decision to those people closest around you and expect them to be the prophets of that message, and then that goes, and you know the further you cascade that

down into the organisation, the more it becomes diluted. And, the more the background is lost, the more the rationale, the more the meaning of it all is lost... unless there's a sense of history that has been retained in the translation." [an interviewed manager in Isabella, 1990, p.35]

Fenton and Langley (2011) also write about the critical role of narrative (the 'sense of history' cited above) to sensemaking in organisations. According to them, narrative can be found in the micro-stories told by managers and others as they interact and go about their daily work. It is seen as a way of giving meaning to the practice that emerges from sensemaking activities, of constituting an overall sense of direction or purpose, of refocusing organisational identity and of enabling and constraining the ongoing activities of actors.

Building on this, both storytelling and narrative serve as vital mechanism for constructing meaning within organisations. While Laufer (2019) frames organisational storytelling as a deliberate communicative method to convey the meaning and value of internationalisation, particularly when it encounters resistance, Fenton and Langley (2011) explore narrative as the broader often implicit, fabric of sensemaking within daily managerial interactions. In this sense, storytelling can be seen as a more structured or intentional form of narrative, aimed at shaping shared understanding and institutional direction. Together these perspectives highlight how narrative practices, whether strategic or emergent, play a central role in sensemaking and in framing institutional change such as internationalisation.

Sensemaking emphasises the social interactions that humans engage in as a source of change and looks to conversations and language as key facilitators of new perspectives. Vehicles for change involve facilitating human interaction and creating conversations, collaboration and communication to help people question their assumptions and increase their exposure to new ideas or values.

In this setting, communication is considered a social process, creating meaning and therefore depending on culture and context and not only on language. Change communicated without sharing meanings will not reduce resistance to change, whereas communication strategies whose role or function is to refine and align change can be more successful at reducing the mentioned reluctance to adapt to a new situation as long as they allow the meaning attributed to change to be constantly re-elaborated by means of cyclical contributions within the cognitive process of its interlocutors (Matos et al., 2012).

This said, however, it is commonly known that communication is still a critical issue on most levels at universities around the globe. In respect to international initiatives, information sharing within one group or among key departments is inefficient, and very often staff feel they are not well informed.

According to Ford and Ford (1995), the most shared perspective on change proposes that communication occurring in the context of change is inverted by proposing that communication is the context in which change occurs, and that the change process unfolds in a dynamic environment of conversations.

In this way, conversation becomes the most appropriate term to describe communication in the context of internationalisation of HE, when this has to be considered in a comprehensive manner. Here conversation is understood not as top-down dissemination of information, but, instead, as a dialogical, two-way exchange of perspectives. This form of communication is considered the most effective for easing mutual understanding, as it enables diverse groups to come together, to reflect collectively on what is happening, and allow these reflections to feed into learning processes that support institutional change.

Then, as Smith (2008) states, an informed and engaged workforce produces better results when they understand what an organisation is seeking to achieve and the part they have to play. Therefore, professional communicators, and in the case of internationalisation of HEIs I assume middle managers in international offices or people in similar roles, are in the ideal position to translate management speak into language that can be understood by those who will have to act upon it. Communicating clear goals and reporting at regular intervals is motivating for teams, and a regular conversation with them will help understand their needs and show them exactly how they can contribute to the bigger picture (Smith, 2008).

On another layer as Stein declares “...there is no single way to rethink internationalisation. Rather, there is a need to persistently attend to the complexities and tensions that characterise this work, and to put contradictory ideologies, desires and interests into conversation without requiring consensus, while also developing practical, context-specific interventions that will necessarily be provisional, imperfect and quite possibly create new problems” (criticalinternationalization.net, 2021).

Before this introductory section to sensemaking (2.4), we’ve asserted the importance of overcoming resistance to change through communicative actions that create new shared meanings in an organisation. I

then started to explore how this can be put into practice, and described how, from the beginning, the concepts of trust and sense of history in the organisation remain at the base of change implementation. To this I add the social construct that inevitably enters into relationships between people trying to make sense of a new reality. Indeed, communication is a social process to create meaning, and in this process change agents or translators are needed, who help in their mediator role to re-elaborate meanings while they change in the process.

2.4.1. Sensemaking Applied to Higher Education Institutions and its Relevance for Change

“Organisational sensemaking is a social process wherein individuals gather and transform input from formal and informal sources across organisational levels. This allows them to create a shared understanding of the organisation’s identity with respect to its changing ... (*omissis*) environments” (Kuntz & Gomes, 2012. p.145).

As stated by Kuntz and Gomes (2012), a successful implementation of change entails the redefinition of organisational values and goals, and success depends on the workforce’s acceptance of change and opportunity of participation. Balogun and Johnson (2005) also confirm with their research how sensemaking plays a central role in organisational change.

Similarly Van Dam (2008) asserts how a positive climate for change is associated with greater involvement in the process, enhanced trust in management and better information networks which, in turn, have a positive influence on perceptions regarding change and increase overall readiness for it.

However, some research highlights the risks associated with organisational sensemaking, particularly when misalignment occurs between intended strategies and their reception. Alvesson & Jonson (2022), for example, argue that what may seem logical from a managerial perspective can appear illogical or incoherent to those on the receiving end of change initiatives. This disconnect can manifest in various ways, including perceptions of management failure, weak leadership, ineffective sense-giving, unprofessionalism or a poorly developed organisational culture. In some cases, it may even be dismissed as ‘business as usual’ or, more critically, as the deliberate cultivation of what they term ‘functional stupidity’ - a state where critical thinking is discouraged in favour of unquestioning compliance (Alvesson & Jonson, 2022).

To describe this phenomenon, Alvesson & Jonsson introduce the concept of Organisational Dischronization, referring to situations where multiple, “poorly understood and/or badly articulated meanings” (Alvesson & Jonson, 2022, p.749) coexist, leading to unrecognised confusion. This highlights the importance of not only making sense of change, but also ensuring that the sensemaking process is effectively managed and aligned across different levels of the organisation. Without careful attention to communication and interpretation, change efforts risk being misread, resisted or rendered ineffective.

2.5. Critical Sensemaking – Adding Organisational Power to Discourse

After exploring the key aspects of sensemaking in organisations, particularly during change processes in HE, it became necessary to examine organisational types, structures and power dynamics to provide a more comprehensive understanding of change and transformation. As mentioned, an important aspect of creating change is ensuring that all those impacted by it in the organisation are able to understand the rationale behind it and their role in implementing it, to avoid or reduce resistance. However, this process of building shared understanding is particularly challenging in HEIs due to both their hierarchical structures and their loosely coupled nature. While hierarchy can limit information flow and restrict participation in strategic decision-making, the loosely coupled nature of HEIs, where different units and actors operate with considerable autonomy, can lead to fragmented interpretations and uneven communication. As a result, many key actors are forced to make sense of change on their own, often without sufficient context regarding the goals or expectations of the internationalisation initiative. To gain insight into why this problem occurs, the analytical approach was enriched by applying critical sensemaking theories (Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2009), which offer an extension to Weick’s sensemaking framework by emphasising the role of power, power relationships or context in attempts to create understanding.

Critical sensemaking is applied to change processes in organisations by examining the narratives and stories that emerge during the change process. It can help to identify how some narratives become privileged over others and how these stories are made meaningful for individuals. Critical sensemaking also highlights the influence of organisational rules on individuals and how these rules can constrain the ways in which individuals may act and interpret meaning. Additionally, critical sensemaking can help to trace the psychological processes that lead to the creation of gendered sub-structures and explain how

discriminatory practices become acceptable over time. Overall, critical sensemaking provides a useful heuristic for understanding the complexities of change processes in organisations and the role of agency in organising.

The role of agency in critical sensemaking is significant as it helps to explain how individuals make sense of their reality and extract cues to make events plausible. Critical sensemaking demonstrates the processes whereby individuals construct their identities and understand the narratives and discourses around them. It also addresses the influence of powerful discourses on sensemaking, plausibility and identity, and how these are embedded in organisational practices.

Since sensemaking happens within a social context and as an ongoing process, and it also occurs within a broader context of organisational power and social experience, the process of critical sensemaking may be most effectively understood as a complex process that occurs within, and is influenced by, a broader social environment (Mills et al., 2010).

Critical sensemaking provides a framework for understanding how individuals make sense of their environments at a local level while acknowledging power relations in the broader societal context. It offers a robust framework for examining how individuals interpret their local environments, while recognising the influence of power relations and societal contexts on these interpretations. In order to address resistance to change processes, power must be central to the conversation (Thomas et al., 2011).

2.6. Contextualising the European Universities Initiative (EUI)

At this stage it becomes essential to contextualise the decision to apply this study within the framework of the EUI, perceived as a multifaceted, complex internationalisation tool that is particularly significant for its transversal implementation in HEIs and its capacity to drive profound transformations in such a “challenging large-scale multilateral setting like the alliance” (Claeys-Kulik, 2022, p.3).

As part of the evolving discourse on internationalisation in HE, Hudzik (2015) introduced the concept of comprehensive internationalisation. In Hudzik’s view, comprehensive internationalisation aims to achieve institutional goals by fostering global connections across all university missions, including teaching, research, organisational structures and services. However, this comprehensiveness has rarely been fully realised due to a range of obstacles and challenges, primarily stemming from strategic

misalignments, institutional identity issues, resistance to mindset shifts and insufficient commitment (Hudzik, 2015).

At European level, the Erasmus+ programme has consistently served as a key driver of internationalisation in HE. Initially focused on student and staff mobility, the programme has evolved to encompass more complex initiatives such as capacity building projects, strategic partnerships and thematic networks (Curaj et al., 2020). The Erasmus+ programme has led to regional harmonisation of the HE system (British Council, 2017) but despite these advancements and many European countries adopting several measures to support HEIs, many obstacles remained, hindering seamless mobility and collaboration in the EEA. This lack of alignment can also be attributed to a disconnect between the broader institutional strategies for internationalisation, such as mobility initiatives, and the more specific actions undertaken at the departmental or faculty level.

The EUI was conceived as a response to barriers in transnational collaboration, including fragmented accreditation systems and regulatory differences (Gunn, 2020). The pilot phase, launched in 2019, saw 17 alliances involving 114 institutions receiving funding, with subsequent rounds expanding participation. These consortia resulting from the initiative are described by Gunn (2020) as networks where bottom-up alliances are coordinated within a top-down framework, reinforcing the broader goals of European integration, excellence in HE and cross-border education. Indeed, this first call of the EUI might be the beginning of an important transformation in European HE (Jungblut et al., in Curaj et al., 2020, p. 412).

One of the primary reasons for the EUI's effectiveness in offering a springboard to HEIs to transversally implement internationalisation may lie in the fact that alliances within the initiative are typically driven by institutional leadership (Craciun et al., 2023; Claeys-Kulik et al., 2022). As such, they become integrated into the mission statements of participating universities (Charret & Chankseliani, 2022). However, while leaders play a pivotal role in leveraging the expertise within their university communities, fostering consensus and engagement requires sustained efforts by ambassadors and change agents - a necessity that cannot be ignored or underestimated. Moreover, the EUI's project-based structure permeates all aspects of participating institutions, resulting in a transversal and capillary implementation of internationalisation in HEIs. Indeed, the EUI engages all organisational levels - academics, administrative

staff and various units and departments, including those traditionally not accustomed to direct involvement in international activities, similarly as envisioned by Huzdik (2015). However, this comprehensive approach may also increase resistance among internal stakeholders who do not immediately perceive the benefits of such a strong wind of change.

A key starting point of this research lies in the persistent tension between the rhetorical framing of internationalisation in HE and its actual implementation across institutions (Hunter & Sparnon, 2018; Jiang & Carpenter, 2013). While internationalisation has been widely promoted as a strategic priority, its realisation has often remained uneven and fragmented, typically limited to specific units or actors within HEIs. This gap underscores the difficulty of achieving transversal internationalisation - that is, integration across all functions, services, and levels of a university.

Through the review of relevant literature, this study conceptualises internationalisation not merely as a policy objective or set of activities, but as a deep, transformational change process that reshapes institutional culture, practices, and structures (Schein, 2017; Eckel et al., 2001). As such, internationalisation mirrors other forms of complex organisational change, where outcomes are shaped not only by top-down strategies but also by internal actors' interpretations, resistances, and sensemaking processes.

It is precisely in this context that the EUI offers a particularly valuable and timely case. The EUI constitutes a deliberate and ambitious policy experiment, designed to accelerate and deepen international collaboration among European HEIs by incentivising transnational alliances (European Commission Report, 2025). Unlike past, more voluntary or marginal initiatives, the EUI requires participating institutions to engage in an integrated form of internationalisation - across governance, teaching, research, and administration. It introduces pressures and opportunities for institutional transformation, affecting leadership strategies, academic practices, and the daily work of professional services.

In this sense, the EUI can be seen as a 'forced' internationalisation context, one that amplifies both the potential and the tensions inherent in embedding internationalisation comprehensively. As such, it presents a concentrated microcosm of the broader challenges faced by HEIs in realising transformative

change. These include resistance to change, cultural and procedural misalignments, and the need for cross-institutional coordination - precisely the dynamics where sensemaking becomes critical.

Furthermore, the EUI context allows for a focused exploration of the often-overlooked role of middle managers. Positioned between leadership and frontline staff, these actors are essential in interpreting, translating, and mediating change initiatives. They are uniquely situated to navigate the formal and informal organisational logics, history, and 'unwritten rules' that surface most prominently during periods of transformation. Their role as institutional sensemakers and change agents is especially crucial in initiatives like the EUI, which require alignment across diverse internal stakeholders and sustained cross-border cooperation.

Thus, the EUI is not only relevant but ideal for this study's research questions. It provides a rich, bounded, and highly relevant context to examine how internationalisation as deep institutional change is understood and operationalised, and how middle managers contribute to shaping this process through their everyday practices and interpretations.

The study aims to uncover strategies to engage internal stakeholders through sensemaking and facilitate meaningful, institution-wide transformations.

Chapter Summary

Internationalisation in HE is an unavoidable transformational change process, and as highlighted by the 2025 Report on the European Universities Initiative (European Commission Report, 2025), the EUI confirms this. However, significant barriers often lead to failure, primarily due to a lack of stakeholder engagement. Despite the growing body of literature on internationalisation and change in HE, a feasible and context-sensitive approach to engaging internal stakeholders, especially in large-scale initiatives like the EUI, remains unexplored.

This literature review identifies a clear gap: while much attention has been given to leadership (Gornitzka & Larsen, 2004; Yue et al., 2021), strategy, and policy (de Wit et al., 2015), the role of middle managers as sensemakers (Kihlberg, 2022) and communicators in engaging internal stakeholders and driving institutional change in HEIs has been insufficiently addressed. Existing studies have not adequately examined how these key actors interpret, translate, and enact change strategies within complex

institutional environments, and how their sensemaking is shaped by organisational culture, communication dynamics, and stakeholder complexities.

The literature suggests that sensemaking offers a valuable theoretical lens (Weick, 1995) for bridging this gap. When viewed through change theories, internationalisation appears not only as a strategic goal but as a deep institutional transformation involving cognitive, relational, and cultural shifts (Balogun, 2001; Eckel et al., 2001). Resistance to change is inevitable, but understanding organisational context and the role of middle managers can facilitate smoother implementation. Effective communication, particularly through change agents, is crucial in embedding new values and aligning institutional needs with stakeholder engagement.

Communication as a tool for cooperative efforts, shared meaning-building and cultural readiness is essential to overcoming resistance. Change communication fosters trust, emotional commitment and a sense of belonging, which are critical for internationalisation success. Connecting these elements, sensemaking emerges as a key process, helping individuals navigate uncertainty and reconstruct institutional identities.

Taken together, these insights lead to a set of research questions that aim to examine how middle managers make sense of internationalisation in the evolving context of the EUI. Specifically, the study explores how they act as mediators among diverse stakeholder needs (RQ1), what approaches support effective stakeholder engagement (RQ2), how institutional conditions influence their sensemaking practice (RQ3) and what kind of changes emerge from these sensemaking processes (RQ4). In doing so, the study contributes to a better understanding of the micro-processes that underpin strategic transformation in HE, and addresses a significant blind spot in both internationalisation and organisational change literature.

This study addresses the identified gap by investigating how middle managers in HEIs use sensemaking to implement transformative change, using the EUI as a case study of an internationalisation process that embodies deep institutional transformation enacted from within.

CHAPTER 3 – RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Chapter 2 included a comprehensive literature review focused on internationalisation in HE, change process in organisations and sensemaking. It also examined internal stakeholder engagement, the challenges connected to it and the role of middle managers as major agents in the broader institutional and national context.

This chapter presents the research design and methodology, starting from the purpose of the study, the research questions, my positionality as a researcher, the research philosophy and the overall research methods used in this qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews.

3.1. Problem and Purpose of the Study

In the context of the EUI, involving internal stakeholders in the internationalisation process presents significant challenges for HEIs. Middle managers play a crucial role in responding to the sensemaking needs of employees as they navigate these complex changes (Samra-Fredericks, 2003). However, there is limited understanding of how these managers engage with stakeholders and facilitate the sensemaking process within their institutions (Friesen, 2013), even though from the literature we saw how success in transformative processes depends on deep commitment by all stakeholders (Carfang, 2016). To address this gap, this study conducted in first instance an in-depth analysis of one selected alliance, focusing then on three of its member universities across different countries. By analysing these cases, the study seeks to develop a systematic framework - a structured model encompassing stakeholder identification in order to target actions towards different groups, and engagement strategies to reveal the effectiveness of implemented alliance activities - that can be applied across the entire alliance, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of stakeholder engagement in the internationalisation process.

The purpose of this study is to explore the main challenges HEIs faced in engaging internal stakeholders in internationalisation through the EUI. It also investigated how middle managers facilitate the sensemaking processes to support employees in adapting and making sense of the transformational change triggered by the EUI context.

3.2. Research Questions

This research addressed the problem statement through the following main research questions and four sub-questions :

Main Research Question (MRQ): *How do middle managers make sense of internationalisation when implementing the EUI at the institutional level?*

- **Research Question One (RQ1):** *To what extent do middle managers act as mediators in understanding different stakeholder needs in context?*
- **Research Question Two (RQ2):** *Which mediation approaches are supportive of stakeholder engagement?*
- **Research Question Three (RQ3):** *How does the institutional context intersect with middle managers' sensemaking approaches?*
- **Research Question Four (RQ4):** *What changes, if any, does this sensemaking lead to?*

3.3. Research Setting

In a globalised world, internationalisation has become a key component of HE. However, there is a lack of knowledge on how exactly to successfully implement it. The topic of Internationalisation of HE is explored extensively in research (de Wit & Jones, 2022; Friesen, 2013; Hudzik, 2015; Hunter, 2013 and 2022; Stein, 2019) and many explanations and definitions have evolved over the decades. It has also been looked at from the point of view of change management (Heyl & Hunter, 2019; Hunter, 2022); however, little research has been conducted with the intention of looking at the reasons for success and failure connected to stakeholder engagement. There are research lines looking at stakeholder engagement through communication (Donnellon, 1986; Ford and Ford, 1995; Friesen, 2013; Leeuwis & Aarts, 2011; Matos et al., 2012;), however these research lines mainly examine the field of general organisational change processes; very few have looked specifically at HE internationalisation sensemaking (Kezar, 2018; Welch, 2012). In other words, while the existing literature provides valuable insights into the drivers and content of change and sensemaking, it does not provide an explanation of the micro-level mechanism through which internationalisation may or may not become a truly transformational change process,

particularly from the perspective of middle managers operating within institutional contexts. Nor does it go in depth, showing all the challenges and obstacles in the implementation of internationalisation in HEIs, especially when it comes to stakeholder engagement. Although some interesting research is being done on the level of internationalisation, it does not take sufficiently into account the recent and most relevant internationalisation tool of the EUI, and fails to explore how this relevant change process has been introduced at institutional level to internal stakeholders.

The EUI offers a uniquely suitable context for exploring sensemaking in internationalisation processes within HEIs. Unlike conventional projects, the EUI is not limited to discrete or isolated internationalisation activities. Rather, it requires a transversal and holistic integration of internationalisation practices into the institutional fabric. Its implementation affects multiple layers of university operation-ranging from governance structures and joint curriculum development to modes of international collaboration, staff roles, and student engagement. This systemic scope compels institutions to rethink organisational structures, embed international and intercultural dimensions into programmes design, and adapt institutional strategies and cultures accordingly. As a result, it initiates significant shifts in working practices and institutional identity.

As Frame and Curylo (2025) point out, the EUI represents a form of 'Euro-internationalization' driven by supranational policy agendas, yet the ways in which this complex change process is understood and enacted at the institutional level, particularly by internal stakeholders, remain underexplored. Because sensemaking theories are commonly applied to organisational change processes, the EUI provides an ideal empirical setting to investigate how middle managers navigate the complexity, ambiguity, and day-to-day operations, play a pivotal role in translating policy into practice. Their sensemaking activities are essential in shaping how change is understood, communicated and sustained across institutions. Moreover, previous internationalisation efforts have often been criticised for their limited impact due to weak stakeholder engagement and siloed implementation within international offices or departments in relation to research. By contrast, the EUI requires active involvement from a wide range of internal actors, academic and administrative staff across faculties and units, making it a fertile ground for understanding how shared meaning and collaborative engagement influence the success or failure of transformative

The literature generally also provides little insight into how the internal actors have been involved in these changes and into the specific problems and strategies they encounter when implementing the initiative. An exception is the recent work by Antonowicz et al. (2025), which examines the impact of the EUI on non-academic staff in Poland. However, such studies remain rare and context-specific, and there is still a lack of broader comparative or interpretive research focusing on how internal stakeholders, especially middle managers, make sense of and respond to the transformative demands of the EUI across different institutional environments. The literature primarily focuses on the structural and formal challenges of internationalisation (Claeys-Kulik, 2022), often overlooking some of the more intriguing aspects; these include the distribution of power in driving change within universities, the ways in which institutions and their members respond to the introduction of internationalisation, the various approaches to its implementation and the strategies for mitigating the risks of failure. The major research gap lies in the exploration of sensemaking within HE internationalisation processes, particularly in stakeholder involvement. This study specifically examines the role of middle managers, who act as mediators or facilitators, making sense of everyday practice through diverse mediation approaches.

3.4. My Positionality as a Researcher

There is a strong personal motivation in deciding to explore sensemaking in HEIs part of an Alliance of the EUI. As a senior professional with nearly two decades of experience in the HE internationalisation sector, I recognise that my role as researcher in this field is not neutral but deeply informed and situated.

My extensive involvement in internationalisation projects, leadership roles in HE associations, and direct coordination of the EUI activities give me privileged access to the field but also risk shaping how I interpret data and how participants interact with me. These dimensions of my positionality are not incidental: they influence the research process in complex ways, and they are therefore explicitly acknowledged and addressed.

As stated by Denzin & Lincoln 'research is an interactive process shaped by one's personal history, biography, gender, social class, race and ethnicity and those of the people in the setting' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 45).

Early in my career, as administrative staff I started with the design and launch of an English-taught Bachelor degree programme at an Italian university, at a time when internationalisation of the curriculum in this country had just started to be tested. After gaining the experience that allowed me to deepen my knowledge of the different aspects of curriculum internationalisation, international student recruitment, welcome services for international students and stakeholder involvement, I moved to another position where, for seven years, I learned about research project implementation, partnership involvement and development, policy and strategy, coordination of international networks and associations. In two of these latter organisations, I've been holding a leadership position.

In my next role, I changed my institution and worked at departmental level. Over the last three years I've been in charge of managing communication activities and international projects for Education. I developed new internal working flows in order to further involve stakeholders in the international growth of the department, but also in its identity building path toward the society. The department in which I worked is concerned with Land and Environment, Agricultural, Forestry, Climate Change and Sustainability, all extremely relevant topics in our current society, but still lacking real recognition and knowledge at a broader level.

Currently, I've accepted a new role as a European Universities Alliance Coordinator, which will allow me to directly explore the topics of my PhD study, and allow to further deepen my knowledge of all main aspects related to stakeholder engagement and middle managers' role in the implementation of the EUI at institutional level, as well as how power dynamics intersect with their activities.

My dual role presents a unique and complex dynamic, as I navigate between being an insider - deeply embedded as a practitioner within HE - and an outsider - adopting a more detached, research-focused stance to ensure objectivity. As a practitioner, I possess first-hand experience, institutional knowledge and an intuitive understanding of the context, which granted me privileged access to insights that might otherwise be difficult to obtain. However, it also challenged my capacity to maintain critical distance. My emotional investment in the field and ongoing involvement in HE internationalisation, while ensuring practical relevance, might also make it difficult to step back and view the data objectively. Transitioning into the role of a researcher necessitated a shift in perspective, requiring me to step back and critically

analyse my own environment with a level of detachment. Balancing these positions involves continuous reflexivity (Darwin Holmes, 2020); I must acknowledge my biases while leveraging my insider knowledge to enrich my research. This dual positioning, however, created both opportunities and challenges - while my practitioner lens allowed me to ask more relevant contextually informed questions, the need for scholarly rigour and impartiality compelled me to adopt methodological strategies that mitigate subjectivity. Thus, this interplay of roles required careful negotiation to maintain academic credibility while drawing on the depth of my professional experience.

Nevertheless, I believe that the advantages of my position outweighed the disadvantages. My insider status allowed me to be aware of the reality of an organisation by being there, as Evered and Louis (1981) assert. The trust I have built within the international HE community encouraged more open and honest responses from participants. This is a world that I understand, and interviewees speak about it with me in a different way than they would with somebody who has never been inside a university. This leading to richer, more authentic data.

To mitigate the potential drawbacks from my positionality, I committed to maintain a reflexive stance throughout the research process. I continuously questioned my assumptions and interpretations, seeking external perspectives to challenge my viewpoints and ensure a balanced analysis. By acknowledging and reflecting on these complex dynamics, I aimed to leverage my insider status while maintaining the necessary critical perspective for rigorous academic research.

Additionally, my unique position at the intersection of practitioner and researcher offered the potential for a deep, nuanced understanding of sensemaking in HE internationalisation. While it presented challenges, it also provided an opportunity to bridge theory and practice in ways that could yield valuable insights for both academia and the HE sector.

Then there is my personal background - my lifelong immersion in international environments. The story of my life has been international by nature, growing up among different cultures, different languages, different countries, schools, systems and societies.

I very often perceive this unique lived experience in my daily job-related situations, when I am able to recognise not only what is being said or done in a given situation, but also what is behind the scenes and

behind the official communication being said and heard by everybody. I am always aware of my natural ability to adapt my behaviour and conversation register to the specific context of the situation, and how this adaptation is very often challenging for many others.

From here, my struggle centres around the idea that it is all about making sense, about interacting with people 'as to enable meaning to be produced' (Fiske, 1994) and not limiting social interaction to simply sending one-directional messages.

In my opinion, to enable meaning, international experience and context awareness are highly relevant. For this reason, this research will explore how internationalisation of HE can be made more understandable and engaging transversally in HEIs (and facilitate international awareness) through context related conversations that make sense of it.

Finally, there is also my background in translation studies. I graduated in Translation and Interpretation in German and English from the University of Trieste (Italy). My theoretical preparation for the more practical learning of translation methods was based on Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, focussing not on language as a sign system, but as a system of meanings, communication theories and the importance of communicating (translating) in the context of a situation to understand "what is going on" in a given situation. These studies are influencing both my view of the translator role and of the content to be translated, even though in this research the context of sensemaking in an organisation is relevant and not the pure concept of linguistic translation.

In this context, it is evident that my active role in the broader context of HE internationalisation in which I conducted my research gave me a double role as researcher and also as an agent of change attempting to create knowledge in the practical context of HE.

3.5. Researching Sensemaking in the Context of Internationalisation

Researching sensemaking is inherently complex due to the numerous variables influencing how individuals interpret the same message, as well as the intrinsic lack of objectivity when analysing socially situated phenomena. This challenge becomes even greater in the context of internationalisation, where universities - already grappling with organisational complexities - must navigate shifts in context and mindset to implement internationalisation effectively.

The choice of a research approach had to take into account many aspects related to this complexity, such as the definition of the role of those who in different HEIs were in the position to translate the leadership's internationalisation strategy because of their position in the organisation or personal attitude. More specifically for this study, it refers to those actors in charge of implementing the activities related to the EUI. According to my knowledge of the phenomenon, to use a general term I identified middle managers as those assuming the role of change agents (Caldwell, 2003) while having diverse roles at each institution. According to the literature (Smith, 2008), internal communicators (for the purpose of this study identified as middle managers in HE) may be those actors capable of conceptualising the social context connected to their institution, and of defining significant environments where conversations happen (not only formal meetings and working appointments, but also informal conversations taking place on campus, at the café etc.).

The concept of sensemaking is strictly connected with the mind map of interpretation and translation then, according to Weick "sensemaking addresses how the text is constructed as well as how it is read", whereas "interpretation ... *omissis* ... points toward a text to be interpreted and ... *omissis*.... toward an audience presumed to be in need of the interpretation" (Weick, 1995, p.7).

By focussing on conversations among employees, there is a strong need to take into consideration the context in which this process takes place, and its social environment. Further analysis of this information involves interpretation of "the meanings of others about the world" (Creswell and Creswell, 2018 p.8), with the aim of confirming how sensemaking may effectively contribute to the implementation of the internationalisation strategy by creating understanding of the process while it happens. Sensemaking refers to the need to make people understand by sharing meanings. It is also considered a tool to build these meanings together in order to create new assumptions and new institutional group identities after a deep transformational change process, such as the EUI in this study.

3.6. Research Philosophy

This study is situated within a constructivist - interpretivist paradigm, which is appropriate for exploring how middle managers engage in sensemaking during the implementation of the EUI. This worldview is rooted in the belief that reality is socially constructed, and that research should aim to

understand the meanings individuals assign to their experiences, particularly in complex and transformative contexts such as organisational change in HE (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

The constructivist perspective emphasises that meaning is not fixed or universal but is shaped by context, relationships, and history. In this study, the constructivist lens recognises that institutional actors interpret internationalisation through the lived realities of their organisations, shaped by specific policies, priorities, and stakeholder relationships. It also acknowledges the researcher's active role in shaping the data and analysis as interpretations are necessarily filtered through the researcher's own background, positionality and reflexivity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

While adopting an interpretivist perspective, which prioritises an in-depth understanding of individuals' perspectives, rather than search for generalisable or predictive theories, the aim is not to test hypothesis, but to uncover how middle managers make sense of their role, how they engage collaborators, and other internal stakeholders, and how they interpret the challenges and opportunities associated with implementing internationalisation through the EUI framework. As Bryman argues, interpretivism "is predicated upon the view that a strategy is required that respects the differences between people and the objects of the natural sciences and therefore requires the social scientist to grasp the subjective meaning of social action" (Bryman, 2012, pp.12-13).

In line with this, the study explores how actors navigate uncertainty, negotiate power dynamics, and build new meanings in the process of internationalisation, rather than assuming that these strategies are translated and enacted differently depending on how they are understood, resisted, or reframed by those involved. This is particularly important in the EUI context, where stakeholders must collaborate across national, institutional, and disciplinary boundaries. Finally, this philosophical foundation supports the choice of a qualitative design, discussed later in this chapter, which uses extensive interviews and observation to generate rich, contextualised insights into participants' perspectives. The interpretivist stance taken here also values reflexivity and process-oriented inquiry, acknowledging that both the participants and the researcher play an active role in the construction of meaning, as argued by Neuman (2014):

“The systematic analysis of socially meaningful action through the direct detailed observation of people in natural settings in order to arrive at understandings and interpretations of how people create and maintain their social worlds.” (Neuman, 2014, p. 104)

In this way, the study embraces the plurality of perspectives rather than attempting to reduce them to universal truths (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.6.1. *Ontology*

This study adopts a relativist ontological position, which is central to a constructivist paradigm. It is based on the assumption that reality is not objective or singular, but rather socially constructed and multiple. These realities are shaped by individuals’ experiences, cultural and institutional contexts, and their role within organisational structures.

In the context of this research, which explores sensemaking in EUAs, the focus is on how middle managers make sense of the initiative in translating and enacting it in their institutions. The study assumes that internal stakeholders may perceive and interpret the EUI differently, based on their institutional setting, professional identity, and the specific challenges they face. These individual narratives and interpretation are not distortions of a “real” EUI, but are instead constitutive of the EUI as it is experienced and enacted. This ontological approach acknowledges that there is no single version of the EUI; instead, it is understood as a dynamic and evolving construct, brought into being through the interactions, translations, and negotiations of those involved, and their meaning building. My role as a researcher, therefore, is not to uncover an objective truth, but to explore how different and new realities emerging through the EUI implementation, are meaningful within the institutional context and through effective stakeholder engagement. While this ontological approach allows for deep, situated insight, it also recognises that any findings are necessarily partial and context-dependent. Another researcher, studying a different alliance with different partner institutions and different participants, might construct a different understanding of the same phenomenon. Rather than a limitation, this is an expected and coherent outcome of qualitative, interpretive approach rooted in constructivist ontology.

3.6.2 Epistemology

In line with the chosen constructivist paradigm and the relativist ontological one outlined above, knowledge is understood as co-constructed through interactions between the researcher and the participants. It is not “discovered” as an objective truth, but emerges through interpretation of the meanings that individuals assign to their experiences, particularly in complex organisational and policy settings such as the EUI.

In the context of this research, knowledge is generated by engaging middle managers in reflective discussion about their sensemaking practices, how they interpret, translate, and give meaning to the initiative through their daily commitment, through tailoring communication and telling meaningful stories to stakeholders. The focus is not just on what they do, but how they understand what they do, and how they position themselves within evolving alliance structures in their institutions. These understandings are context-dependent and shaped by institutional culture, leadership dynamics, individual attitude, and the interpersonal relationships they develop.

Consistent with an interpretivist epistemology, my role as a researcher is not neutral or detached, but rather active and reflexive. The interpretations of interviewees’ narratives are inevitably influenced by my own background, assumptions, and experiences within the field of HE internationalisation and the EUI. Therefore, the research process is recognised as dialogical, with meaning negotiated rather passively recorded, in a way it is a sensemaking process in its own within the sensemaking exploration of the study.

This approach assumes that no singular or universal account of stakeholder engagement or sensemaking in the EUI can be produced. Instead, the study aims to understand how middle managers make sense of complex processes in context, and how their interpretation evolves through practice. In doing so, the research contributes to a situated, nuanced understanding of change processes in internationalisation as lived and enacted by those implementing them.

3.6.3. Philosophical Approach to the Study

An inductive approach to research is typically recommended when there is a gap in the literature related to the research questions at hand (Bryman, 2012; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011). This approach involves allowing theoretical insights to emerge from the data, rather than imposing pre-existing categories

or hypotheses. Through iterative data coding and categorisation, pattern and themes are developed that reflect participants' lived experiences. Conversely, a deductive approach is used when the topic has already been extensively studied, enabling the researcher to test existing theories by categorising data into predefined groups. Given the under-researched theme of this study, that is how middle managers make sense when implementing the EUI, an inductive approach is particularly suitable. It allows for the emergence of rich, grounded insights that reflect the complexity and contextual variability of organisation sensemaking, rather than limiting analysis to existing theoretical assumptions.

In this research, the conceptual framework built through the literature review has evolved and been refined throughout the doctoral journey, with additional insights emerging from the field while inductively analysing data from the interviews. This enabled me to refine the sensemaking conceptual framework, highlighting the most critical aspects in the specific context of the EUI. The approach I used combined inductive and deductive thematic analysis to capture the complexity of context and cases.

According to Braun & Clarke, thematic analysis as a constructionist method "examines the ways in which events, realities, meanings, experiences and so on are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.81). This perspective aligns with the context and purpose of this study, which explores the direct experiences of middle managers within organisational settings, emphasising how the social context shapes their sensemaking processes and influences stakeholder engagement in internationalisation efforts.

The "choice of research practices depends upon the questions that are asked, and the questions depend on their context" (Nelson et al., 1992, p. 2 in Denzin & Lincoln, 2006, p. 4), and also what is available in the context, and what the researcher can do in that setting.

This methodological approach led the research in finding answers to the research questions, not only in observing how facilitators made sense of internationalisation in the context of the EUI (RQ1), but also understanding if, and to what extent, middle managers responded with tailored communication to the varied needs of those in the institution involved in diverse activities (RQ2). Then according to Weick, "sensemaking involves turning circumstances into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into action" (Weick et al., 2005, p.409). Middle managers appear to precisely

have this role in the framework of the EUI, and in the many contexts in which this has to be implemented, by involving different actors and engaging them to the extent that they become pro-active.

3.7. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach, which is particularly effective for investigating change processes in internationalisation because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the meanings, interpretations and contextual factors that influence such processes (Leavy, 2014). This, again, is directly related to the research questions asked and explored in this study. In understanding sensemaking processes, **MRQ and RQ3** qualitative research enables an exploration of how middle managers interpret and make sense of internationalisation within their institutions. It also captures the nuances of their perspectives, including how they navigate institutional pressures during transformative change. This approach is well suited for researchers aiming to understand both the individual actions and the collective experiences, including the process of sensemaking within organisations. Qualitative research is especially appropriate in this context, as it focuses on how individuals interpret their experiences, construct their realities, and assign meaning to those experiences. Rather than merely seeking outcomes, it aims to understand the dynamic processes through which people make sense of their lives and environments. As Merriam and Tisdell (2015) highlight, qualitative inquiry is concerned with uncovering these meaning-making processes and exploring how people interpret what they encounter. This perspective aligns with the study's aim to investigate how sensemaking unfolds within HEIs undergoing internationalisation. In examining middle managers as mediators between stakeholders with different needs (RQ1 and RQ2), qualitative methods allow to analyse their interactions, strategies and narratives. More specifically, interviews and case studies can reveal the approaches that facilitate stakeholder engagement and the challenges in mediation. Organisational dynamics and changes are essential areas in the study of European Alliances, and qualitative methodology provides enough 'sensitivity' for detailed analysis of organisational changes through sensemaking. In capturing institutional context and change dynamics (RQ3 and RQ4), qualitative research helps to uncover how context shapes sensemaking and decision-making processes. The quantitative methodology, although able to diagnose that the change has occurred through time, is unable to explain why (in terms of circumstances and stakeholders) or how (which processes were involved) the

change occurred (Kohlbacher, 2006). Finally, given that the EUI is a relatively new policy framework, qualitative research was chosen for this study not simply because it allows for inductive analysis, which can also occur in some forms of quantitative research, but because it is best suited to exploring the complex, context-dependent, and interpretive nature of sensemaking in HE. This approach enables a deep understanding of how middle managers perceive, construct and negotiate meaning in response to institutional change, something that cannot be fully captured through numerical data alone.

In order to answer the research questions and uncover sensemaking at those universities that are advancing in the implementation of international activities as members of an alliance in the framework of the EUI, the design for this study is based on interviews. The interest in exploring participants' values, beliefs and practices embedded in situations, which are highly complex and dynamic, made this form of research appropriate, especially because qualitative research relies heavily on dialogic relationships between the researcher and participants (Bratich in Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) and generally focuses on an analysis of language that results from conversation or documentation (Sarantakos, 1998; 2005).

"The word 'qualitative' implies an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity or frequency" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p.8; 2006).

Denzin and Lincoln (2006; 2018) also pointed out that the qualitative approach will help stress the nature of reality which is socially constructed, allowing a close relationship between the researcher and the subject of the study. This is particularly important in this research, as sensemaking involves individuals and groups interpreting and constructing meaning from their experiences within an organisational context. A qualitative approach allows the researcher to delve deeply into these subjective processes, capturing the nuanced ways in which people make sense of changes, such as those brought about by internationalisation initiatives (Flick, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). It is also argued that a qualitative inquiry entails looking for answers that create social experiences which are inevitably charged with meanings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2006; 2018), but this aspect has been expanded on in the previous positionality paragraph.

The choice of a qualitative research approach is also connected to the understanding of this type of research as a "situated activity that locates the observer in the world" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2006, p. 3). While

the term *observer* is used here, in the constructivist paradigm adopted in this study, the researcher is not viewed as a detached observer but rather as an active participant in the co-construction of meaning. This definition nonetheless aligns with the kind of exploration I made in this study, as well as with the “interpretive and naturalistic approach to the world” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2006, p.3) that characterises qualitative research. This approach seeks to understand how individuals make sense of their experiences within their everyday organisational contexts and in their natural settings. As Denzin & Lincoln (2006) further highlight, “qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 3). Rather than isolating variables or testing pre-defined theories, this study observes how meaning emerges through real-world interactions and practices, especially in response to change processes like the EUI.

3.8. Research Methods

This section presents the specific methods employed in this study to investigate the sensemaking processes of middle managers during the implementation of the EUI. Before outlining the practical steps taken to collect and analyse data, I explain the tools used for the investigation, such as choosing to use a case study analysis and conduct semi-structured interviews, and the criteria used for selecting the specific alliance, finally I describe the alliance case study and the relevant terminology used.

The study adopts in first instance an inductive approach, which allows for the development of insights from the data, rather than testing pre-established hypotheses, combining this with a deductive approach in the second-round-interview analysis. A qualitative research design was chosen to enable an in-depth exploration of participants’ experiences, supported by a case study strategy to examine the unique institutional dynamics of the EUI. Additionally, semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method, enabling the capture of diverse perspectives and lived experiences from the interviewees. These methods were carefully selected to align with the research objectives and ensure the study’s rigour and relevance.

3.8.1. Case Study

One preferred method in qualitative analysis when examining contemporary events involves using case studies. I also opted for this approach in consideration of a further strength of case studies; that is the

“ability to deal with a full variety of evidence - documents, artefacts, interviews and observations...” (Yin, 2009, p. 11).

The main reason for using case studies is linked to the use of theoretical models in which the analysis of the organisation is based on the experience of the participants in that specific organisational process. This experience can be best observed and understood using case studies. Case studies offer the advantage of exploring real-world contexts in which the nuances of sensemaking and stakeholder interactions are embedded, allowing for a rich, situated understanding that survey methods or isolated observations cannot provide. Finally, the case study design is deemed to be adopted in this research because, as seen in the literature, sensemaking happens mainly in social relations where the context plays a relevant role and might influence the interpretation of data collected from the interviews.

According to Patton (2015), case studies are particularly valuable when the research data aims to capture individual differences or unique variations from one research setting to another. In this study, although a single case study design was found to be appropriate, focusing on one EUA, the case itself was complex and internally diverse, comprising multiple partner institutions. Interviews were conducted with middle managers across different universities, each with its own organisational culture, leadership style, and implementation approach. This embedded case structure enabled the study to explore variation and nuance in how the initiative was understood and enacted, thus producing the kind of rich, context-dependent knowledge associated with case study research (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

“Examine a phenomenon in its natural setting, employing multiple methods of data collection to gather information from one or a few entities (people, groups and organisations) [when] the boundaries of the phenomenon are not clearly evident at the onset of the research and no experimental controls or manipulation is used”. (Benbasat et al., 1987, p.370).

Thus, this research uses a case study to reveal and ascertain how middle managers make sense of internationalisation when implementing the EUI at their institutions and engage stakeholders in EUI. The emphasis of the case study is the middle managers’ work environment (a European university partner institution of an European Alliance), their relationship of trust with internal stakeholders and their way of making them understand the process of transformation requested by the EUI, when and while it is

happening. For this purpose, the decision was made to focus and analyse one EUA (see paragraph 3.8.9. for a description of the chosen alliance) and its partner universities to observe and explore the sensemaking activities through middle managers.

According to Kanter, the case study “is a search for explanation and theory rather than a report of an empirical research” (Kanter, 1997, p. 291), and is an in-depth investigation of an issue over a given period of time. In my research, this perspective is particularly relevant, as the goal is not merely to describe how the EUI is implemented across institutions, but to interpret how middle managers make sense of this complex change process within their specific organisational settings. Yin (2009; 2014) asserted that a case study is not dependent upon the techniques used to collect data, but rather the application of understanding to complex events. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) highlight three types of case studies; descriptive, interpretive and evaluative. This case study falls under the descriptive type, and intends to present a comprehensive account of the phenomenon under study (sensemaking), though there are also theoretical assumptions. In this research study, a deep understanding of sensemaking is needed to comprehend if this supports middle managers to engage stakeholders in the EUI. It therefore has to take into account different aspects of the social context in several institutions implementing the same kind of activities by considering more details of the institutional environment, trust relations among different stakeholders and how leadership enables change by involving people in the process.

According to Smith (1988) and Yin (1989; 2009; 2014) finally, and reflecting on the purpose of this study, as a deep understanding of the changing organisational environment in the process of the EUI implementation, as well as observation and knowledge gaining on social relationships and group processes are required, studying a particular alliance in detail was considered to be the best approach.

This case study has been an opportunity to observe and analyse the sensemaking processes through interviewing middle managers involved in change due to the EUI (so far not investigated in previous studies), with the understanding that the findings may resonate with a broader population of HEIs being part of European alliances and facing similar challenges in internal stakeholder engagement.

The main research question, aimed at better understanding how middle managers make sense of internationalisation in the specific context of the EUI, required an extensive and in-depth description of a

social phenomenon such as sensemaking in the context of HEIs, and especially in the social interaction among stakeholders to put internationalisation forward. This is one of the various reasons why the case study in this research is deemed as appropriate, as it's being "used in many different situations to contribute to knowledge of individuals, groups, organisational, social, political and related phenomena" (Yin, 2009 p. 4).

The case study approach has been carefully structured through interviews with the participants representing the main tool to uncover their understanding of change related to the EUI, their concerns and experiences in its implementation and if - and how - sensemaking was more or less consciously adopted. Interviews were structured and conducted as informal discussions with guiding interview questions that facilitated open conversations and led to the richness and depth of the data collected.

This choice helped to overcome the idea that single case studies lack rigour in the data obtained, in the analysis and in findings (Yin, 1989; 2009; 2014).

One particularly important aspect of this research project was to find out, through semi-structured interviews with middle managers in charge of putting forward the EUI, how they made sense of this deep transformational change process when trying to involve stakeholders at all levels of the institution. Specifically, I tried to understand, through the interviews with these managers, which challenges have been felt as major obstacles when trying to have people onboard.

"The essence of a case study, the central tendency among all types of case study, is that it tries to illuminate a decision or set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented and with what result." [Schramm, 1971 in Yin, 2009, p. 17]

This citation gives me more reasons (besides those already stated above) why I think that the choice of a case study approach based on interviews was appropriate for the design of this research. In the context of the EUI a 'set of decisions' were taken very often by leadership and managers and needed to be implemented by involving all kinds of stakeholders, offices and divisions. It therefore became highly relevant to capture 'how they were understood', if there has been resistance to participate in the activities (and by which specific reference group) and how this was overcome.

3.8.2. Semi-Structured Interviews

In qualitative research, interviews are often used as major tools for exploring participants' experiences, perspectives, and interpretations of social phenomena in depth (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Especially in single case studies, however, the use of multiple sources of evidence, such as unstructured and structured interviews, observation and some document analysis, allows the researcher to address a broader range of behavioural issues and to develop "converging lines of inquiry, a process of triangulation and corroboration", therefore making findings and conclusions more convincing (Yin, 2009, pp. 115-116).

The documents I took into consideration were in a previous preparation phase for interviews, analysing the website of the case study alliance and each of its member institutions' website, with particular focus on the internationalisation strategy of the three case universities. The description I use for each of these three universities about their history and mission was drawn from their respective websites and anonymised where needed.

As stated above, I considered the interviews "guided conversations" (Rubin & Rubin in Gubrium, 2012) that gave the interviewees the freedom to "tell their story" (Gubrium, 2012, p. 311) and that helped me to outline if, and how, sensemaking in internationalisation was made in those specific social contexts.

Being face-to-face (even if online in most cases) when having conversations, created a more confidential context in which the sensemaking process could be naturally displayed and discussed. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, online interactions have become a normalised form of professional communication, and participants appeared comfortable and engaged in this format. Rather than limiting rapport, the slight psychological distance afforded by the virtual environment may have lowered social barriers, encouraging greater openness and reflection. This contributed positively to the richness and depth of the data collected, the findings reflect not only participants' formal roles but also their emotional and interpretive responses to the EUI, which may have remained underexplored in less personal data collection settings.

Moreover, in some cases I had the opportunity to observe and describe that social context, while in others I deepened my knowledge by reading documents on institutional strategies and structures and visiting their websites. In any case I paid particular attention to the ways that the middle managers

themselves understood their context and experience and how they communicated that understanding to others. I explored the broader context of organisational power dynamics, both from the “EUA university autonomy in Europe” report (2023), and by having in depth conversations with interviewees on how decisions are taken in their institutions. Uncovering decision-making processes became a prevalent part of researching sensemaking as a social process, partly differentiated through specific critical sensemaking theories.

Central to an interview is the act of asking appropriate questions which are shaped by the purpose of the research. There are two types of interviews, unstructured and structured, both of which can involve individuals or groups. It is argued that the appropriate type of interviewing method employed depends on “the research topic and purpose, resources, methodological standards and preferences and the type of information sought, which of course is determined by the research objective” (Sarantakos, 1998, p. 179).

In addition, the interview process itself might give the participant the opportunity to reflect on, and react to, their experiences and, equally, give as much opportunity for the researcher. The decision to collect data through semi-structured interviews was taken because in this way you might “gain information on the perspectives, understandings and meanings constructed by people regarding the events and experiences of their lives” (Grbich, 1999, p. 85).

May (2004) suggested that informal interviews allow the researcher a degree of freedom to verbalise thoughts without imposing their views and wishes on the participant. In this case study, interviews also helped give an insight into how internationalisation as a change process was disseminated in the social contexts of respondents, and how middle managers enacted awareness. Understanding of sensemaking in HEIs was explored through participants ‘telling stories’ from the context of their working lives. They were asked to provide examples of practical situations where they successfully made sense of issues with collaborators who were initially resistant or not involved. These stories were gradually enriched and guided through prompts designed to address the research questions. Throughout the interviews, the objective was to maintain a strong emphasis on participation and dialogue, all closely tied to the participants' experiences.

An attempt was made to maintain a balance between control and flexibility, thereby allowing time to build up a connection, responding to verbal and non-verbal cues and being prepared to share information, ideas and feelings (Sorrell & Redmond, 1995). As Fontana and Frey (in Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) pointed out, interviews offer a powerful method to understand what others think, and further:

“Asking questions and getting answers is a much harder task than it may seem at first. The spoken or written word has always a residue of ambiguity, no matter how carefully we word the questions and report or code the answers ... the interview becomes both the tool and the object ... [we] disclose ourselves, learning about ourselves as we try to learn about others ...the question must be asked person to person if we want it to be answered fully.” (Fontana & Frey in Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p.361)

However, at the same time I’m aware of the fact that self-report data relies upon the skill of the interviewer in setting up the situation so that the interviewer and the interviewee are recounting a similar practice, the interviewee feeling comfortable enough to express their opinions, establishing clear purposes for the research, selecting participants who are relevant to the research questions and using open-ended, non-leading questions.

Interviews have many advantages as stated by Judd et al. (1991):

- The interviewer is able to establish a rapport and motivate the respondent to answer fully and accurately, thus contributing to the quality of the data obtained.
- The interviewer is able to notice and correct the respondent’s misunderstandings.
- There is an opportunity to probe inadequate or vague responses.
- The interviewer has some control over the environment or context, including the biasing presence or absence of other people.

These advantages are particularly relevant to this study, then establishing rapport and probing responses enabled a deeper exploration of participants’ experiences, interpretations, and emotions, key elements in understanding how they navigated the complexities of the EUI. Moreover, the ability to clarify misunderstandings ensured that participants engaged meaningfully with questions. But on the other hand, interviews can be very time consuming, and this is an issue that has been taken into account when deciding

how many HEIs' middle managers to interview, while still taking into consideration consistency of data. While the number of interviewees was necessarily limited by the availability of middle managers directly involved in the chosen alliance, I believe that saturation was effectively reached. This was made possible through the open-ended and in-depth nature of the interviews, which allowed for rich detailed accounts of participants experiences. The flexibility of the conversational approach enabled me to explore emerging themes thoroughly, prompting further reflection when needed. As a result, consistent patterns began to meaningfully address the research questions.

When interviewing middle managers to specifically explore their sensemaking agency in the context of the deeply transformative implementation of the EUI, an etic approach has been adopted. This involved studying the primary practice world (from the researcher's perspective) and how agents make deliberate sense of the EUI; in particular, how they describe the properties of their sensemaking and how they made detached/deliberate sense of the implementation of the initiative (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020).

3.8.3. Selection Criteria of the Studied Alliance

At the time I started my PhD, the European Commission had published two calls for the selection of funded Alliances in the framework of the EUI. These calls (2018 and 2019) have been considered pilot calls, whereas in the following years three more calls (2022, 2023, 2024) have been published with the intent to prolong fundings for the first-call Alliances, as well as to select new Alliances (Craciun et al., 2023; EP Report, 2025).

The Alliances are extremely diversified according to number of members, size of institutions, geographical coverage in Europe, topics.

By deciding which alliance could best fit my research, I took into consideration different criteria; some on a practical level, some on a more personal one.

The practical level criteria have led me to consider those consortia in which I personally knew middle managers involved in the coordination of the initiative. In this way, I could more easily get access to them to make appointments for interviews. Some alliances on the other side had to be excluded from the selections, either because I personally coordinated one of them, or because I was working in a university which is part of an alliance. Also, some alliances with specific Italian universities wouldn't be a good choice

for me because of my previous close working relationship with the leadership of those institutions. As it will have been discussed in the section on positionality, while being embedded in the sector can offer a deeper contextual understanding, I took care to minimise potential bias. Including alliances in which I was professionally involved would have compromised the neutrality of the research in several ways. My prior knowledge of institutional dynamics, challenges, and internal processes could have unintentionally shaped the data collection and interpretation. More importantly, interviewees who knew me professionally may have felt constrained in their responses, potentially limiting the openness and honesty required for a rigorous qualitative study. In order to maintain objective distance and protect participants' anonymity and freedom to speak candidly about their lived experiences, such alliances were intentionally excluded from the study.

However, some of these "excluded" alliances were taken into consideration in the pilot coding phase later mentioned in this chapter. Pilot interviews were conducted with middle managers from some of these alliances, allowing for early exploration of the research themes and contributing to the refinement of the case selection criteria.

3.8.4. The Selected Alliance

The alliance that best fit this study, according to the previously described reasons (existing relationships with middle managers in some partner institutions, geographical convenience etc.), is a pioneering alliance that started with a minor number of founding members and then grew into a larger alliance of diverse European universities and several global partners. It aims to re-imagine HE through innovative international collaboration. The member universities of this alliance geographically cover all areas in Europe - north, south, east and west - and are therefore representative of the typical "population" of this initiative.

This alliance fosters a challenge-led, student-centred, place-based, and inclusive model for HE. Its vision involves creating a network of deeply integrated, multicultural campuses across Europe. Through shared academic programmes, collaborative research initiatives and active community engagement, the alliance addresses pressing global and regional challenges. The universities aim to provide seamless

mobility for students, staff and researchers, while cultivating a sense of belonging to a broader European educational space (Curaj et al., 2020).

As part of its mission, the alliance envisions transforming the traditional HE model to become more flexible, inclusive and innovative. It works towards establishing a confederation of interconnected campuses, where resources, expertise and knowledge flow freely, creating opportunities for joint degrees, interdisciplinary research and active cooperation with local communities. This bold initiative aligns with the broader goals of the European Commission to enhance cross-border partnerships and strengthen the EEA, while also promoting global partnerships which address worldwide educational and societal challenges.

To protect the anonymity of my interviewees I have taken several measures. The alliance is referred to as generically “this/the alliance”, whereas the names of its member universities have been substituted with phantasy names. These adjustments in the presentation of the data do not affect how the data has been interpreted to explain the results.

3.8.5. Terminology

This study primarily focuses on internal stakeholders in HEIs. It is therefore pertinent to note that across all ten institutions in the alliance considered for the case study, a clear distinction between two main stakeholder groups emerged: Administrative staff and Academic staff.

Furthermore, the study delves into the topic of sensemaking as perceived and enacted by middle managers within HEIs, necessitating a clearer definition of this group.

In certain institutions, administrative staff are alternatively termed as professional development staff, while academic staff may be referred to as faculty. For the purpose of this study, I’ll utilise only the terms ‘academic staff’ and ‘administrative staff’ and delineate their respective roles as follows:

Administrative staff typically encompass employees employed across various departments and offices within HEIs. Broadly speaking, they possess general administrative skills and are responsible for overseeing procedures and paperwork. However, at a deeper level, these staff members evolve into specialised professionals with diverse competencies and expertise.

They are responsible for a wide range of tasks and functions that contribute to the smooth operation of academic programmes, student services, research initiatives and institutional management (Olsen et al., 2005).

Overall, administrative staff in HEIs play a multifaceted role in supporting the mission of the institution, fostering student success and ensuring effective operations across various functional areas.

In this context, academic staff encompasses individuals at all levels of academic roles, ranging from young researchers to full professors, as well as any professionals who serve as teachers or researchers within the institution.

I use Dutton and Ashford's (1993) definition for middle managers as those who "occupy intermediate level in the corporate hierarchy, two or three levels below the CEO" (p. 398), such as general managers, business unit heads or functional managers (e.g., head of supply chain). In the context of organisations, middle managers are considered "crucial actors in performing (purposeful) work" (Sharma & Good, 2013, p.95), and within HEIs they might hold an academic position or an administrative one.

Finally, when referring to sensemaking within HE through middle managers, in this study it pertains primarily to those staff members, predominantly from the administrative group, who work in international offices or hold project related roles. Typically, personnel in international offices are tasked with translating leadership messages to stakeholders, thus becoming preferred sources of implementation-related and job-relevant information during change (Allen et al., 2007). Notably, in the context of this study, 15 out of 18 interviewed middle managers (not considering the pilot study interviewees) in the first interview round belong to administrative staff in their respective institutions, with only 3 holding academic positions with administrative responsibilities.

3.9. Data Collection and Analysis

The literature study for this case study commenced in May 2021 with the writing of the doctoral proposal and was concluded by the end of 2022. The data gathering process was conducted from September 2023 to June 2024. Before starting the data collection, a test coding phase with five interviews to PhD peers in the field of internationalisation was carried out to test interview questions and ensure they

aligned with the overarching research aims, particularly to capture how middle managers engage in sensemaking processes during the implementation of the EUI (MRQ).

The data collection followed a cross-sectional time horizon. Online and on-site interviews with the 18 middle managers from the institutions within the selected Alliance were conducted from September 2023 to June 2024. The goal was to interview middle managers who were directly involved in implementing the EUI and who had a certain level of knowledge of the institution and power in involving collaborators. Initially, I conducted semi-structured interviews aimed at identifying the sensemaking actions and meaning-building processes that managers used to comprehend and communicate key decisions.

This interview approach allowed for maximum flexibility, enabling me to pursue lines of questioning based on middle managers' perspectives on current workplace practices within their institutions. In the first round of interviews, questions were tailored to the different phases of implementation and concomitant stakeholder involvement across institutional levels, encouraging storytelling and detailed responses from the interviewees. The design encouraged reflection on concepts such as trust and effective communication with collaborators during change processes like internationalisation within the EUI framework to understanding how middle managers mediate between top-down strategic goals and local realities (RQ1, RQ3).

This approach resulted in a substantial collection of data that not only enriched the answers to research questions but also allowed for the extraction of relevant themes linked to the theoretical framework of this study. As argued by Braun & Clarke, thematic analysis was conducted within a constructivist framework, which aimed to theorise the sociocultural contexts and structural conditions that shape the individual narratives provided (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Based on these findings of the thematic analysis, three case universities were selected for deeper investigation, representing diverse configurations of organisational power dynamics and structures, as well as leadership style.

In the three mini-case studies universities, a total of five additional semi-structured interviews were conducted to facilitate deeper and more meaningful discussions with participants. These interviews explored, with more emphasis on power dynamics and organisational structures, the social context of the institution, and how leadership roles might facilitate (or hinder) the implementation of change processes

across campus. This multi-layered analysis directly supports the overall aim of understanding the interpretive and mediating roles of middle managers in institutional responses to internationalisation (MRQ).

3.9.1. Pilot Study

Before starting the interviews in the case study alliance, I decided to run a pilot test and subsequently coding the data collected from one of these interviews.

This choice was driven by the need to learn how to conduct interviews and to gain more confidence with this tool. Moreover, pilot interviews provide an opportunity to refine interview protocols and generate insights that can inform subsequent stages of the study (Bryman, 2016). It also allows assessing “the degrees of observer bias, frame questions, collect background information, and adapt research procedures” (Creswell, 2007, p. 133). Indeed, conducting pilot interviews provided an opportunity to start developing a coding framework to relate to in the main study.

Pilot interviews serve as a “valuable opportunity to fine-tune the research design, refine and develop research instruments” (Creswell, 2007, p.133), and gather preliminary insights. The primary objective of these interviews was to identify any potential issues or limitations in the interview questions, explore the feasibility of the research approach and gauge the respondents' reactions and interpretations of the topics under investigation.

Typically, pilot interviews are conducted with a small number of participants who share similar characteristics with the target population. This helps in assessing the clarity, relevance and effectiveness of the interview questions and helps identify any modifications needed. For these reasons, I decided to run pilot interviews with a group of PhD peers at the Centre for Higher Education Internationalisation (CHEI), where I’m pursuing my doctoral studies.

I selected peers in the PhD programme who were practitioners in their own institution, based in Europe, and whose role would be comparable to middle manager level and having a similar position with the target population of this study. This meant that they are leading international offices, and/or that they have experience in the field of project management; in the best case, specifically in the context of the EUI, as part of an alliance in their respective institution.

I used a similar interview scheme (Appendix B) previously prepared to be applied in the first phase of my research interviews.

In this scheme I started the first round of interviews with two 'ice-breaking' questions relating to the participants' role and professional experience. I then moved on to the other questions that had been conceived to guide the conversation and to stimulate participants to tell a story about their experience. The aim of this conversation was to find out how activities in the framework of the EUI had been decided and implemented, whether challenges had been faced and whether solutions had been found to overcome those difficulties.

Before starting with the video-recording of the online interview on the Zoom platform, a short introductory chat took place in order to create a relaxed environment, and also to decide with those colleagues whose institution is not involved in the EUI which could be the 'substitute object' of the interview (in place of the EUI) in order to make the pilot testing activity still plausible and valid for the purpose.

All interviews were transcribed, and I read through the transcripts several times, while also watching the recordings and making notes, highlighting relevant quotes that would relate to topics from the literature review and capturing first impressions to become familiar with the data.

In a second phase, I wrote down some initial themes, which were assigned to quotations from all interview transcripts. The approach used here was open-coding, as no pre-set codes were defined and labels were developed and modified in the process (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

Coding involves systematically categorising and organising the interview responses into meaningful themes or codes (Saldaña, 2016). This process is essential for data analysis, as it allows for the identification of patterns, relationships and significant findings within the interview data. Coding helps to ensure the data is manageable and facilitates the identification of commonalities, differences and emerging themes that will inform the subsequent stages of the research.

Therefore, after the initial more intuitive working phase, I decided to adopt a more systematic coding process to only one (most relevant) pilot interview, in order to create a first sample of data to be coded.

The relevant pilot interview had been selected according to the case study principles adopted for this study; I chose a middle manager who had been in charge of managing an international office for a long period in time and who has been (and still was at the time of the interview) in charge of the implementation of the EUI in their institution.

In this phase, I added some new inductive codes from the themes that emerged from the interview to the previous more deductive coding from the literature. To do so, I used Atlas.ti, and I adopted a line-by-line coding of each quote from the chosen interview transcript. During this process I again took the opportunity to make notes, which could potentially be used for the forthcoming interview with the same participant.

During the line-by-line coding process I felt the need to describe the meaning of each assigned code to facilitate future coherent use of the same codes and to avoid confusion. This assignment of description has been listed in one file (table 4) constituting a first base for the creation of a codebook (Appendix G) that would be enlarged and refined while doing the interviews.

After coding and re-coding, a tentative analysis was made by crossing the codes with a matrix previously created in order to assign each interview question to my research questions and to the main topics drawn from the literature (table 3).

Starting from this table, I did a 'surface analysis' that at least gave me indications on the possible results from the data collection. It was very helpful to further deepening concepts; however, after having conducted the second pilot interview with the same colleague, the subsequent analysis clarified some doubts that had risen from the first one. This second coding and analysis was very useful in enlarging concepts and locating richer information.

The learning from this pilot testing was related to developing a greater ability in asking for examples of specific situations described by the interviewee. This again helped create clarity on the meaning behind the words and the latent thematic analysis.

The second pilot interview was much shorter, and allowed further development of some concepts that emerged in the first coding and analysis, but were not sufficiently explored. It became evident how power relations influenced decision-making processes concerned with the implementation of the EUI,

especially in the first phase of the project. Moreover, changes related to organisational structures became an important trigger for further involvement of stakeholders across the institution.

3.10. Procedure for Data Collection

This section describes the data collection and analysis procedures applied to the research after the pilot study. As mentioned in the section on study design, this qualitative method study, based on two rounds of interviews, was intended to deepen knowledge deriving from perception in a sort of ‘funnel-effect’, in which the first round of interviews allowed for much more in-depth information to be gathered on specific aspects of the conceptual framework of this study. In the following sections, data collection and recording procedures, as well as data analysis and interpretation, are discussed.

The 23 interviews used for this study were carried out over a period of 10 months, from September 2023 to June 2024. As my focus was on the process individual participants used to make sense of the EUI in involving internal stakeholders, I was not over concerned with the exact sequencing of the interviews or the time between them but, certainly, in the initial phase my concerns were around the effective availability and willing of interviewees involved in such a time-consuming project.

The interviews ranged from 45-70 minutes in length, and most occurred online on Zoom, whereas three interviews occurred in the individual participant’s workplace. Each interview was video-recorded and then transcribed verbatim with the Office365 SharePoint online tool. I initiated contact with colleagues from various partner universities within the selected alliance. In some cases, these individuals fit the middle manager profile I targeted but, in other cases, they provided the names and emails of other colleagues at their institutions. When direct contact names were lacking, engaging with interviewees proved instrumental in securing further connections, some of which were in institutions other than theirs. I interviewed 18 middle managers, out of which three higher leadership members with academic profiles. One of the middle managers was a former employee who had left the organisation, one academic had changed position within the same organisation, and two middle managers connected to the EUI project had been hired after the beginning of the first funding period. Each university in this alliance had at least one manager interviewed, with a second manager interviewed in eight of the ten universities.

Interviewee Role	Category	University Pseudonym	Quotation Pseudonym
Senior Academic	Academic	Carpathian Bear Academy	Carpathian Bear Academy
Senior Manager	Administrative	Wise Owl University	Wise Owl University 1
Project Manager	Administrative		Wise Owl University 2
Leadership Role	Academic		Wise Owl University 3
Senior Manager	Administrative	Gallic Rooster Academy	Gallic Rooster Academy 1
Senior Manager	Administrative		Gallic Rooster Academy 2
(former) Senior Manager	Administrative	Viking Elk University	Viking Elk University 1
Senior Manager	Administrative		Viking Elk University 2
Senior Academic	Academic	Alpine Ibex University	Alpine Ibex University 1
Assistant Senior Manager	Administrative		Alpine Ibex University 2
Senior Manager	Administrative	Navigator Dolphin University	Navigator Dolphin University 1
Project Manager	Administrative		Navigator Dolphin University 2
Senior Manager	Administrative	Lynx University	Lynx University 1
Senior Manager	Administrative		Lynx University 2
Senior Manager	Administrative	Wolf University	Wolf University
Senior Manager	Administrative	Hare University	Hare University
Senior Manager	Administrative	Raven College	Raven College 1
(former) Senior Manager	Administrative		Raven College 2
Senior Manager	Administrative	Pilot	Peer 1
Senior Manager	Administrative	Pilot	Peer 2
Project Manager	Administrative	Pilot	Peer 3
Project Manager	Administrative	Pilot	Peer 4
Senior Academic	Academic	Pilot	Peer 5

Table 1 – Interviewees’ Role and Affiliation with Pseudonyms

More conversations and interviews were conducted with one president in one institution, different working groups in similar alliances, and during conference presentations. While not being considered in the analysed data-set of the study, this data contributed to confirm concepts and relationships among topics related to sensemaking. It also established that interviewing more middle managers within the chosen alliance wouldn’t provide more - or different - interpretations of meaning-building attitudes; nor would it give more insights into different language use adapted to different stakeholder needs. At this point I determined that theoretical saturation had been achieved and there was no need to reinforce or repeat narratives that had already emerged. Consequently, in the case of the second interviews with the three case universities emerging from the first analysis, the results could serve as a model to interpret sensemaking by middle managers in the other institutions as shown in table 7. The only differentiation would be the specific autonomy and decision-making context.

I approached all interviewees uniformly, by sending an initial email to introduce myself, explaining the research topic and requesting interview availability. Alongside this, I attached the Project Information

Document approved by the Ethical Board (Appendix A). Upon receiving confirmation of willingness to be interviewed, I sent a follow-up email containing a link to the pre-set Calendly application, offering days and time slots for scheduling the interview. Additionally, I attached the informed consent form (Appendix E), requesting participants to sign and return it before the interview.

Upon scheduling interview dates, I promptly sent a Zoom link invitation. For interviews further in the future, a reminder was dispatched three days before the scheduled date. The first interview occurred online on September 18th 2023 with the final one conducted on-site on June 25th 2024.

In general, participants displayed an immediate positive attitude toward participating in the research. However, there were some individuals who were initially reluctant due to high workloads and commitments.

Managing these organisational aspects required extensive effort. I maintained an Excel file to organize the flow, attempting to keep it up-to-date on a daily basis. Following each interview, a thank-you email was sent, accompanied by a request for further contact if applicable.

Transcriptions of the interviews were revised through careful review of both the text and video recordings in parallel. The revised transcriptions were then uploaded to Atlas.ti.

On average, I dedicated approximately five hours to each interview. After completing the initial round of interviews, I commenced coding data on Atlas.ti, aiming to inductively assign labels to paragraphs or text chunks in each interview. Each code was described in the comment area of the Atlas.ti software (table 4), aiding in the creation of a code list.

3.11. Data Coding

Interview transcripts underwent thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke's 6-step framework (2006), with the aim of identifying themes and patterns that address the research questions. While thematic analysis has been questioned at times (Bryman, 2016) due to a lack in identifiable heritage, it is still considered a solid foundation for a 'generic approach to qualitative data analysis' (Bryman, 2006, p. 587).

Consequently, the approach adopted was a theoretical thematic analysis, capturing relevant chunks of information pertaining to the research questions (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

In this study, the conceptual framework developed through the literature review is expected to evolve and expand as the research progresses and additional insights are gathered from the field. Given the aforementioned framework within which this study operates, while a combined inductive and deductive approach to data analysis has been employed a greater emphasis has been placed on inductive thematic analysis to thoroughly explore the perceptions and attitudes of middle managers. This approach allows for the interpretation of these perspectives within the broader context of organisational transformation, the disruptions associated with it and the processes of constructing new meanings.

This necessity for an inductive approach arises from the unique context represented by the chosen framework for the case study. The EUI offers an original change process where sensemaking and critical sensemaking theories can be applied to ascertain if and how their implementation supports internal stakeholder engagement, thus justifying a deductive approach.

This methodological approach facilitated the discovery of answers to the research questions, not only by observing how middle managers consciously or unconsciously attempted to make sense of internationalisation within the context of the EUI (MRQ), but also by understanding if, and to what extent, they responded to the varied needs of individuals within the institution involved in diverse activities (RQ1) and the different mediation approaches utilised (e.g., different languages, tailored messages) (RQ2). Additionally, the third research question (RQ3) provided valuable insights into how, and to what extent, middle managers' attitudes toward making sense of the transformational process introduced by the EUI are shaped by both the general country-specific decision-making patterns and the influence of enabling leadership.

The coding and subsequent analysis were conducted using Atlas.ti software and followed the following phases:

1. *Becoming familiar with the data.* This phase involved listening to the 18 recorded interviews multiple times while reading the automatic generated transcription to correct inaccuracies or typos, and making notes to capture initial impressions. This also implied reading and re-reading the transcriptions many times.

2. *Generating initial codes.* In this phase, I used open coding to identify 68 data-driven codes across all interview transcripts. These codes were rooted in the semantic surface of the data and aimed to stay close to participants' voices. For instance, codes like 'making understand', 'workload', 'budget' were derived from frequently recurring expressions. In subsequent readings and re-coding processes, I began interpreting them especially looking for evidence of sensegiving behaviours and institutional constraints influencing them. This led to a reduction to 44 more analytical meaningful 'labels'. These labels were reviewed and modified during the process (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017) and interviews re-read many times, while moving to a deductive coding having in mind the main concepts from the sensemaking and critical sensemaking theories. Recurrent codes were considered in crafting comments for the analysis, serving as a foundation for a more detailed second coding and analysis. This further allowed narrowing down the code list to 27 final codes, that more precisely captured both semantic content and latent themes. In this way the coding moved from descriptive labelling to interpretive categorisation, mapping participants' lived experience of EUI implementation onto broader organisational and theoretical constructs. Codes were also prefixed (i.e. DIFF:budget; DIFF:workload; ENG:motivation) to support categorical coherence and make visible their relationship to emerging themes. A table was used to track the transition from open codes to reduced codes and themes (see Table 2).

Coding 1	n.	Coding 2		Themes
Activities to involve		/		
Believer		/		
Bottom-up approach		/		
Brexit		/		
Budget	1	Budget		
Covid		/		
Difficulties main	2	Difficulties main	A	DIFFICULTIES
Perception of the alliance	3	Perception of the alliance		
Solution to difficulties	4	Solution to difficulties		
Workload	5	Workload		
Clarity on purpose	6	Dissemination	B	DISSEMINATION
Dissemination				
Engagement main	7	Engagement main		
Making understand	8	Making understand	C	ENGAGEMENT
Motivation	9	Motivation		
Purpose of the EUI	10	Purpose of the EUI		
Tailored communication	11	Tailored communication		
Trust	12	Trust		
Alliance legal entity		/		
Executive board		/		
Felt importance of EUI		/		
Identity main	13	Identity main	D	IDENTITY
Negative perception	14	Negative perception		
Positive aspect of alliance	15	Positive aspect of alliance		
Transformation	16	Transformation		
Incentives to engage		/		
Inclusive attitude to collaboration		/		
Internationalisation	17	Internationalisation	E	INTERNATIONALISATION
Motivation to join the alliance		/		
Hierarchy	18	Hierarchy		
Leadership	19	Leadership	F	POWER
Power relations main	20	Power relations main		
Rector's role	21	Rector's role		
Top-down initiative	22	Top-down initiative		
Admin staff role	23	Admin staff role	G	ADMIN STAFF ROLE
Internal organisation		/		
Role in home university		/		
Role in the alliance		/		
Second phase partner		/		
Sensemaking among partners	24	Sensemaking among partner	H	SENSEMAKING
Sensemaking main	25	Sensemaking main		
Storytelling	26	Storytelling		
Team-work	27	Team-work		
Structure of the alliance project		/		

Table 2 Coding Process from Extensive List to Themes

3. *Searching for themes.* Once the 27 codes were defined and labelled, I began the process of thematic clustering, where codes were grouped into eight overarching thematic categories: Difficulties, Dissemination, Engagement, Identity, Internationalisation, Power, Admin Staff Role, and Sensemaking. These themes were informed both by theoretical constructs from the literature review and by the empirical data generated during coding. This phase involved a constant comparison approach, supported by a spreadsheet that had previously mapped the literature to research questions (Table 3). The organisation of themes was also informed by the research aims, specifically the focus on middle managers' sensemaking during internationalisation processes in the context of a EUA. Following Thurlow's approach I 'allowed the

language to highlight the elements of the process that were most significant in influencing that particular representation' (Thurlow, 2007, p. 92). This approach helped to surface both semantic codes and discursively constructed representations. Themes were prefixed as the second code list (e.g. DIFF; ENG; ID) to signal their relationship to broader theoretical categories and to ensure consistency between code, theme, and theory. Emerging themes were then cross-checked with core sensemaking literature, resulting in the following interpretive connections.

- I. Difficulties as a barrier to sensemaking: Codes such as 'budget', 'workload', and 'perception of the alliance' indicated the presence of material and symbolic obstacles. This aligns with the literature on sensemaking (Weick, 1995) highlighting how individuals struggle to interpret complex, ambiguous or shifting policies. In the context of internationalisation, middle managers may face challenges related to institutional resistance, policy ambiguity or resource constraints. This connects to the implementation gap in HE governance and the tensions between top-down decisions and bottom-up practices.
- II. Dissemination connected to sensegiving: Codes like 'clarity on purpose' and 'dissemination' represented efforts by middle managers to translate complex policy into understandable language for internal target groups. These reflect the sensegiving dimensions of Weick et al.'s (2005) theory and build on Wittmann's (2013) framing of organisational communication as a tool of strategic alignment.
- III. Engagement linked to stakeholder involvement in sensemaking: Codes such as 'motivation', 'making understand', 'tailored communication, and 'trust' highlight the mediating role of middle managers in facilitating engagement. This supports research on stakeholder engagement and the importance of their role in changing the organisation (Hunter, 2020), showing how sensemaking is often co-created through interpersonal dynamics and local knowledge (aligned with RQ1 & RQ2).
- IV. Identity and sensemaking: The data reflected tensions in how participants perceived their own and their institution's identity, coded under 'identity main', 'positive aspect of the alliance', and

‘transformation’. This aligns with Stensaker (2015) and Gioia & Chittipeddi (1991), who conceptualise identity as a core aspect of how people make sense of organisational change.

- V. Power in relation to critical sensemaking. This theme reflects insights from critical sensemaking theory (Mills et al., 2010) with codes such as ‘hierarchy’, ‘top-down initiative’, and ‘rector’s role’. These point to the institutional contexts that shape what can be interpreted, said and acted upon and by whom in the implementation of internationalisation in HE.
- VI. Sensemaking as core theoretical lens: Codes like ‘storytelling’, ‘teamwork’, and ‘sensemaking among partners’ reflect the everyday interpretive work that middle managers engage in to build and share meaning. This is the central theoretical framework guiding this study, here defined after Weick’s conceptualisation as an ongoing, social, retrospective, trust-driven, and plausible process which aligns with the research focus on internationalisation implementation.
- VII. Administrative staff role as an interpretive actor group. The single but meaningful code ‘admin staff role’ highlighted the sensemaking and operational contribution of administrative staff, often overlooked in strategy literature.
- VIII. Internationalisation as the macro-context meaning. Though expressed through a single code ‘internationalisation’ provided a structural backdrop for all themes, shaping both the narrative and strategic dimensions of sensemaking. Participants interpreted the EUI not just as an operational project, but as part of broader geopolitical, educational and identity-based shifts in HE.

This thematic structure allowed for a multi-layered interpretation of how middle managers experience, shape, and respond to internationalisation processes within an EUA. The coding-to-theme process was guided by theoretical saturation, narrative coherence, and relevance to the research questions.

Concept	Research Question	Interview question	Literature reference
Context of change (EUI)	MRQ	a) Could you tell me about your work with the EUI?	It is demonstrated that in the context of change, knowledge of content is not sufficient to involve employees, trust in management is much more relevant (Devos et al., 2007)
		g) What do you think that the purpose of the EUI is?	
	MRQ, RQ4	7) How is this process rolled out in your institution? ...is it similar to what it was before being part of the initiative? ...was internationalisation disseminated differently?	
Institutional structure	RQ1	What is your position in the institution?	
	RQ1	How long have you been working in this institution?	underlying knowledge may be connected to knowledge of the institution due to longer time working in that institution (Samra-Fredericks, 2003)
	RQ4	f) What has the impact of working with the EUI been?	
	RQ1	1) Who do you work most closely with? ... and most frequently with?	
	RQ1	2) Who do you talk to about internationalisation?	
Middle managers (as mediators, as change agents)	RQ1, RQ2	e) What have been the challenges?	leaders who inspire engagement, build consensus through academic and administrative change agents (Olsen et al., 2005)
			middle managers acting in international offices are those people who practically will have to translate the message related to change from leadership to stakeholders (Dutton & Ashford, 1993)
			strategic sensemaking is accomplished through the ability of middle managers to craft and share a message by referring to a complex mosaic of underlying knowledge (Samra-Fredericks, 2005)
	MRQ	h) Could you tell me about your experience of working on internationalisation through the EUI?	INT as transformational change process (Eckel et al., 2001) EUI as complex INT project
	RQ1	4) How do you see the role of staff in this initiative?	Sensemaking processes have a strong influence on the manner by which individuals within organizations begin processes of transacting with others (Weick, 1995)
	RQ2	6) Could you tell me about how you see your role being between your own institution and the Alliance? ... and your role in this process?	Managers need the ability to first transform problematic situations into problems (making sense) and then frame the context (problem solving) - (Schoen, 1983)
Engagement/involvement/motivation	RQ1, RQ2	e) Have there been any difficulties? What have been the challenges?	classical concept of unfreezing -> creating motivation and readiness for change (Lewin's, 1955)
	RQ1	3) Who do you talk to about the EUI? ... how would you describe the nature of those conversations (regular – formal – informal – sporadic - spontaneous)?	Active agents "structuring the unknown" (Waterman, 1990)
	RQ1, RQ4	5) How has staff responded to this project? ...has there been any surprises or challenges?	
Mediation approaches	RQ2	c) How has it been like working with the EUI?	
	RQ2	2) Who do you talk to about internationalisation?	
Sensemaking	MRQ	b) How did it all start?	
	RQ4	i) Has it been different from how you worked before to work with internationalisation through the EUI?	How would you describe your relationship and cooperation with other members of your university before and after the EUI?
	RQ1	8) Would you like to tell me something about how the initiative is communicated within your institution? ... do you have any role in that?	ORG are open systems, adaptive to change, capable of change and of changing themselves, and in doing so they can have an effect on its environment and the world around. The way of how adaption works is providing a very specific way of communication. (Weick, 1995). Positive climate for change is associated with greater involvement in the process, enhanced trust in management and better info networks which in turn have a positive influence on cognitions regarding change and increase overall readiness (Van Dam, 2008)
Results of SM (success/failure)	RQ5	f) What has the impact of working with the EUI been?	
		5) How has staff responded to this project? ...has there been any surprises or challenges?	
	MRQ, RQ4	9) Could you tell me about any changes you have noticed in internationalisation activities since the EUI started? ... success stories that can be shared? ... something that surprised you?	

Table 3. Connection Table Concepts, RQs, Interview Questions, Literature Review

4. *Reviewing themes.* In this phase the eight themes were carefully reviewed to make sure that they strictly corresponded to semantic and latent themes from the literature. This involved revisiting coded data extracts and checking that each theme was distinct, internally coherent, and appropriately representative of the underlying patterns in the participants' narratives.

Code	Groundedness	Groups	Comment	Creator
• DIFF:Difficulties main	251	DIFFICULTIES	Difficulties includes any challenge, obstacle or difficulty perceived or concretely described by the speaker	Agata Mannino
• Dissemination	120	DISSEMINATION	Dissemination refers to any kind of communication activity, tool or procedure related to the alliance	Agata Mannino
• ENG:Engagement main	221	ENGAGEMENT	Engagement refers to if and how stakeholders are or are not engaged, refers to any topic in the involvement of people or units in the institution 17/01/24, 17:24, merged with What is it about? Either the speaker or people in the institution that are being involved directly and explicitly in the alliance	Agata Mannino
• ID:Identity main	112	IDENTITY	The identity of the institution is referred to as being influenced by the initiative: references (as well not explicitly) are made to the concept of institutional identity	Agata Mannino
• POWR:Power relations main	62	POWER RELATIONS	Evidences that show power relations in the institution or how powerful roles influence decisions and involvement.	Agata Mannino
• SM:Sensemaking main	72	SENSEMAKING	Anything that relates to activities that bring back to sensemaking concepts (in the institution) but also that are opposite to it (in which sensemaking has not been applied)	Agata Mannino

Table 4 – Themes and Description Created on Atlas.ti

5. *Defining themes.* Once the themes were confirmed, I refined the definition and scope of each one, clarifying how it contributed to answering the research questions and how it related to key theoretical constructs. Attention was also given to the interrelations between themes, with some overlap examined and clarified to preserve analytical clarity.

6. *Writing up.* This final phase involved constructing a coherent narrative that presented the findings of the thematic analysis. Themes were illustrated with selected quotes from the interview transcripts to

support interpretations, and the discussion was anchored in the conceptual framework and broader literature. This write-up aimed to show the data-driven insights, combined with theoretical reasoning, responded to research questions and contributes to understanding the role of middle managers in implementing the EUI at institutional level.

Following the initial phase of substantial data collection and analysis, it became evident that the preliminary results warranted a second phase of data collection, with a refined focus on critical sensemaking theory (Mills et al., 2010). This phase particularly emphasised the examination of power dynamics and their influence on change processes.

The second round of interviews was designed to explore in greater depth the topics that had prominently emerged in the initial phase and which directly related to critical sensemaking theories, including the contextual relevance and power dynamics when looking at organisational transformation processes. During this process, it became apparent that three specific institutions provided a more substantial dataset. Each institution could be seen as representative of distinctive characteristics of different power structures, which resulted in varied, more successful approaches and outcomes in the implementation of the EUI by middle managers.

This observation led to the formulation of an additional research question (RQ3), aimed at the exploration of decision-making processes according to leadership, power structures and institutional culture, and its intersection with the implementation of the EUI.

The key arguments leading these interviews in the three selected case study universities were:

1. The importance of leadership in driving profound transformational international processes.
2. The influential power of loose decision-making methods and organisational culture in shaping these processes.
3. The reciprocal potential of decentralised structures in HE to support internationalisation processes.

3.11.1 Reliability of Data

Given that this is a doctoral study with a relatively short time frame, and without the support of a research team or funding, several strategies were employed to demonstrate the reliability of the coding, analysis process and themes, thereby validating the accuracy of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

As Creswell and Poth (2018) suggests, multiple approaches to ensure reliability were implemented:

- Thorough transcription and revision of interviews: interviews were meticulously transcribed and reviewed using electronic transcription tools (such as Office365 SharePoint) alongside video recordings. This approach helped mitigate misunderstandings, particularly given that 16 out of the 18 interviewees were non-native English speakers, which sometimes led to inaccuracies in automatic transcription due to pronunciation issues.
- Triangulation of data: Data was collected from multiple sources, not just interviews, but also observations, surface document analysis (mainly websites) and conversations with relevant stakeholders involved in the case study alliance or similar projects. This triangulation strengthened the credibility of the findings.
- Peer examination: a doctoral student served as a peer examiner to further validate the analysis process.

To enhance the “systematicity, communicability, and transparency of the coding process” (O’Connor & Joffe, 2020, p. 11), Inter-coder Reliability (ICR) practices were partially and informally adopted, intended to serve as a supportive rather than definitive function, offering a light form of cross-checking for the clarity and consistency of my interpretations.

A PhD colleague was involved to carry out a partial coding of 22 selected excerpts from three different interviews. The units of coding were conceptually meaningful chunks. Before starting, the reviewer was provided with the codebook (Appendix G) derived from the coding procedure and was given time to familiarise himself with the content. He then coded the abstracts independently, using a simple table on a word document.

Subsequently, I reviewed whether he assigned the same code words to the passages as I had, based on the tentative definitions in the codebook. The decision was binary ("yes" or "no"), and I calculated the

percentage of agreement on the passages we both coded. In 19 out of 22 instances, the codes assigned were identical. One differed only at the same sub-theme level (e.g.: POWER vs. POWER: rector's role). The remaining three instances were mismatches.

Given the limited scope and informal nature of this exercise, the percentage of agreement (86%) was not used as statistical validation but as an indicative measure of interpretive clarity. The minor mismatches did not result in any changes to the coding scheme, as they were judged not to undermine the thematic coherence of the codebook. Rather, the ICR practice functioned as a reflective tool to support transparency and demonstrate that the coding system and interpretive framework could be consistently applied and understood by another researcher. This reinforces the internal credibility of the analysis and provided confidence in the analytical procedures used, without implying objectivity or generalisability. As Yardley (2008) states "Although qualitative research, by definition, places value in the analyst's interpretation of data, the ultimate purpose of doing and publishing research is to share it with others" (in O'Connor & Joffe, 2020 p. 4).

3.12. Ethical Considerations

Permission to carry out this research, and therefore to conduct interviews has been obtained from an Ethics Clearance Committee at the Fondazione Policlinico Universitario Agostino Gemelli IRCCS, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore.

Further on, individual consent of every participant also has been obtained by using an informed consent form (Appendix E), assuring them that the data would be used anonymously and for the sole purposes of the present study.

As the research involves collecting data from people, it is crucial to anticipate ethical problems before starting the study and to protect participants, develop trust, prevent misconduct, respect the privacy and others (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Some of the actions that helped to address potential ethical issues were: (i) Participants were informed on the type and aim of the research (through the Research Proposal), their involvement and the right to withdraw at any time; (ii) Respondents confirmed their willingness to participate through an explicit question at the beginning of the interview that has been recorded; (iii) Confidentiality about identities has

been respected at all times, so pseudonyms were used to protect the participant's anonymity and have been recorded in the study database; (iv) The results will be shared with each university through an executive summary by the end of the doctoral thesis writing, and participants and credit will be given to the universities involved in the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018); (v) Backup copies containing personal data will be stored in secure locations (Cloud storage or hardware device).

My positionality, as described above, may have some effects on the research as a whole. As a senior member of the HE sector, having served in different HEIs and been active in major Associations and Networks, my position inherently may carry both authority and influence, which shapes my interactions with middle managers and other stakeholders. This dynamic presents ethical considerations that have been acknowledged and managed throughout the research process. My position can create an imbalance in researcher-participant relationships. Interviewed middle managers may perceive my role as one of oversight or evaluation rather than that of a neutral PhD researcher, potentially influencing their openness and responses. To mitigate this, I established clear ethical boundaries, ensuring that participants felt free to express their perspectives without fear of professional repercussions. Moreover, my dual insider-outsider status grants me a deep understanding of institutional structures and context, allowing me to interpret nuances that an external researcher might miss. However, this also presents challenges of bias and subjectivity. While my own lived experience enhances my ability to grasp complexities, it requires reflexivity to prevent preconceptions from shaping findings. Transparency in data interpretation and validation through peer debriefing helped maintain research integrity. In conclusion, while my role within the HE sector, and specifically in the framework of the EUI, grants me privileged access and some institutional knowledge, it also necessitates a heightened ethical awareness of those power relations that I also explored in this study. By embracing reflexivity, transparency and a commitment to participant autonomy, my attitude has been to conduct research that is both ethically sound and methodologically robust.

Chapter Summary

This chapter commenced by outlining the problem and purpose of the study, along with the research questions that guide the investigation. It then detailed the research setting, philosophy, design and

methods, as well as clarifying my positionality. A qualitative methodological approach was selected due to its effectiveness in exploring issues related to organisational change processes, such as internationalisation and the specific context of the EUI. Through semi-structured interviews, this study was able to capture rich, nuanced perspectives from participants, shedding light on the complexities of internationalisation and on middle managers' role in engaging stakeholders to navigate the change implied by the implementation of the EUI at institutional level. The depth of insight afforded by this methodological approach has been crucial in uncovering the patterns of practice, tensions and power dynamics that influence the process of change. These findings will be presented in the next chapter, providing critical reflections on how internationalisation is understood, enacted and contested within institutions of an EUA. They also highlight the interplay between institutional power dynamics and individual agency, revealing both enablers and barriers to successful internationalisation. By closely examining these insights, the upcoming chapter will not only offer an analytical synthesis of participant perspectives, but will also contribute to the broader discourse on internationalisation, the EUI, and organisational transformation in HE.

CHAPTER 4 – FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings of the study that aim to answer the main research question on how middle managers make sense of internationalisation. The focus here is on presenting the key patterns and themes that emerged from data. A more interpretive analysis follows in the discussion chapter.

The findings presented in this chapter explore the lived experiences of middle managers and, indirectly, those of key internal stakeholders addressed by them through their sensemaking activities, as they navigate the complexities of internationalisation within the EUI context. As universities seek to balance institutional priorities with the demands of European and global HE frameworks, the role of middle managers emerges as a crucial link between strategic decision-making and on-the-ground implementation. This chapter unpacks the central themes that have emerged from the data (Table 4 and 5), offering a nuanced understanding of how internationalisation unfolds in diverse institutional contexts.

The findings of this research are structured around four overarching themes related to the research questions: role of middle managers in sensemaking processes, their approaches to stakeholder engagement, the influence of context, and changes resulting from sensemaking. In looking at the role of middle managers as mediators (RQ1), the ways in which they try to balance the complex EUI demands becomes apparent. Middle managers are positioned at the intersection of diverse interests and perspectives and face competing pressures from institutional leadership as well as all types of internal stakeholders. Their capacity to adapt, communicate and strategically navigate these demands is crucial to the success of internationalisation efforts.

The approaches middle managers use to recognise and adapt to stakeholder needs (RQ2) while simultaneously building trust and crafting narratives that sustain internationalisation efforts pertains to the second overarching theme. Given their intermediary position, middle managers must constantly assess the expectation and concern of various stakeholder groups - including administrative staff, academic staff, and institutional leadership - and devise strategies to ensure alignment between these diverse actors. One key approach they employ is the use of narratives that frame the EUI in ways that resonate with different audiences. By shaping how internationalisation is perceived, middle managers can facilitate engagement

and encourage commitment from those who might otherwise be resistant to change. Another crucial element in this adaptive process is the development of trust-based relationships. Effective internationalisation does not merely depend on policies or structural changes; it also hinges on the ability of middle managers to foster a shared sense of purpose across different levels of the institution. The findings highlight how trust is built through active listening and empathy.

The third theme focuses on the changes that have occurred as a direct result of EUI implementation (RQ4) and those already perceived as transformative within participating institutions. These changes manifest themselves across multiple dimensions, from heightened awareness of the importance of communication in international collaborations to shifts in internal structures and hierarchies. A significant transformation observed across institutions is the increasing recognition of internationalisation as a core element of institutional identity, rather than as a peripheral initiative. Additionally, structural shifts have emerged, including the redefinition of administrative roles. These structural changes are accompanied by mindset and behavioural shifts among academic and administrative staff, with an increased openness to international collaboration.

The fourth theme delves into the role of context in shaping how middle managers make sense of their work (RQ3). Given that context is a central concept in this study - closely linked to sensemaking and critical sensemaking theory - it has been further explored in three selected universities within the case study alliance. These cases serve as examples of the different organisational and power structures that influence sensemaking in HE. While the EUI provides common objectives and guidelines, the ways in which these are enacted at the institutional level varies significantly across HEIs, due to differences in governance models, leadership dynamics or organisational types. This section examines how these three universities have responded to the challenges and opportunities presented by the EUI, highlighting the diverse organisational paradigms shaping internationalisation processes. Some institutions follow a highly centralised, top-down approach, where leadership plays a dominant role in defining internationalisation strategies, while others are characterised by a more decentralised, bottom-up model that encourages involvement and collaboration among faculties and departments. A latter example shows how a loose organisational structure enables interpersonal relations and trust building when implementing

internationalisation. The findings emphasise the fact that sensemaking in internationalisation is not uniform, but rather it is shaped by a complex interplay of subjective interpretations, organisational structures, and institutional context; it is, therefore, deeply embedded in the unique realities of each institution.

The following sections delve deeper into each of these findings, offering insights into the lived experience of middle managers as they mediate competing demands, adapt to stakeholder needs, respond to the ongoing changes that emerge as a result of EUI participation and interpret internationalisation within their institutional contexts.

To guide the reader through the findings and enhance understanding, Table 5 provides an overview that serves as a reference for the interpretation of the themes derived from interview coding and analysis. Partially drawing on this table, I aim to demonstrate how these themes connect to the broader literature on sensemaking and critical sensemaking. To illustrate these themes, selected quotes from interview transcripts are included throughout the chapter. These quotes were chosen based on their capacity to represent typical experiences shared across multiple interviews, to capture particularly rich or illustrative instances of sensemaking, or to highlighting contrasting perspectives. The aim was not only to support analytical claims with direct evidence but also to allow the voices of participants to convey the complexities and nuances of their lived experiences. The quotes reflect recurring patterns that emerged across the dataset and are grounded in the thematic analysis described earlier.

In summary, this chapter sets the stage for a detailed exploration of the findings, providing a comprehensive foundation for the discussion that follows. By framing the findings through these four themes and contextualising them within a broader theoretical lens, the chapter aims to illuminate the nuanced processes through which middle managers make sense of, and contribute to, internationalisation efforts in HE.

4.1. Two Main Stakeholder Groups in the European Alliances

Before delving into a description of the findings, it is important to highlight another key aspect that emerged from the interviews: the differentiation between the two main stakeholder groups as outlined in

Chapter 3 (3.8.5. Terminology) takes on particular significance. The findings reveal that middle managers employed distinct strategies, tailored messages and varied approaches when engaging with these two groups. Additionally, the dynamics of power relations influenced these interactions, leading to subtle differences in approach depending on the stakeholder group involved.

4.1.1. Administrative Staff - the Backbone of the EUI

Administrative staff in HEIs play a crucial role in supporting the overall functioning and success of the institution. Nevertheless, administrative staff in alliances are not yet uniformly integrated into the initiative across all institutions. Efforts are being made to involve them in ways that complement their existing responsibilities, recognising their pivotal role in fostering collaboration within the EUI. However, they also deal with challenges in implementing activities, especially with regard to language barriers, workload and recognition of competences. Nonetheless, there is noticeable enthusiasm among administrative staff, particularly those with limited exposure to international initiatives, highlighting the potential impact the EUI could have on this stakeholder group over time, as one interviewee noted:

“...there was, in some places, almost more excitement because those [admin] staff don't always have access to international initiatives, whereas academic staff usually can, if they want to. Whereas it's not so easy for the administrative staff, so they most of them, it was kind of self selection I guess, but most of them were really excited about it and they have, as I said, a lot of them have self selected into groups, so we have a lot of groups of professional administrative staff in lots of different areas.”

[13:49 ¶ 67 Raven College 2_271023.docx].

Recognising the essential role of administrative staff in the success of transformative processes within institutions, efforts are underway in many HEIs to support and empower administrative staff, including involving them in leadership roles within the project. This might be considered as a shared meaning achievement in recognition of their crucial roles in some administrative stakeholder groups.

4.1.2. Academic Staff - Distinguishing Teaching from Research Collaboration

Academics, in general, initially showed some reluctance to engage in research activities within this alliance, often prioritising their research networks over new collaborative structures. This hesitation stemmed from various factors, including concerns about the added administrative burden, scepticism

about the long-term benefits of the alliance and a preference for established, discipline-specific collaboration over broader institutional partnerships. However, when opportunities for teaching and collaborative learning were introduced, academic staff demonstrated a significantly higher level of engagement. These forms of collaboration were perceived as more immediately beneficial, providing avenues for pedagogical innovation, interdisciplinary exchange and enhanced student learning experiences.

“I think academics are really busy people, so them trying to find time to invest in another kind of institutional initiative is clearly a barrier and when they've got busy and full workloads already and lots of different priorities. Trying to persuade them to spend time doing something else was often difficult.” [12:14 ¶ 26 in Transcription_Raven College 1_091023_revised.docx]

As expressed by an interviewee from Raven College, engaging academics was sometimes challenging due to their already demanding schedules. In several cases, in fact, interviewees expressed the need for stronger intervention from high-level leadership to encourage academics to participate in alliance activities. They highlighted that, without clear institutional endorsement, many faculty members remained hesitant, whether due to competing priorities, uncertainty about the benefits of participation or a preference for existing research and teaching networks. More proactive engagement from leadership - through strategic communication, incentives and institutional support - was seen as essential in fostering academic buy-in and integrating alliance initiatives more effectively within university structures.

4.2. Finding 1. Middle Managers in EUI Implementation: Key Players, Mediators and Change Agents

Sensemaking in organisations involves the continuous negotiation of meaning among members, particularly when faced with ambiguous or novel situations like the EUI. Middle managers in HEIs play a crucial role in this process by interpreting organisational changes and disseminating these interpretations among the institutions. They recognise the importance of each stakeholder's role in the change process, and this dual role enables them to act as interpreters and translators of change, ensuring that organisational shifts are understood and acted upon at all levels.

Middle managers were found to play a central role in facilitating internal alignment and fostering stakeholder engagement during the EUI implementation, acting as mediators between institutional

leadership and diverse stakeholders. Their role as mediators is characterised by different approaches (see Finding 2), such as their ability to craft narratives that translate complex, abstract alliance goals into tangible, actionable strategies.

This process of sensemaking and sensegiving, as articulated by Alvesson and Jonsson (2022), involves interpreting top-down directives and aligning them with bottom-up needs, thereby fostering a shared understanding across organisational boundaries.

Middle managers also bridge different perspectives, not only from administrative and academic staff but also varying within the same group, and across different offices, departments and faculties. This enables them to build trust and promote collaboration, especially in contexts marked by uncertainty caused by a rapidly changing environment. By framing the initiative's goals in ways that resonate with stakeholders' specific priorities and constraints, they facilitate alignment and engagement, critical factors in sustaining momentum during the implementation process. Their adaptability allows them to navigate institutional complexity, balancing leadership's strategic vision with the operational realities faced by staff.

Middle managers utilise their mediation skills to adopt concrete approaches with which to involve and engage internal stakeholders. The data indicates that, in many HEIs within this alliance, middle managers employ a range of often intuitive approaches, for example a middle manager interviewed at Viking Elk University described how they sought a tailored approach to engage collaborators based in peripheral units:

“So, that's really the way we try to really work with these people who are a little bit more on the outskirts, but are super important for the implementation is to invite them to our sort of coordination and steering group for [this alliance], ... and to get the whole context and you can do that one by one, or you can do that like inviting them to the important meeting so they feel important”.

[7:56 ¶ 90 in Viking Elk University 2_161023.docx]

Furthermore, middle managers' proximity to both leadership and day-to-day practices positions them uniquely as change agents, translating organisational priorities into meaningful actions while responding to evolving contextual challenges. This cognitive and relational function underscores their

centrality in sensemaking processes as articulated by Weick (1995) and further developed through critical sensemaking theory (Mills et al., 2010). Both theories provide a valuable framework for understanding how these managers interpret and influence organisational change within the complex landscape of HE. As illustrated by the quote from a Navigator Dolphin representative, middle managers take on the roles of ‘advocates’, ‘promoters’, ‘communicators’, and ‘facilitators’:

“You know, I do a lot of advocacy, you know. I'm always promoting, I'm always communicating, I'm always facilitating relations, identifying people ... and then your role is more being close to the stakeholders and then you do all the roles”.

[9:39 ¶ 80 in Navigator Dolphin University 1 - Institutional Coordinator.docx]

According to Gioia and Thomas (1996), top management team members are crucial in interpreting change issues and linking the organisation's internal context with team members' interpretations.

However, in the specific context of HEIs, middle managers are often more directly involved in the daily operations and are therefore better positioned to navigate the complex dynamics that emerge during change.

Interviews revealed how most middle managers consistently advocated for the initiative, built relationships and fostered collaboration among academic and administrative staff, acting as translators of diverse stakeholder needs and bridging gaps across different organisational units. Those who were able to build new meanings through their commitment, succeeded in engaging faculty and staff, ensured mutual understanding and adapted to diverse organisational contexts, enabling the successful navigation of the complex dynamics that characterise EUI implementation. Their role as mediators, indeed, extended beyond administrative execution among middle managers strongly believing in the initiative, situating them as indispensable facilitators of internationalisation and institutional change. Whereas those middle managers who were less committed to the initiative often expressed a desire to free themselves from the responsibility of such a large-scale European project and to be a mere executor of decisions taken by others. In following quote from a representative of Viking Elk University, they clearly explain how they attempted to shift responsibility towards leadership, positioning themselves merely as an executor.

“...now what I do is like I first make sure I have my mandate to speak right, and I have my mandate from the Vice Chancellor. So, I'll be like ‘right, don't ask me why, don't ask me how, [this university] has signed off to be a part of this.” [7:22 ¶ 45 in Transcription_Viking Elk University 2 _161023_revised.docx]

Others felt discouraged due to a lack of institutional support, stemming from rigid organisational structures that hindered their ability to adopt flexible approaches to stakeholder needs. This lack of commitment was further exacerbated by leadership changes and a perceived lack of conviction from successive leaders. Consequently, the decision was made to examine power dynamics more deeply and explore organisational types in three case universities to assess how these factors influence commitment and sensemaking activities.

Coding 1	n.	Coding 2		Themes	Findings	RQ
Activities to involve		/				
Believer		/				
Bottom-up approach		/				
Brexit		/				
Budget	1	Budget				
Covid		/				
Difficulties main	2	Difficulties main	A	DIFFICULTIES	MIDDLE MANAGERS' (CRUCIAL) ROLE (based on how they understand and enact difficulties, how they adapt communication and in this way how they engage different internal stakeholders)	RQ1 RQ2 RQ4
Perception of the alliance	3	Perception of the alliance				
Solution to difficulties	4	Solution to difficulties				
Workload	5	Workload				
Clarity on purpose	6	Dissemination	B	DISSEMINATION		
Dissemination						
Engagement main	7	Engagement main				
Making understand	8	Making understand				
Motivation	9	Motivation	C	ENGAGEMENT		
Purpose of the EUI	10	Purpose of the EUI				
Tailored communication	11	Tailored communication				
Trust	12	Trust				
Alliance legal entity		/				
Executive board		/				
Felt importance of EUI		/				
Identity main	13	Identity main	D	IDENTITY	POWER DYNAMICS AND TRANSFORMATION OF THE EUI INFLUENCE INSTITUTIONAL IDENTITY	RQ3
Negative perception	14	Negative perception				
Positive aspect of alliance	15	Positive aspect of alliance				
Transformation	16	Transformation				
Incentives to engage		/				
Inclusive attitude to collaboration		/				
Internationalisation	17	Internationalisation	E	INTERNATIONALISATION	MINDSET, APPROACH	RQ2 and RQ4
Motivation to join the alliance		/				
Hierarchy	18	Hierarchy				
Leadership	19	Leadership				
Power relations main	20	Power relations main	F	POWER	INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT (leadership role, organisation type, organisation structure) MODIFIES MMs' ENACTMENT	RQ3
Rector's role	21	Rector's role				
Top-down initiative	22	Top-down initiative				
Admin staff role	23	Admin staff role	G	ADMIN STAFF ROLE		
Internal organisation		/				
Role in home university		/				
Role in the alliance		/				
Second phase partner		/				
Sensemaking among partners	24	Sensemaking among partner				
Sensemaking main	25	Sensemaking main	H	SENSEMAKING	NARRATIVE, TRUST, ENACTMENT	RQ2 RQ4
Storytelling	26	Storytelling				
Team-work	27	Team-work				
Structure of the alliance project		/				

Table 5. From Coding to Findings

4.3. Finding 2. Approaches to Adapting to Stakeholder Needs

The “SENSEMAKING” label in Table 5 comprehends concepts from the theories that were extracted from cues indicating, sometimes with longer wording, how interviewees were building meaning around the initiative and, specifically, meaning of the initiative in their institution. In many cases, storytelling and drafting new narratives have proved to be a successful strategy in building trust among groups and towards those managers.

Interviewees described the need to tailor their communication and actions towards two main stakeholder groups: administrative staff and academic staff. This required an extensive knowledge of their institution’s dynamics as well as the intuition of deciding when an intervention of higher leadership was necessary, as illustrated by a middle manager of Wise Owl University:

“we are in the process of trying to understand how to communicate this different information to different figures with different needs.” [3:23 ¶ 41 Wise Owl University 2 _091023.docx].

Sensemaking in organisations involves the continuous negotiation of meaning among members, particularly when faced with novel or challenging situations like the EUI. Middle managers in HEIs play a critical role in this process by interpreting organisational changes and disseminating these interpretations to both upper management and their own teams. They recognise the importance of each stakeholder’s role in the change process. I observed that middle managers fulfil this dual role, enabling them to act as interpreters and translators of change, ensuring that organisational shifts are understood and acted upon at all levels.

Conversely, there were cases in which middle managers admitted to struggling with the creation of a new narrative; on the one hand because their own understanding of the scope of the initiative was not clear to them, and on the other hand because the institutional context and culture did not always allow for creative interpretation of what was going on. A representative of Viking Elk University expressed their confusion in having to explain the initiative to others while not fully understanding it themselves.

“I think that we were a bit struggling with our narrative trying to explain how is this better. How is giving more interest or more value to our students, I think that we're still struggling a bit actually.”

[6:9 ¶ 23 in Transcription_Viking Elk University 1_180923_revised.docx]

The analysed data reveal various approaches employed by interviewed middle managers to make sense of the initiative; these include creating tailored narratives, employing credible storytelling to engage different stakeholder groups and building valuable relationships that strengthen trust across the campus.

Some middle managers align with the original sensemaking concept, particularly in terms of enactment for new meaning building, wherein actions are consistent with the interpretation of (past) experiences as suggested by Weick's theory (1995). Conversely, there are clear connections to the critical sensemaking concept which highlights the importance of collective identity construction in sensemaking processes (Mills et al., 2010).

This finding represents the complex process of interpreting stakeholder concerns, translating complex institutional and project-driven directives into comprehensible actions and refocusing the organisation's shifted identity to align with the changed context of the institution. Middle managers employ various approaches to engage internal stakeholders, including:

- Fostering open and tailored communication;
- Telling meaningful stories;
- Establishing supportive networks;
- Building trust through personal relationship building.

In the context of the EUI, middle managers use tailored narratives that resonate with diverse stakeholder needs, acting as intermediaries who not only deliver top-down instructions but ensure messages are contextualised and meaningful for different internal audiences. This process involves creating different nuances of the same narrative that bridges gaps between various groups.

The ability to communicate effectively, often through tailored and strategic messaging, is crucial. Middle managers help stakeholders understand the broader vision by aligning the institution's goals with stakeholders' expectations, ensuring everyone moves toward the same objectives. By reinterpreting changing institutional identity in this evolving landscape, these managers help guide their organisations through complex transitions, enabling buy-in and support from various groups.

Middle managers in HEIs engaged in the EUI exhibit a critical role in bridging institutional objectives within the realities of diverse stakeholder expectations. They navigate complex demands, foster

engagement, craft meaningful narratives and create trust to ensure an effective implementation of the alliance's goals. This finding highlights the critical approaches employed in achieving alignment and support within their organisations, with two central strategies standing out: narrative crafting and trust-building.

The theme "DIFFICULTIES" (Table 4) used in the coding phase highlights not only the types of challenges interviewees encountered during the EUI implementation but also reveals their approaches to managing these obstacles. These managers navigated issues by identifying solutions and examining the roots of resistance, which often originated from administrative staff or, in slightly different ways, from academics. Their ability to understand and interpret the institution's social and political context supported their sensegiving efforts, allowing them to adapt their communication ("DISSEMINATION" – Table 4) to engage different stakeholders. A middle manager of Navigator Dolphin University expressed their commitment to personally supporting collaborators who required additional motivation to carry out their tasks.

"I ensure that also colleagues that are probably not so motivated to do their work anyway."

[Transcription_ Navigator Dolphin University 2 _071123_revised.docx]

Through these tailored interactions, middle managers sought to convey the importance of collective contributions to the alliance, often successfully fostering both engagement ("ENGAGEMENT" – Table 4) and, in some cases, enthusiasm due to their own belief in the goodness of the initiative. As illustrated by the quote from a Gallic Rooster Academy representative, the effort required to engage with the initiative was often greater when involving colleague who were typically not part of international projects and who felt 'outside the box' of such initiative.

"... we are at the front, because we are managing the projects, but for example what I see is that I'm facing some problems with the... I don't know... accounting and financial problems and well HR, they are starting to do something, but all these people they are not, they see our mission orders coming, our travels and things like this but they do not participate, they feel outside the box of [Name of Alliance] just for example" [4:35 ¶ 70 in Transcription_Gallic Rooster Academy1

_111023_revised.docx]

This challenge is echoed by a middle manager from Navigator Dolphin University, who emphasised the importance of broad institutional involvement beyond senior leadership:

“The main thing is, taking part in an alliance is a decision very top down, and then to be effective, you need involvement at all levels of the university. So, you have to have initiatives of course top down but also you have to have engagements at all levels, and some initiatives that are bottom up. I think taking this outside the rectorate, outside the managing team, I think that's one of the biggest, not only at *our university*, but I think it's in all universities.” [9:7 ¶ 16 in Transcription_Navigator Dolphin University 1_91123_revised.docx]

Middle managers’ capacity to make sense of the complexities surrounding internationalisation is not a static process but dynamic, as they constantly adapt to the unique cultural and organisational contexts within which they operate. This adaptability makes their role essential in ensuring that the overarching internationalisation objectives outlined by the EUI initiative resonate at all institutional levels. They must comprehend the perspectives and priorities of diverse groups, ensuring that each voice is acknowledged and understood. This balancing act involves reconciling top-down directives with bottom-up insights, enabling a coherent approach to the EUI that resonates throughout the institution.

4.3.1. Crafting Narratives

Crafting narratives is an approach involving a deliberate effort to shape, adapt and convey institutional messages in ways that resonate with diverse stakeholders. It is not merely about communication, but about tailoring messages to the specific cultural and operational contexts of different internal stakeholder groups. This involves interpreting nuanced needs, translating these into actionable strategies and refocusing the institutional identity to align with shared goals and values. By doing so, narrative becomes a tool for enhancing mutual understanding, clarifying directives, and ensuring that institutional aspirations are not lost. Such effort requires an acute awareness of cultural sensitivity and organisational dynamics, enabling stakeholders to find confidence and reallocate themselves in the new working mode created by the international environment of the alliance. One middle manager from Viking Elk University described this approach as involving informal, proactive engagement with key individuals across the institution:

“we did a lot of sort of more informal footwork at the university trying to talk to important stakeholders or trying to create a buzz or trying to talk to people who were interested or creating sort of ambassadors at different parts of university because that's the way it works” [:31 ¶ 48 in Transcription_Viking Elk University 1_180923_revised.docx]

This hands-on, network-building approach aligns with the sensemaking literature, strategic sensemaking might be described as a process achieved through middle managers’ ability to build and disseminate messages, drawing upon a nuanced understanding of the organisation’s underlying knowledge (Samra-Fredericks, 2003). The collected data confirms the ways in which middle managers leverage their knowledge, stakeholder needs, contextual nuances and organisational culture to navigate change processes. They recognise the significance of communication as both a means and a source of power in engaging stakeholders. However, as Alvesson and Jonsson (2022) caution, major changes can lead to surface-level acceptance and external legitimisation while hiding deeper issues like confusion, lack of collective action, wasting of time and resources and diminished commitment (Alvesson & Jonsson, 2022).

Middle managers serve as key advocates for change, ensuring that the narratives shaped by senior leadership are effectively communicated and internalised across the institution. This is particularly significant in HEIs, where entrenched power dynamics and institutional traditions often create resistance to change. Their ability to recognise and interpret organisational culture - shaped by national contexts - profoundly influences both their sensemaking processes and the realisation of the initiative’s objectives.

The narrative approach adopted by middle managers is audience-specific and heavily influenced by the institution’s unique environment, including decision-making processes, organisational structures, institutional culture, leadership style and historical context. This underscores the importance of constructing cohesive and compelling narrative to align with organisational goals. This aligns with key sensemaking elements such as advocacy, communication and relationship-building, which are integral to this process. As Devos et al. (2007) note, building trusting relationships is foundational to change initiatives and critical for ensuring smoother acceptance within organisations (Devos et al., 2007).

Advocacy entails promoting specific interpretations or strategies, while communication ensures these interpretations are clearly articulated and understood across organisational levels. The middle

managers' ability to deliver tailored messages is crucial in fostering understanding and engagement. For example, one interviewee highlighted the role of micro-stories in daily interaction:

"I just had to tell sort of different stories to adapt the situation to what is going to be sort of what does this group need to know about this initiative to understand the contribution or understand their own role in this." [7:16 ¶ 29 in Transcription_ Viking Elk University 2 _161023_revised.docx].

They serve as powerful sensemaking tools, connecting abstract goals with lived experiences and fostering alignment between academic and administrative staff. Storytelling of this kind reinforces trust and makes organisational aspirations actionable. Tailored communication also plays a critical role in this process. As one participant observed:

"...there are like a few tools that you can use to make people more engaged, but depending on the stakeholders and the group of people you want to address, it's not always easy" [Transcription_Wolf University_11122023_revised.docx]

This highlights the importance of communication strategies that convey the right messages in accessible and engaging ways. Tailored communication, often manifested as storytelling activities, addresses the specific needs and preferences of the audience, facilitating understanding and reinforcing interpersonal relationships within the team and trust. Moreover, such communication underscores the human element of sensemaking, where interpersonal interactions and relationships shape understanding and commitment to change initiatives.

Showing empathy and understanding, as well as demonstrating that stakeholders' view have been listened to and taken into consideration, are essential components for overcoming resistance to change (Ancona, 2012) and for effective sensemaking. These elements help middle managers navigate complex power dynamics and ideological influences, fostering trust and collaboration. As another participant reflected:

"when they [the leadership] want to do something, they use the sort of international offices to be ambassadors or whatever. So, we were always trying to sort of convince different parts of the university that this is a good way of going forward, so of course they had the responsibility, but we

were the ones who had to sort of convey the message to the departments, to research and others, students of course.” [6:17 ¶ 31 in Transcription_Viking Elk University1_180923_revised.docx]

Ultimately, middle managers act as translators, bridging the gap between management jargon and the language that is comprehensible and actionable for those who must implement decisions. By regularly communicating clear goals and engaging in continuous dialogue, they aim to ensure clarity and coherence within the organisation. This process involves explaining the organisational objectives while addressing employees' needs and concerns, fostering a sense of inclusion and contribution to the broader picture of the whole initiative. As Gioia and Thomas (1996) emphasise, such practices are vital for helping stakeholders interpret shifts in institutional identity and navigate change (Gioia & Thomas, 1996). Through interpretive and dialogic processes, middle managers working in this alliance facilitate collective sensemaking, which is essential for overcoming organisational complexities and achieving consensus among diverse groups within the institution. However, these accounts reflect their perspective, and the study does not include the views of other institutional actors, which may reveal differing perceptions of how effectively this communication is received or interpreted.

4.3.2. Building Trust

In parallel with this narrative, building trust emerges as a cornerstone of middle managers' sensemaking efforts. Rooted in interpersonal dynamics, trust underpins relationship-building and enables effective sensemaking processes. As Mast and Stehle (2015) argue, trust is one of the most relevant goals in interpersonal communication (Mast & Stehle, 2015). Through dialogical conversations and authentic relationship-building efforts, managers can cultivate credibility, fostering deeper involvement and engagement in institutional activities. In this context, trust is both a process and an outcome - requiring intentional actions and mutual understanding. One middle manager from Raven College emphasised how confidence in leadership can facilitate ethical transformation within organisations, while its absence undermines employee involvement and collaboration:

“I guess there was a sense of some people who've maybe been at the institution for a long time that are 'this is just the latest in a long series of top-down initiatives that the university leadership make a big splash about and then change their minds in three years and something else kind of comes along

and happens'. So I think that trust was really important." [12:26 ¶ 60 in Transcription_Raven College 1_091023_revised.docx].

Understanding the role of trust in change initiatives requires attention to the nature of relationships among different groups, the decision-making processes within the institution, and the degree to which these processes are characterised by shared opinions and active employee involvement. Trust in management becomes particularly crucial when justifying change, as it often relies on social narratives and interpersonal factors to secure employee buy-in.

Building trust involves fostering genuine connections that allow institutions to create environments where understanding, collaboration and shared meaning thrive. As one representative of Navigator Dolphin University reflected, in the context of European alliances, trust often emerged not through formal mechanism, but through personal relationships and human interactions:

"it's always trust, you know, and trust is always a personal thing. It's not an institutional thing. You don't build trust between institutions, you build trust between people, then the institutional trust, but the trust is in the personal relation". [9:41 ¶ 84 Navigator Dolphin University 1_91123.docx].

This insight underscores how trust is rooted in interpersonal dynamics, serving as a foundational element in the sensemaking process. The concept of sensemaking is intrinsically linked to trust, relationships and decision-making processes, as it requires stakeholders to actively engage in navigating and interpreting the diverse dynamics within organisations. Effective organisational change is frequently associated with the cultivation of positive internal relationships, which are nurtured through effective communication between managers and employees.

Empathy again plays a crucial role here, as it enables middle managers to engage on a human level and to anticipate how changes will impact individuals. By leveraging empathy and transparent communication, middle managers foster trust, thereby creating a supportive environment in which stakeholders feel heard, valued and understood. These efforts in turn reduce resistance to change, enhance stakeholder participation and contribute to the overall success of the initiative.

Furthermore, the importance of trust in leadership dynamics is underscored in several corresponding theoretical frameworks. For instance, Schyns (2008) highlights the role of leader-member exchange theory,

where trust is a central mediating factor in leadership relationships. She suggests, perceived resistance in these relationships are ‘fully mediated by three change process characteristics’, of which trust in management is a critical component (Van Dam et al., 2008, p.313). When trust is established, it not only facilitates smoother communication but also mitigates scepticism (Langrafe et al., 2020), but as seen from the interviews, it enables middle managers to act as effective mediators between institutional goals and stakeholders’ concerns.

The development of mutual trust also aligns with principles of stakeholder theory. Langrafe et al. (2020) emphasise that the creation of value for organisations is contingent on fostering trust-based relationships between stakeholders and the organisation. This finding confirms that trust is not merely an abstract concept, but a strategic asset that enables middle managers to navigate the complexities of sensemaking in internationalisation processes. Trust provides the psychological safety necessary for open dialogue, the resolutions of conflicts and the co-creation of solutions.

Ultimately, cultivating confidence is a deliberate and multifaceted effort, requiring middle managers to navigate interpersonal dynamics with care and attentiveness. They must dismantle potential barriers such as miscommunication, scepticism or fear due to misunderstandings of the project goals through transparency, active listening and empathetic engagement. By doing so, they establish a foundation of mutual respect and confidence and enable shared endeavours to flourish, ensuring that the implementation of the transformative EUI process is collaborative and inclusive, rather than divisive or unilateral, and perceived as an exclusive top-down decision.

4.4. Finding 3. Changes in Higher Education Institutions Embarking in the EUI

In the previous sections, I explored various dimensions of how middle managers within HEIs navigate and implement change initiatives under the EUI through sensemaking and meaning building.

In this section I’m addressing some findings connected to changes that are emerging and already perceived as such due to the EUI implementation. Changes can be grouped into five categories, derived from interpretation of the data (Table 5) as well as from one explicit question on observed changes during the interviews:

- a) Heightened awareness of the importance of communication
- b) Mindset and behavioural shifts
- c) Structural changes
- d) Changed awareness towards internationalisation
- e) Changes in internal relations and hierarchies

4.4.1. Heightened Awareness of the Importance of Communication

At the personal level, the initiative fosters a heightened awareness among middle managers and staff regarding the crucial role of clear, consistent communication in engaging diverse stakeholders effectively. This awareness has become even more pronounced in the second funding phase of this alliance, as participants reflect on the communication challenges encountered during the first phase. One representative of Gallic Roster Academy voiced this frustration, questioning the visibility and internal impact of the alliance:

“after three years there are a lot of improvements, but still, ‘how come that after three years nobody knows about [the alliance] inside the university?’. So, I was like, ‘everything is not well handled’”

[5:48 ¶ 79 in Transcription_Gallic Rooster Academy2_071123_revised.docx]

Such reflections highlight that effective communication goes beyond simply disseminating information. It requires crafting messages that resonate across different stakeholder groups, addressing their specific concerns, expectations and institutional priorities.

The findings indicate that successful internationalisation efforts require more than just a compelling strategic vision; middle managers recognised the need for transparent, accessible and relatable messaging that not only informs but also inspires.

4.4.2. Mindset and Behavioural Shifts

Mindset and behavioural shifts underscore this evolution. Staff across campus are showing a greater willingness to adopt flexible, informal working styles within traditionally rigid structures. This shift toward adaptability, marked by less hierarchical and more collaborative interactions, in some cases signals a breakdown of old norms. The alliance’s influence is noted in subtle but impactful cultural changes, for

example punctuality, increased practicality and the reduction of endless lasting, time-consuming meetings. Staff members are adopting practices from their peers across the alliance, leading to more cohesive and professional culture. As one middle managers from Viking Elk University observed,

“the change focus is that [this alliance] is run at the university level, and it has maybe done something with our mindset that we need maybe to think a bit more like a university, not like a different faculties.” [6:47 ¶ 77 Viking Elk University 1 _180923.docx]

This analysis also shows that the initiative has sparked a shift in institutional focus and mindset, encouraging a unified perspective that transcends individual units or departments. Moving away from traditional, isolated identities, staff and administrators are increasingly oriented toward a collective identity within the EEA. Another representative from the same institution reflected on this shift, stating:

“I think that's the biggest learning that we have sort of ...taken down our own borders within the university administration” [7:44 ¶ 69 in Transcription_Viking Elk University 2_161023_revised.docx]

This broadened perspective is reflected in daily activities, where institutional stakeholders now consider a more expansive, cross-institutional framework that not only confirms the new working attitude among partner universities in the consortium, but also how much this supports middle managers’ motivation. As one interviewee from Gallic Rooster Academy shared,

“...this [partner support] is definitely something that helped me, and motivated me to continue, although it was really, really hard. I arrived at a group of project managers, that was literally a group of friends. So, I felt really welcome and if this could happen in other alliances, I think this would be great.” [5:50 ¶ 91 in Transcription_ Gallic Rooster Academy2 _071123_revised.docx]

The data, therefore, reveals a growing sense of European identity among university members, who are beginning to review their roles within national or institutional confines.

4.4.3. Structural Changes

Structural changes within partner institutions reflect the broader impact of the initiative on organisational boundaries, responsibilities and institutional priorities. In many universities within this alliance, the EUI has acted as a catalyst for the creation of dedicated units specifically designed to oversee and coordinate alliance-related activities. These units are often staffed by professionals from diverse

backgrounds, bringing together expertise in internationalisation, project management, policy development and much more. Their establishment represents a shift in how internationalisation is managed, decentralising responsibilities and integrating them more holistically across different university structures.

One representative from Wolf University described this evolution, noting:

“Last but not least is a team that is dedicated to our European University Alliance. We are member of quite a few alliances, all of which are important, but this alliance is one of the currently 50 European university alliances, it is of strategic importance to us ...[omissis] other teams of this alliance are in other units at our university and that gets us straight into a conversation about where the alliance is present on what the status of the alliance is within the university organism, so to speak” [15:1 ¶ 12 in Transcription_interview_Wolf University_11122023_revised.docx]

This decentralisation of internationalisation responsibilities signals a clear institutional commitment to embedding the alliance as a transversal priority. The integration of these dedicated units into the broader institutional framework fosters collaboration across faculties and conveys that the alliance is not just another project, but a transformative process increasingly seen as integral to the university’s mission, fostering shared global identity. However, this conclusion is drawn from a specific case study and reflects a particular moment in time; while such structures signal institutional commitment, their long-term permanence and impact remain contingent on sustained support and evolving priorities.

4.4.4. Changed Awareness Towards Internationalisation

Additional findings underscore the initiative’s impact on enhancing awareness of internationalisation across the institution. The Alliance’s influence has fostered a stronger sense of unity among diverse offices and departments, reinforcing the need to view the university as a cohesive community rather than as separate entities.

Notably, universities in non-English-speaking countries are increasingly publishing official documentation in both English and their national languages, reflecting a practical shift toward an international ‘collaborative mindset’ (Hudzik, 2011, p.36). This change is not only symbolic but also functional, as it enables broader engagement and inclusivity across diverse institutional actors. As one representative from Hare University explained:

“So you know we have a meeting every month which is very informal...and that builds an international collaborative mindset because you know many people, especially those working as HR directors, they don't have an international mindset, but now they do” [1:111 ¶ 124 in Hare University 1-2_240524.docx]

Such practices illustrate how regular, informal interactions, especially across units that have traditionally been less exposed to international work, can gradually foster a culture that embraces cross-border collaboration and shared understanding. This broadened, transnational perspective aligns with the alliance's mission, as universities collectively work to address the shared challenges and opportunities of the European educational landscape.

4.4.5. Changes in Internal Relations and Hierarchies

These structural and relational shifts are also accompanied by changes in internal relationships and hierarchies, as maintained by an interviewee at Wise Owl University:

“we have a very hierarchical structure that in any case characterises universities in this country, in our case it begins to be less strict, so that some formalisms, even the fact of being able now to call some managers, some professors by their first names...this is something that helps a lot, actually.”

[3:59 ¶ 91 in Wise Owl 2-2_IT_050624.docx – translated from original language]

In institutions with traditionally formal and rigid structures, the alliance has catalysed a shift towards more informal, adaptable working methods. Middle managers have played a central role in this transformation, acting as key sensemakers who help guide change also at the inter-personal level of their institution in facilitating communication among stakeholders involved in the initiative. Creating a sense of belonging that goes beyond hierarchies, this has been crucial for fostering buy-in and commitment among stakeholders.

In conclusion, the changes observed across multiple levels within HEIs highlight the significant impact of the EUI and the crucial role of sensemaking in driving these changes. From enhanced communication and collaboration practices to structural reconfigurations and a shift towards a collective European identity, these changes demonstrate a deep cultural evolution within universities. As institutions continue to navigate the complexities of internationalisation, the ongoing commitment to fostering an inclusive, unified

approach across faculties and departments will be essential for sustaining these transformations and achieving the broader goals of the alliance.

4.5. Finding 4. The Influence of Context in Shaping Sensemaking

The findings underscored the crucial role of context in shaping how middle managers interpret and act on the goals of the EUI. Institutional factors - such as leadership stability, organisational type and power dynamic - emerge as critical elements influencing their sensemaking processes. These factors, labelled “POWER” (Table 4) during the coding and analysis phase, clearly define and modify middle managers’ attitude and sensemaking, which also undergoes adaptation according to changes in top-level hierarchy.

“When conversation performance is put in the context of setting the scene it emphasises the relational aspect of middle manager sensemaking” (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011, p.958). The concept of sensemaking as “setting the scene” (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011, p.958) is particularly useful for understanding these strategies. This concept involves more than just setting up and building conversations for the different stakeholder groups in literal or physical spaces; it includes creating an environment conducive to meaningful dialogue, where language choices are thoughtfully adapted to suit the situation and the individuals involved. The effectiveness of middle managers in fostering understanding and aligning stakeholder interpretations is largely determined by their ability to navigate these social settings and use language appropriately (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011).

This interplay between language use and the social environment underscores the importance of contextualising communication strategies to ensure messages are both clear and resonant with the audience's experiences and expectations. Thus, successful sensemaking is deeply embedded in the deep understanding of social settings and the specific language used within these contexts.

It is important to highlight that this finding emerged as being particularly significant following a deeper examination of three case universities. These institutions reported comparatively greater success in implementing the EUI, as interpreted through the interview data collected in the first round. This assessment is based on self-reported accounts by middle managers in engaging internal stakeholders, in which I recognised key sensemaking outcomes aligned with Weick’s framework. The decision to further explore this finding was motivated by the recognition that positive contextual factors create more

conducive environments for middle managers to make sense of change initiatives. Specifically, these contexts were characterised either by a dynamic interplay of factors: stable and engaged leadership, organisational structures that provided flexibility and adaptability and power dynamics that enabled rather than hindered the process of sensemaking and EUI implementation.

The idea that conducive contexts facilitate more effective sensemaking led to a closer alignment of the findings with critical sensemaking theories that emphasise how sensemaking occurs within a broader context of organisational power and social experience (Mills et al., 2010). Contextual factors shape middle managers' ability to interpret, translate and enact strategic initiatives. In the three selected universities, leadership played a central role in fostering clarity and alignment, while flexible organisational types empowered middle managers to act decisively. Additionally, power dynamics were managed in ways that encouraged collaboration and collective engagement across various institutional layers.

Findings from all universities in the studied alliance reinforce the significant influence of context on middle managers' engagement in sensemaking and their capacity to advance the alliance's objectives. However, to illustrate this impact, three university cases were examined, each exemplifying one of these contextual factors. While the number of interviewees per institution remained small across the dataset, significant variation emerged in how middle managers perceived and navigated their organisational contexts. These differences allowed for meaningful comparative insight, particularly into how structural, leadership, and power-related dynamics shaped sensemaking processes. The three institutions selected for further illustration were not chosen to be institutionally representative, but because the interviews in these cases provided particularly rich and relevant material on one or more contextual dimensions.

The three guiding factors are:

- **Leadership Role:** Leadership stability plays a dual role: consistent and engaged leadership fosters clarity and alignment in middle managers' roles, while turnover generates confusion and disrupts their capacity to make sense of shifting priorities.
- **Organisational Structure** This profoundly shapes these processes; while decentralised structures grant managers the flexibility to navigate complexities, centralised and rigid hierarchies often hinder their ability to implement initiatives effectively.

- Power Dynamics** The third contextual layer reveals the nuanced interplay between organisational structures, leadership roles and institutional identity. The findings underscore how hierarchical power arrangements influence managers' ability to translate top-down directives into actionable strategies. Managers in HEIs characterised by unequal power distribution often struggle to drive implementation due to restricted agency.

PSEUDONYM OF UNIVERSITY	EXAMPLE FOR...	PARAGRAPH TITLE	TYPE AND CRITERIA
Wise Owl University	example of committed leadership	Leadership in Action: The Role of Visionary Commitment in Advancing Internationalisation	Wise Owl University operates within a highly hierarchical organisational structure, characterised by strict regulations and clearly defined procedures. Nevertheless, its strong and committed leadership fosters an environment where sensemaking activities can thrive. This makes this university a perfect case to look for sensemaking activities. This makes it an ideal case for examining how governance and strategic alignment in internationalisation efforts.
Hare University	example of loose organisational structure	The Crucial Role of Freedom in Higher Education Institutions	Hare University operates with an extremely loose organisational structure, which can sometimes pose challenges for direct leadership intervention. However, this flexibility also fosters a highly effective environment built on trust-based relationships, enabling collaboration and adaptability across the institution.
Navigator Dolphin University	example of decentralised university	Decentralised Universities: Catalysts for Change in Internationalisation Efforts	Navigator Dolphin University operates characterised by a decentralised organisational structure, where individual Schools enjoy significant autonomy. However, through the implementation of the EUI and ongoing sensemaking activities, a culture of shared collaboration is gradually taking shape. This process is fostering a stronger institutional cohesion and a growing sense of collective identity across the university.

Table 6 – Context of Three Cases

In describing these findings, I connected the “POWER” theme with another relevant one that emerged from coding and referred to as “IDENTITY” (Table 4) in its broad meaning. Indeed, power dynamics also affect institutional identity, which evolves over time as organisations adapt to new leadership, governance changes and external demands. I didn’t examine this broad concept, but what clearly emerged was how power dynamics have a crucial role in shaping identity at institutional level when going through change processes. This interplay between power and identity reinforces the need for middle

managers to be highly adaptive and culturally attuned, as they must navigate the diverse organisational landscapes shaped by national and institutional norms.

Identity is a key element in critical sensemaking theory, but also a key concept of communities and organisations, as McNay argues, ‘the individual must identify with the collective, and there must be a strong sense of congruence, of collective identity’ (McNay, 2005, p. 43).

Critical Sensemaking theories provide a lens for analysing power dynamics and their implications for individuals within organisations. In the university cases selected for this study, middle managers often adopted different perspectives to analyse varied power relations, thereby attempting to assign distinct meanings to the same event (Mills et al., 2010). Notably, a significant aspect of sensemaking exhibited by middle managers involves conveying “a workable interpretation” of the initiative to “those who would be affected” by it (Alvesson & Jonsson, 2022, p.729). This entails making sense of decisions made by leadership and conveying them to diverse stakeholders.

Middle managers act as intermediaries, balancing top-down mandates with bottom-up feedback while responding to the unique cultures, hierarchies and decision-making processes of their institutions. Their sensemaking requires an acute awareness of how directives are communicated, interpreted and enacted across various institutional levels. Often, they must tailor strategies to fit hierarchical or decentralised models, which can either facilitate or constrain their efforts. Beyond interpreting policies, middle managers engage actively in shaping meanings for diverse stakeholders, using empathy and relational skills to bridge divides. A message that resonates within one stakeholder group may face resistance from another, depending on departmental culture, staff roles and diverse professional backgrounds. This diversity adds complexity to the managers’ task of aligning various groups around a common understanding of the EUI’s purpose.

In the hierarchical and complex governance structures of HEIs, middle managers must continuously negotiate and realign competing priorities. Their role involves fostering alignment between institutional goals and stakeholder expectations by leveraging their understanding of power dynamics and organisational identity. By doing so, they navigate the tension between maintaining institutional coherence

and fostering grassroots innovation, ensuring the EUI's objectives are realised in meaningful and context-sensitive ways.

As seen, the decision to examine power dynamics in HEIs alongside middle managers' approaches stems from recognising that the process of communication in social contexts is heavily influenced by the cultural and contextual nuances of organisations. As highlighted in the literature, the meaning derived from communication is not static but is actively constructed and reconstructed through social interactions, which vary significantly depending on the unique culture, values and decision-making processes of each university (Isabella, 1990). At different universities, similar messages may be interpreted in diverse ways, reflecting distinctive organisational environments and the specific decision-making frameworks in place.

Previously findings have confirmed that middle managers play a crucial role as sensegivers within this context, largely due to their capacity to guide interpretation and influence stakeholders through their communication processes. By understanding and leveraging these elements, organisations can foster a more inclusive and trust-based environment that supports effective change management. Their ability to interpret and communicate complex events becomes especially important in environments with diverse stakeholders, such as universities, where power structures significantly impact decision-making processes. By promoting initiatives and framing them within the broader organisational goals, middle managers ensure alignment and facilitate a cohesive understanding among various stakeholders, thereby enabling effective change and adaptation within the institution.

Empathy, pragmatism and a comprehensive understanding of individuals' decision-making rationales are critical components of effective sensemaking. These elements help navigate complex power dynamics and ideological influences. As the effectiveness of narratives is influenced by the power dynamics and social structures within the university, this determines who has the authority to shape and disseminate these stories. This influence can vary according to the institutional structures and culture, which are often further shaped by national cultural contexts.

When I refer to structures, I mean the organisational guidelines that provide insights into the system of formal and informal rules governing organisational processes. These rules define how tasks are performed within an organisation, and they are also shaped by the past experiences and behaviours of its

members (Thurlow, 2007). Additionally, these rules interact with specific hierarchies and leadership styles and may evolve over time based on how individuals adapt or resist transformational events.

Further evidence illustrating power dynamics within the HEIs of this alliance is the acknowledgement that shifts in university leadership have affected the priorities of their respective institution. This reaffirms the significant role of power relations in organisations and their potential influence on the sensemaking process. The intricate dynamics of power relations within HEIs in this alliance reveal a nuanced interplay between top-down directives and bottom-up approaches, highlighting the hierarchical structure of universities and the governance complexities involved. This balance could undergo abrupt shifts with changes in leadership.

4.5.1. Leadership in Action: The Role of Visionary Commitment in Advancing Internationalisation

The Wise Owl University has been considered a perfectly fitting case with which to deepen the topic of leadership. Even so, there were other institutions that revealed how supporting leadership was helpful in fulfilling the alliance tasks by involving collaborators transversally as a representative from Raven College noted:

“...the real strong support from the Rector. Yeah, he was and still is sort of really passionate and supportive of European engagements more generally, and then [the alliance] specifically so knowing that we had buy in from the top also helps” [12:30 ¶ 64 in Transcription_Raven College 1_091023_revised.docx]

This underscores the value of top-level endorsement in legitimising and energising institutional engagement with the alliance. Conversely, data also reveal that leadership transitions can disrupt this dynamic. In some cases, universities reported that, for the previous senior leadership, being part of the EUI was crucial and a matter of excellence, whereas after a change in leadership the EUI was not supported equally, thus creating challenges, as articulated by a middle manager from Viking Elk University:

“I think previous leadership of the university they wanted to sort of single out [this alliance] as like a very strong initiative, that was like superior to other initiatives, but our current leadership is more like. ‘I mean, it's all good [the alliance] is there, probably there to stay, it's like one initiative amongst

others', we don't put all our eggs in one basket." [7:14 ¶ 25 in Transcription_Viking Elk University 2_161023_revised.docx]

Such shifts in leadership approach may affect the strategic positioning of the institution among the alliance, underscoring the significance of sustained executive support for long-term institutional commitment.

Wise Owl University was founded in 19th century, by a group of intellectuals. The institute's main aim was both to train tradesmen and to prepare future teachers of economics. Moreover, since the foundation, students were also required to study languages, both Western (French, English, German, Spanish, modern Greek) and Eastern (Arabic, Turkish, Serbo-Croat, Japanese). In twentieth century, Wise Owl University became a fully-fledged University. It covers scientific and cultural areas organised into Departments.

Wise Owl University joined this alliance during an enlargement phase, when the European Commission approved funding of a second project for an additional four years.

This university is regarded as a reference point for internationalisation in its country's HE sector. Since its foundation, internationalisation has been a high priority, and the current Rector is a committed international leader. In their election programme, they expressed the intention of joining the EUI, emphasising that this would represent a transformational process for the university and support comprehensive internationalisation. Two main objectives outlined in Wise Owl's strategic plan are the development of IaH activities and a recognition process for valuing multilingualism as a factor that enables internationalisation. The institution's leadership places strong emphasis on hierarchical engagement, as expressed by a university representative:

"if we don't have the directors of the departments and the vice-rectors of the governance involved, it's quite impossible to reach also the others at the university. Universities are hierarchical places, so we have to start from the top and then try and reach the bottom".

[3:21 ¶ 41 Wise Owl University 2_091023.docx]

This statement reflects the embedded power dynamics within the organisational structure, reinforcing earlier discussions on the significance of the role of power in critical sensemaking, it is important to

emphasise how this element forms an integral part of a potential emergent narrative within this case university.

The data from the interviews reveal several key aspects regarding the role of leadership in driving deep transformational processes, particularly within the project context of this alliance. The decision-making process at Wise Owl, though bound by hierarchical structures and procedures, emphasises a more transversal and participatory approach due to strong intervention by the rector, as one interviewee explained:

“It's not that there was a need for information, for persuasion, for goodness' sake, but the fact that *they themselves* (ed. the rector), experiences [this alliance] with this involvement, passion, engagement, commitment.” (ed. translated from original language) [4:68 ¶ 74 in Wise Owl 1-2_05062024.docx]

Interviewees in this institution confirm that the rector's commitment to - and belief in - the initiative has been a driving force in engaging stakeholders across the campus. Although the involvement of the teaching staff is acknowledged as an area needing improvement, there is growing enthusiasm for participating in the alliance activities, with some stakeholders demonstrating a spontaneous willingness to be involved. This highlights the pivotal role of leadership in fostering inclusive and effective decision-making processes. A strong, committed leadership significantly promotes internationalisation activities across the campus, while ensuring successful implementation and easing challenges at various levels, from logistical obstacles to the widespread dissemination of knowledge about the initiative.

Moreover, mutual trust and familiarity within the internal team, cultivated by a generally positive working environment, are recognised as significant advantages. These factors facilitate smoother collaboration and enhance the overall effectiveness of the university's participation in the Alliance. The proactive leadership, evidenced by efforts to maintain stability and long-term sustainability through structured proposals, aims to improve the Alliance's effectiveness and interaction. However, this awareness of the advantages of committed leadership also raises concerns about the upcoming election for new governance, highlighting the complexities and critical aspects of this internationalisation tool. This aligns

with the other HEIs involved this alliance (i.e. Viking Elk University, Alpine Ibex University, Hare University), who confirmed how change in leadership caused disruption in the implementation of the alliance.

In summary, the leadership at Wise Owl University plays a crucial role in managing decisions hierarchically based on competencies while aligning with the specific needs of the alliance and maintaining coherence with university practices. The success of internationalisation initiatives hinges on strong leadership, commitment and effective communication. While these initiatives bring about positive changes, they also present challenges, particularly in logistics and funding. However, at Wise Owl the EUI can significantly expand the internationalisation mindset across the campus, underscoring the importance of visionary and effective leadership in navigating these complexities.

4.5.2. The Crucial Role of Freedom in Higher Education Institutions

A second perspective on critical sensemaking in the EUI as a loosely structured organisation is offered by Hare University.

Hare University was founded in the 19th century with the aim to create a university independent from church and state, with academic freedom at its core.

Hare University is a middle-sized highly international university. Ranked as one of the world's top comprehensive universities with a history spanning over almost 200 years, Hare University combines excellent research with accredited English and local language study programmes, (from Bachelor to PhD) with a high engagement towards societal, as well as cultural and economic, innovations.

Hare University is one of the founding members of this alliance and, as such, it shows a great commitment to the EUI in various declaration released on its website and social media channels.

The data from this case reveal several key insights into the influential power of flexible decision-making processes in loose hierarchical organisations with a familial organisational culture in engaging internal stakeholders and fostering strong commitment. As one interviewee described,

“the Hare University is one of the most flat structures, lack of hierarchy that I have ever seen”. [1:81

¶ 50 in Hare University 1-2_240524.docx]

Unlike environments where trust is predominantly derived from institutional frameworks, here, involvement shifts from a professional to a personal level, underscoring that trust is built more on personal relationships.

As in other cases, this university faces challenges in establishing new initiatives, creating new structures and managing leadership dynamics, especially following leadership transitions. However, its flat hierarchy, which emphasises relationships and a servant-oriented, democratic administration, plays a pivotal role in shaping its organisational culture. This culture directly affects how decisions are made and implemented which, in turn, influence the success of transformative initiatives like the EUI. A sense of familiarity and strong interpersonal bonds underpin this environment, as one staff member notes:

“oh, it's also the fact that people like working here because it's very sort of familiar, you know there's a family feeling” [1:85 ¶ 50 in Hare University 1-2_240524.docx]

This relational closeness appears to foster a culture of personal engagement and informal reciprocity, illustrated in another comment:

“where you ask something and people go ‘ohh well, just for you’. And there's more of that than there is saying ‘no’, I would say overall I think it actually helps in terms of getting people involved” [1:94 ¶ 64 in Hare University 1-2_240524.docx]

Such a culture, while offering valuable support for bottom-up engagement, also contributes to loosely structured decision-making processes, characterised by inclusivity and collaboration, it contributes also to both challenges and opportunities in implementing this alliance’s activities. While these processes can lead to varying levels of personal commitment to the initiative, they also facilitate adaptability and responsiveness to emerging issues. The flexibility allows the university to navigate the complexities of international initiatives more effectively, fostering a positive environment for change.

Despite these challenges, there have been positive developments in research and educational collaboration, driven by an evolving internationalisation mindset. This shift is supported by critical evaluations and examples of successful collaborations, indicating that loosely structured organisations can achieve substantial progress when aligned with strategic goals. Contrary to this, there have been interviewees from other universities characterised by extremely tight organisational structures (i.e.

Carpathian Bear Academy, Lynx University) reporting how the strong power relations which characterise the institutional environment hinder or slow down the building of relations based on trust and personal commitment.

The interviewee's advocacy for this alliance, including efforts to secure structured funding and ensure sustainability, acknowledges the progress made, despite the difficulties encountered. Although the interviewee admits that their initial enthusiasm for the initiative has wavered from the initial phase to the actual one due to challenges faced more at the alliance level than within their own institution, their continued support mainly underscores the influential power of flexible decision-making processes and a collaborative organisational culture. This approach not only navigates the complexities of international initiatives but also fosters a conducive environment for positive change.

4.5.3. Decentralised Universities: Catalysts for Change in Internationalisation Efforts

The third perspective on critical sensemaking theory is exemplified by the case of Navigator Dolphin University.

This institution is characterised by a highly decentralised organisational structure, where several different Schools operate as autonomous entities with their own decision-making bodies. Recently, the university transitioned into a foundation, necessitating a stronger emphasis on collaboration and delivery of a unified message, strategy and vision.

Navigator Dolphin University was founded in the second half of the 20th century and is one of three state universities in the region. Integrated within a framework of expansion and diversification of HE, the university adopted a new model within the national system that stressed interdisciplinary approaches and technological developments while safeguarding offerings in traditional academic domains including medicine, sciences and humanities. Since its inception, Navigator Dolphin University has aimed to innovate HE in the country and to contribute to its social and economic development. The institution is a medium-sized university.

Navigator Dolphin University is dedicated to establishing its international presence and developing a talent policy that represents European values on a global scale. Rooted in European culture with a strong local identity leads Dolphin to prioritise various geographical areas also beyond Europe.

The data from this case underscores the significant role that highly decentralised structures can play in advancing internationalisation processes within HEIs. At Navigator Dolphin University, the decentralised decision-making system – relying on various boards and councils – presents both benefits and challenges. While this structure can slow down change implementation due to the need for broad consensus, it simultaneously enables a more inclusive and participatory approach by valuing diverse perspectives across academic units. One interviewee reflected on this dynamic, noting:

“Our decision-making process respects this diversity that we have in [Navigator Dolphin] and we want to keep this diversity, but it creates challenges to change and to implement change”. [5:63 ¶ 30 in Navigator Dolphin 1-2_250624.docx]

Such decentralisation, however, does not necessarily hinder the development of institutional cohesion. On the contrary, participation in the EUI appears to catalyse a growing sense of unity and belonging across previously siloed schools. As one middle manager observed:

“it is important that we create some opportunities that bring people together from the different schools and they start to talk with each other...it’s happening with staff, because they are starting to work together [omissis]... So, all these things, I think are starting to create bridges between our different schools and different research centres”. [5:65 ¶ 34 in Navigator Dolphin 1-2_250624.docx]

This emphasis on promoting a culture of collegiality and shared governance reflects what Shattock (2010) describes in his analysis of successful universities. He argues that strengthening of decentralised structures is crucial and that it is most effective when coupled with consistent engagement with the academic community in a collegial manner. In this case, the alliance seems to serve as a platform through which a collaborative institutional culture is actively supported aligning with both strategic goals and internal cohesion.

The positive outcomes of this alliance at Navigator Dolphin University demonstrate the potential of decentralised structures in fostering collaboration across different areas of the institution. Conversely, those universities with a highly centralised organisation type (i.e. Gallic Rooster Academy, Wolf University) reported more difficulties in spreading the initiative to ‘peripheral’ units of the university.

The activities aimed at involving stakeholders at Navigator Dolphin University have benefitted both academic and administrative staff by encouraging international collaborations and expanding perspectives on sustainable development goals.

The data also suggests that tailored communication strategies are crucial in engaging stakeholders in a decentralised university setting. Middle managers in particular must possess a strong sense of initiative and a deep understanding of the institutional environment to effectively make sense of the EUI and foster meaningful engagement. This highlights the importance of having skilled individuals who can navigate complex organisational landscapes and effectively communicate the value of internationalisation efforts to a diverse audience.

Overall, the case demonstrates that decentralised organisational types, when effectively managed, can be powerful agents of change by promoting inclusivity, fostering collaboration and enhancing institutional unity in the context of internationalisation.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a detailed description of the findings. The analysis highlighted the role of middle managers as mediators and change agents, their varied mediation approaches and the changes occurring at different levels of the organisation referring to personal, organisational and structural layers in HE. Finally, I provided findings on the complexities and nuances associated with leadership dynamics, decision-making structures and the evolving sensemaking processes among middle managers.

The findings revealed the transformative influence of the EUI on the European HE landscape. Specifically, they showed how the implementation of the EUI within HEIs has underscored the mediating role of middle managers and their diverse approaches to fostering progress while adapting to the needs of various target groups and institutional contexts. The social, cultural and organisational environments of universities were shown to significantly shape these change initiatives and the level of engagement across campuses. Notably, participation in this initiative catalysed the emergence of a transversal internationalisation mindset across institutions, sparking structural, operational and cultural changes that are reshaping institutional identities. This profound transformation, indicative of deep organisational

change, progresses unevenly across HEIs and will require sustained time and investment to realise the ultimate EUI objective of creating truly European Universities.

The chapter demonstrated how various organisational factors and individual sensemaking efforts intersect with individual sensemaking efforts by middle managers, including narrative construction, trust-building, and mediation, to influence the implementation of internationalisation initiatives. While no entirely new concepts were discovered, the study identified new relationships between existing concepts: for example how decentralised structures combined with empowered middle managers enhance more effective stakeholder engagement, or how consistent leadership support the coherence and sustainability of sensemaking processes. These interconnections offer a deeper understanding of how context and agency jointly shape internationalisation within the EUI framework.

The insights gathered here form the foundation of the subsequent discussion chapter, where these findings will be critically examined in the context of existing literature and theoretical frameworks. The next chapter will therefore engage with these results, exploring their implications and drawing broader conclusions to contribute to the academic discourse on sensemaking and internationalisation in HE related to the EUI.

CHAPTER 5 - DISCUSSION

The study addressed a gap in understanding how middle managers in HEIs engage in sensemaking during the implementation of the EUI. Despite the EUI's transformational power in driving internationalisation (European Commission Report, 2025), little is known about how middle managers interpret, translate and act upon its goals within their institutions, all characterised by different social, cultural and organisational peculiarities. The research focused on how sensemaking processes influence the implementation of the initiative. By examining these processes, the study aims to provide crucial insights into the role of middle managers in implementing large-scale internationalisation initiatives like the EUI.

The findings of this study illustrate the transformative impact of the EUI on the European HE landscape. The implementation of the EUI within HEIs has catalysed a transversal internationalisation mindset across campuses, initiating profound structural and operational changes that are likely to reshape institutional identities. This transformation, characteristic of deep organisational change, is expected to progress at varying pace across the EEA.

While leadership's capacity "to imagine a future vision that not only inspires and engages the university community" is crucial (Hunter in de Wit, 2013, p.61), this research adds to it by underscoring the pivotal role of middle managers in operational change. Their function in translating abstract ideas and directives into actionable strategies is fundamental to the practical realisation of institutional transformation.

The interpretation of this study's findings is discussed in four sections, and will follow the logical sequence of the four findings previously illustrated, while connecting to the research questions that guided this study in understanding sensemaking in HEIs. The research questions are:

How do middle managers make sense of internationalisation when implementing the European Universities Initiative at the institutional level? (MRQ)

To what extent do middle managers act as mediators in understanding different stakeholder needs in context? (RQ1)

Which mediation approaches are supportive of stakeholder engagement? (RQ2)

How does the institutional context intersect with middle managers' sensemaking approaches? (RQ3)

What changes, if any, does this sensemaking lead to? (RQ4)

Before delving into the discussion, a short insight follows into the use of metaphors in research and the metaphor used to better interpret the overall theme of this research.

5.1. Metaphors as a Tool to Share Meanings

When I began writing up my research findings, I encountered challenges in transforming data analysis into relevant insights, and more so in presenting those findings meaningfully. Writing them simply to answer the research questions felt dry and somewhat uninspiring. Instead, whenever I described the research to a non-specialist audience, I told them a story using a metaphor that had come to mind. This metaphor provided a way to simplify the complex data and give it structure. This is why I'm starting the Discussion Chapter with a metaphor.

Metaphors indeed serve as powerful tools to structure data and understand them using "a unique and creative perspective", further on "metaphors illuminate the meanings of experiences" (Carpenter, 2008, p. 274) which is also one relevant aspect of using qualitative analysis and, finally, metaphors make complex findings more accessible and relatable (Steele et al., 2022). This perspective is particularly relevant for my study, as it centres on the experiences of middle managers in navigating in the universe of meanings.

5.1.1. *Balancing the EUI's Complex Demands: The Middle Manager as a Juggler of Internationalisation*

This research originates from my journey as a practitioner-turned-researcher who was deeply invested in understanding the complexities of internationalisation in HE, especially during the challenging initial phase of implementing the EUI. Motivated by my own professional experience, I recognised the massive challenges in engaging internal stakeholders and fostering alignment in a landscape of shifting priorities and institutional transformation within the EUI framework.

The metaphor that best captured this role was that of a juggler, representing the intricate and multidimensional role of middle managers. I envisioned a juggler performing amidst a bustling university setting that was undergoing profound change – one that few fully grasped would redefine the very landscape of HEIs. In this metaphor, the juggler symbolises the middle manager, skilfully balancing an array

of capabilities, knowledge and personal commitment to the EUI implementation. Yet their act is far from straightforward; surrounding them are myriad challenges – power dynamics, organisational context, leadership pressures and unforeseen disruptions due to the implementation of the EUI - all demanding their constant attention.

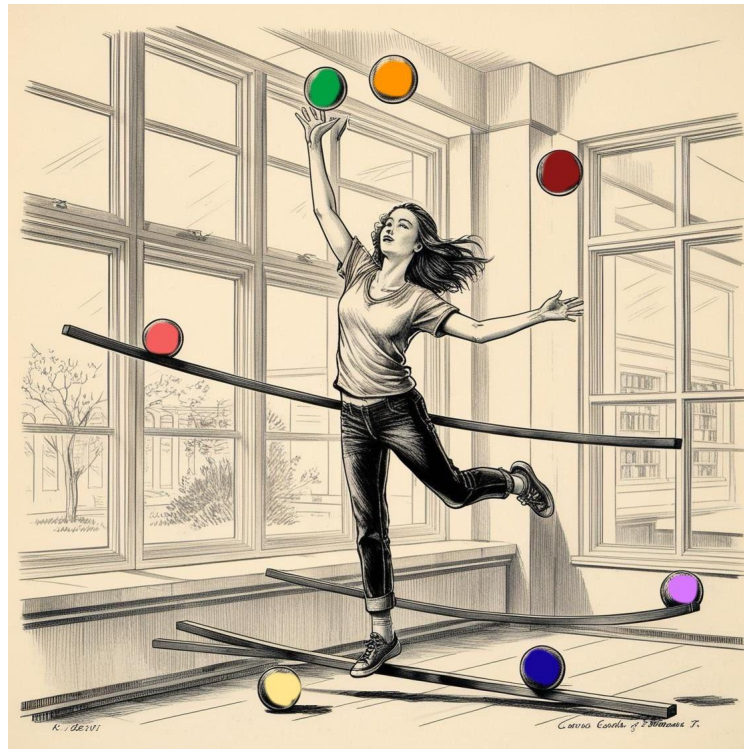


Figure 9: The Juggler [generated with Canva AI tool]

5.2. Finding 1: The crucial Role of Middle Managers

To further address the MRQ, it is essential to contextualise this concept within its theoretical foundations and its practical applications in HEIs.

Weick (1995), the pioneer of sensemaking theory, argued that deep change occurs when an understanding of an institutional context becomes collective, thereby shaping institutional sensemaking. In this study, middle managers played a crucial role in this process, though their level of enactment varied depending on multiple factors. Notably, individual attitudes significantly influenced the successful implementation of the EUI. Indeed, the study clearly demonstrates that middle managers at HEIs within the alliance engage in sensemaking at various levels through enacting shared processes, interpreting the

intersection of institutional context and creating a new shared meaning through navigating power dynamics and adapting it to the institutional setting (MRQ).

Table 7 illustrates the positioning of the ten member universities (U1-U10) based on the extent to which middle managers engage in making sense of the EUI. Their positioning reflects two dimensions: the degree of individual belief in the initiative (subjective level), ranging from believers to sceptics, and the favourability of the institutional context for its implementation (context). Those terms, believers and sceptics, are not formal categories but interpretive labels developed through thematic analysis, used to describe recurring patterns in participants' discourse around the EUI, this connects back to the *locus of control* (Dulebohn et al., 2012) concept seen in the previous literature review chapter. Believers are people with *internal locus* as they see themselves as active agents, in fact in the interviews they expressed strong alignment with the initiative's goals, viewing themselves as active contributors to its implementation. Sceptics, by contrast, are people with *external locus* and see themselves as passive agents, they often voiced doubts about feasibility, institutional priority, or strategic relevance. Their positions and the intersection with institutional context were not measured quantitatively but were inferred from the analysis of the institutional structure and the interviewees' language, tone, and framing of the EUI, particularly regarding alignment with their institution's vision and support structures. Those who strongly believed in the initiative actively shaped institutional sensemaking, fostering a cohesive understanding of this internationalisation initiative across their institutions. Acting as mediators, interpreters and change agents (Finding 1), they helped create a common interpretive framework that united diverse stakeholders.

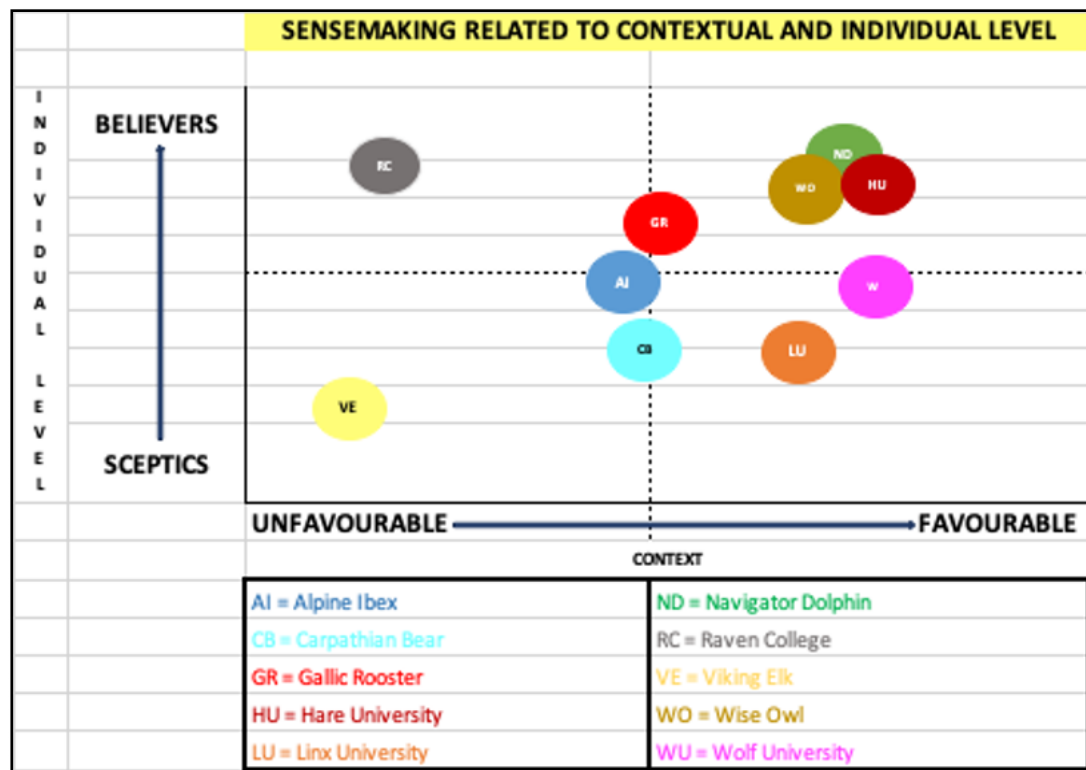


Table 7 – Sensemaking According to Context and Individual Level of Middle Managers

5.3. Finding 2: Approaches to Build Shared Meanings

Beyond individual commitment, the approaches adopted by middle managers were instrumental in facilitating sensemaking (Finding 2). Two key strategies emerged: trust-building and the use of narrative. Trust-building played a fundamental role in overcoming resistance and enabling engagement, particularly within decentralised units where internationalisation was not initially seen as a priority. This aligns with Mast and Stehle's (2015) research indicating that interpersonal trust is a prerequisite for stakeholder collaboration in HE change processes. It also resonates with broader stakeholder engagement literature which emphasises trust as a foundation for commitment to organisational change (Devos et al., 2007). In line with this literature, middle managers in this study cultivated relationships across academic and administrative staff to stimulate collaboration and mutual understanding, key conditions for sensemaking. Additionally, tailored narrative - framing the EUI in ways that resonated with different stakeholders - proved essential in shaping perceptions and securing buy-in. This echoes Alvesson and Jonsson (2022) work on sensegiving, which highlights how leaders use narratives or a "workable interpretation" (p.443) to influence meaning building during organisational transformation. Similarly, in internationalisation

literature, Hudzik (2015) notes that successful implementation of international initiatives are aligned with motivation and interests of stakeholders. Consistent with this, the present findings show that embedding the EUI within existing institutional priorities, such as innovative teaching methods, interdisciplinarity, or societal engagement, middle managers made the initiative more relatable and actionable. In contrast to top-down approaches described in the change management literature (Kotter, 2007), this more adaptive, trust-and narrative-based engagement strategy underscores the critical role of middle managers in bridging strategic intent with organisational realities.

5.4. Finding 3: The Broader Impact of the EUI

The dynamics around middle managers' sensemaking did not remain static but evolved as the initiative progressed (Finding 3). Structural changes within institutions reflected the broader impact of the EUI, with universities increasingly establishing dedicated units specifically for alliance-related activities. This institutionalisation of the initiative signalled a shift from viewing it as an external project to embedding it within the core strategic framework of the university. This process of institutionalisation helped stabilise roles, clarify responsibilities, and sustain momentum for implementation. Crucially, the redistribution of responsibilities also extended internationalisation beyond the traditional international office, engaging a wider array of academic and administrative staff in EUI-related work, signalling a more transversal and embedded approach to internationalisation. This is consistent with the observations from the EP recommendation that the institutionalisation and sustainability of alliances require "a combination of dedicated alliance staff and wider staff body to ensure staff ownership and enable fully fledged European universities" (European Parliament, 2025, p. 318). The report highlights that without broader staff engagement "an alliance cannot be sustainable." (p. 318). These findings reinforce the importance of both targeted management structures and broad institutional involvement in driving systemic change. This broader engagement enhanced the international mindset of the institutions and a transversal, comprehensive implementation of the EUI. Middle managers were central to this transformation: by linking high-level goals with operational realities, they acted as institutional change agents who facilitated both top-down coordination and bottom-up engagement. In doing so, they contributed not only to the short-

term sustainability of the initiative but also to the long-term embedding of internationalisation into institutional practice.

5.5. Finding 4: The Intersection of Context with Sensemaking

Building on Finding 2 and middle managers' approaches, critical sensemaking theory (Mills et al., 2010) extends Weick's framework by highlighting how power dynamics and broader societal contexts influence sensemaking, underscoring the interplay between agency and structure. This is particularly evident in Finding 4, where certain organisational structures facilitated transversal actions - either through a loosely coordinated system, through decentralised structures or through the explicit support of higher leadership. In such contexts, middle managers were better positioned to lead and participate in shared processes, reinforcing a collective institutional sense of purpose that aligned with the alliance's goals. These findings resonate with research by Currie and Brown (2003), who argue that middle managers' strategic capacity is context-dependent, often shaped by institutional configurations and leadership alignment. Similarly, Floyd and Woolridge (1997) note that the ability of middle managers to contribute to strategy is contingent on organisational systems that recognise and support their role.

Navigating power dynamics was another critical aspect of their role. Middle managers manoeuvred within the hierarchical structures of HEIs while actively engaging faculty and staff at all levels. This reflects the double role of middle managers as both sensemakers and sensegivers (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Their role required translating abstract alliance goals into locally meaningful terms, a task complicated by differences in institutional culture, disciplinary norms, and governance traditions. Furthermore, their ability to tailor strategies to align with their institutions' context demonstrates how sensemaking is not only an interpretive process, but also one deeply embedded in local institutional realities (Kezar, 2018). As such this finding reinforces the idea that sensemaking is a situated, power-sensitive process shaped by institutional logics and actor agency.

By weaving sensemaking into the fabric of institutional transformation, middle managers contribute to a sustainable, contextually embedded approach to internationalisation. This process reinforces the importance of cultivating shared meaning, navigating power dynamics and fostering collective purpose in achieving the ambitious goals of the EUI.

5.6. The Balls in the Air: Challenges and Responsibilities

In the juggler's metaphor, each ball in the air represents a distinct challenge or responsibility faced by middle managers. These include not only implementing the EUI's activities, engaging internal stakeholders and mediating between top-down directives and bottom-up feedback. Sometimes, a ball drops - a reminder that implementation is rarely linear, and resistance from stakeholders or unforeseen obstacles can disrupt progress. Yet, in many cases, the juggler persists, retrieving the fallen ball and striving to sustain momentum.

This aligns with Research Question One (RQ1), which seeks to understand to what extent middle managers act as mediators. The study revealed that middle managers serve as key mediators, translating the vision of leadership into operational strategies and bridging the gap between institutional directives and stakeholders' understanding. This aligns with Wooldridge et al.'s (2008) conception of middle managers as those actors in organisations who connect strategic and operational levels. Their ability to juggle competing priorities and adapt to challenges highlights their critical role in navigating the complexities of the EUI framework.

The findings also confirm that middle managers are sensemakers, as theorised by Weick (1995) and extended through critical sensemaking theory (Mills et al., 2010). They interpret the leadership's vision and communicate it in ways that resonate with diverse institutional actors. When a 'ball falls' - a disruption in the implementation process - it often reflects broader organisational tensions, such as resistance from stakeholders and inadequate structural support. These moments underscore the fragility of the sensemaking process in hierarchical and rapidly evolving contexts such as HEIs.

For some middle managers, their firm belief in the value of the EUI drives their determination. They train tirelessly, honing their skills to keep the balls in motion despite the setbacks. Others, however, may lack confidence in the initiative or face particularly challenging institutional contexts. For these managers, the effort to keep juggling may wane, and they might abandon the act more readily when obstacles arise.

This connects to Research Question Two (RQ2), which explores how middle managers leverage their mediation skills to engage stakeholders through various approaches; this is embodied in this juggling act. Middle managers must navigate diverse and sometimes conflicting priorities, reconciling leadership's vision

with the practical realities of implementation. This process involves ongoing negotiation and sensegiving to foster alignment and buy-in from stakeholders. The findings illustrate that effective juggling requires both strategic adaptability and resilience. As Kezar (2018) notes, successful change agents in HE must blend formal authority with informal influence, navigating complex political and cultural terrain.

Middle managers who succeed in maintaining momentum despite dropped balls are those who can recalibrate their approach through effective interpersonal communication, dialogical relationships, storytelling and therefore trust building, re-engage stakeholders, and sustaining progress toward the EUI's goals. These findings echo Balogun and Johnson (2005), who describe how middle managers contribute to strategic change not simply through execution but through shaping interpretations and generating meaning. However, when institutional environments fail to provide adequate support - such as rigid hierarchies or hindering the communication context - these managers are left with fewer resources with which to recover and continue their balancing act. Their capacity to juggle is diminished when organisational structures fail to support sensemaking and sensegiving processes. This reinforces the conclusion that organisational design matters: supportive leadership, flexible structures, and inclusive communication channels are not peripheral, but essential for transformative initiatives like the EUI to take root.

5.7. Balls in Motion: Changes Brought by the Juggling Act

Beyond the intricate balancing act performed by middle managers, the implementation of the EUI within HEIs has triggered multidimensional changes. These changes, stemming from middle managers' sensemaking processes while implementing the EUI, unfold across five categories, as outlined in Chapter 4; heightened awareness of the importance of communication, mindset and behavioural shifts, structural changes, increased awareness of internationalisation and changes in internal relations and hierarchies. These findings address Research Question Four (RQ4), affirming that middle managers are not only responding to immediate challenges but are also contributing to deeper institutional transformation.

On an individual level, middle managers experience an enhanced awareness of the crucial role of clear, interpersonal communication. Navigating the EUI's complex, transversal nature fosters a more nuanced understanding of how to convey ideas effectively across diverse stakeholders and institutional

silos. In particular administrative staff were seen to shift their working modes and internalise new values, reflective micro-level behavioural change that was catalysed by engagement with the EUI.

On a structural level, the implementation led to more enduring organisational adaptations, driving substantial reconfigurations of teams, decision-making processes and the creation of new units and roles. Additionally, the establishment of stronger cross-campus collaborations signals a redefinition of institutional identities, embedding internationalisation not as an auxiliary goal but as a core principle guiding institutional development. These developments are consistent with Kezar & Eckel's (2002) arguing that sustainable change in HEIs requires deep structural integration, not just superficial programmatic adjustments. Furthermore, changes in institutional context emerged as middle managers nurtured the required cross—campus collaborations, built trust across departments, and challenges rigid hierarchies. In some cases, the initiative began to reshape institutional identity, embedding internationalisation not as a peripheral concern but as a guiding principle. This also supports de Wit and Hunter's (2015) call for comprehensive internationalisation as a core institutional strategy.

Such changes, however, are not uniform across the institutions of the studied alliance. They progress at different paces, reflecting the diverse contexts, structures and capacities of institutions within the EEA. Some institutions embrace transformation swiftly, propelled by favourable internal dynamics or supportive external conditions, while others advance incrementally, constrained by structural or cultural barriers. Nevertheless, the overall trajectory points to a reimagining of institutional practices and cultures, increasingly aligned with the ambitious objectives of the EUI.

The sequence of changes - spanning personal, structural and cultural dimensions - set off by juggling multiple balls, highlight the transformative potential of sensemaking processes in HEIs. Middle managers, through their efforts, are not merely addressing the immediate complexities of the EUI but are also driving broader, systemic shifts that reshape how institutions approach internationalisation. These changes indicate a move from piecemeal, fragmented and isolated efforts towards more cohesive and sustainable frameworks, where internationalisation becomes an integral part of institutional identity and practice.

Key findings show that sensemaking processes significantly shape the success of EUI implementation. For example, early engagement of stakeholders through transparent communication

fosters motivation, trust and a shared sense of mission. Conversely, a lack of sensemaking capacity can lead to misalignment, disengagement and resistance to change, confirming the fragile nature of strategic change in hierarchical HE contexts (Weick, 1995; Gioia & Thomas, 1996)

This research contributes to existing literature by expanding the scope of sensemaking theory within HE internationalisation. While previous studies focus heavily on leadership roles, this study emphasises the nuanced, human-centred work of middle managers as critical in translating high-level visions into actionable strategies. It also reveals the iterative and relational nature of sensemaking, where trust-building and interpersonal relationships are as vital as operational alignment.

5.8. Contextual Influences: The Room, the Board, and the Wind

The juggler's performance is not solely determined by their skills, but also by the conditions of their environment. Some jugglers operate in stable, supportive contexts - standing firmly on a solid floor in a quiet room. In these cases, leadership is engaged, or institutional structures are consequently conducive to collaboration and stakeholder dynamics are relatively harmonious. Such an environment enables middle managers to focus on refining their juggling act, improving their performance over time. These are the specific cases described in the context of Finding 4 (section 4.5).

This observation aligns with Research Question Three (RQ3), which investigates how institutional contexts influence the work of middle managers in the EUI framework. The findings highlight that middle managers must adapt their approaches to the unique organisational landscapes they inhabit. These landscapes, shaped by organisational culture, leadership style and broader national contexts, significantly affect how EUI-related internationalisation activities are interpreted and implemented. This insight is supported by Kezar (2001), who argues that change in HE is highly contingent on the interplay between structural, cultural, and political dimensions of institutions. In collaborative, decentralised environments, middle managers often leverage relational strategies, building trust, securing consensus, and fostering inclusive engagement.

In other cases, however, the juggler stands on an unstable board in a room where an open window allows gusts of wind to disrupt their balance. This instability represents less favourable contextual factors:

rigid hierarchies, unsupportive leadership, resistance to change or external disruption like lack of national policy support or insufficient funding. These conditions create unpredictability and hinder the juggler's ability to maintain their performance. The findings illustrate that middle managers' sensemaking and implementation activities must account for these contextual variables. For example, managers in hierarchical institutions with top-down directives may focus on precise communication and careful alignment with leadership expectations. Conversely, as seen in the Navigator Dolphin University (section 4.5.3.) those in more collaborative or decentralised environment often rely on fostering relationships, building consensus and ensuring bottom-up engagement.

This study highlights the fact that a one-size-fit-all approach is not viable, either within the EUI framework, or within the same alliance. Middle managers' ability to recognise, interpret and respond to the nuanced influences of their organisational and national contexts is essential. As de Boer et al. (2007) point out, governance in HEIs is characterised by a balance of autonomy and coordination, requiring actors to constantly recalibrate strategies to accommodate institutional realities. Adapting to institutional dynamics becomes a skill in itself - akin to balancing on a shifting surface while continuing the juggling act. By remaining flexible and attuned to their specific contexts, middle managers can embed EUI's internationalisation goals authentically and sustainably within their institutions, transforming these objectives from imposed directives into meaningful, context-sensitive strategies.

5.8.1. Expanding the Metaphor: Implications for Middle Managers and Leadership

The metaphor of the juggler not only illustrates the middle managers' balancing act but also underscores the critical importance of their institutional context. Leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping the 'room' where the juggling act takes place - a supportive environment symbolised by a stable floor and closed windows – which can amplify the middle managers' effectiveness, fostering resilience and adaptability. Conversely, a volatile environment undermines their efforts, leading to diminished engagement and performance. Here the relevance of McNay's (1995) organisational culture framework becomes particularly evident when comparing how middle managers navigated the EUI implementation across different institutional settings. In institution displaying characteristics of the collegial model, such as Navigator Dolphin or Hare University, middle managers described greater autonomy in interpreting the

initiative and adapting it to local realities – a condition that encouraged innovation but occasionally led to fragmentation or lack of alignment with broader institutional goals. Conversely, those operating within bureaucratic or corporate cultures, such as Wolf University and Lynx University, reported clearer structures and formalised channels, which provided strategic direction but often limited their discretionary space and communicative agency. In these contexts, the sensemaking role of middle managers was more constrained, as top-down procedure dominated decision-making. An exception was Wise Owl University, where despite a traditionally bureaucratic structure, strong and committed leadership enabled meaningful sensemaking and bottom-up engagement.

Moreover, this metaphor highlights the interplay between individual agency and systemic constraints. While middle managers bring their own skills, beliefs and strategies, their success is contingent upon the broader institutional ecosystem. Leaders must, therefore, recognise the challenges middle managers face and actively work to mitigate contextual barriers. Doing so can enhance middle managers' capacity to engage stakeholders, align diverse perspectives and drive transformative initiatives like the EUI.

5.9. Conclusions to the Discussion Chapter

The findings of this study have far-reaching implications for HEIs, particularly for those HEIs in newly funded EUI alliances. They highlight the pivotal role of middle managers as agents of change and sensemaking, whose capacity to bridge the gap between strategy and implementation is essential for the initiative's success. By investing in middle managers' professional development, institutions can equip them with the tools, agency and confidence needed to navigate the complexities of internationalisation and implement the EUI's ambitious objectives effectively.

A key insight from this study concerns the transformative potential of fostering a culture of sensemaking within institutions. Middle managers thrive in environments that empower them to make sense of complex initiatives and align them with institutional realities. Such an approach enhances not only the sustainability of internationalisation efforts but also the adaptability of institutions to broader challenges and opportunities. For HEIs embarking on the implementation of newly funded alliances and other complex internationalisation projects, this research underscores the importance of recognising

middle managers as central figures in driving institutional change. Making their role and actions visible will enhance recognition and their authority in involving all groups of internal stakeholders.

From a policy perspective, these insights offer a valuable lens into the practical realities of implementing large-scale internationalisation initiatives. Policymakers can draw from these insights to design more effective policies that better align with the diverse contexts and needs of HEIs. Understanding the variability in how institutions interpret and enact the EUI's objectives can help policymakers develop frameworks that provide guidance, while allowing room for local adaptation.

An unexpected finding of this research is the depth of reliance on interpersonal trust and informal networks during the sensemaking process. While formal communication structures remain critical, middle managers frequently draw on personal relationships to navigate ambiguity and secure buy-in from stakeholders. This reveals the human, relational aspect of institutional change - a dimension often overlooked in policy-focused discussions. The ability to foster trust and collaboration at all institutional levels proves to be a defining characteristic of sensemakers in HEIs.

Another striking observation is the variability in how HEIs interpret the EUI's goals, which has led to diverse implementation approaches within the alliance. Institutions must strike a balance between leveraging this flexibility and fostering shared understanding and objectives.

Ultimately, this research underscores the transformative potential of the EUI, while highlighting the critical, often-overlooked contribution of middle managers. Their ability to engage in sensemaking, build trust and translate strategy into actionable steps is vital for navigating the complexities of internationalisation. Institutions that prioritise middle managers' professional growth, foster a supportive organisational culture, and embrace the relational aspects of change-making will be better positioned to achieve long-term resilience and success.

This re-imagining of the middle managers' role has implications beyond the immediate success of the EUI. It points to broader evolution of HEIs as adaptive, globally engaged organisations. In this sense, the juggling act of middle managers transcends day-to-day challenges, positioning them as architects of a deeper transformation in HE. By investing in their skills, capacity and agency, institutions can bridge the gap

between policy and practice, ensuring that the transformative vision of the EUI is not only realised, but embedded into the future identity and practices of HEIs.

CHAPTER 6 - CONCLUSIONS

This research set out to explore the ways in which middle managers in the context of the EUI make sense of internationalisation, contributing to a broader discussion of their role within HEIs. In doing so, it examined not only the ways in which these individuals interpret and implement internationalisation, but also the broader institutional and systemic factors that shape their sensemaking processes. By investigating these dynamics, the research provided a nuanced understanding of how middle managers navigate the complexities of internationalisation during an era of rapid and uncertain global shifts that necessarily reflect on HEIs, balancing institutional objectives, stakeholder expectations and their own professional identities.

Reflecting on the findings, this study advances the understanding of the *'how'* and *'why'* behind the critical role of middle managers. It reveals that sensemaking is not merely a passive or reactive process but rather an active, creative and relational endeavour. Middle managers do not simply respond to top-down directives; instead, they play a crucial role in translating, negotiating and institutional mandates into actionable strategies. This interpretive process allows them to mediate between senior leadership and frontline staff, fostering trust and alignment in complex organisations such as universities.

Furthermore, this study highlights that internationalisation within HEIs is an inherently intricate and multi-faceted phenomenon, shaped by shifting geopolitical conditions, policy frameworks and institutional culture. As such, middle managers are not only implementers of change, but also key agents who shape the trajectory of internationalisation initiatives. Their ability to engage in sensemaking enables them to manage ambiguity, mitigate resistance and foster institutional adaptability - capacities that are particularly critical in an era of rapid transformations. Building on previous research, such as Laufer's (2019) work on organisational storytelling, this study further demonstrates that effective communication strategies are integral to successful internationalisation efforts. Organisational storytelling has been identified as a powerful tool for sensemaking, allowing middle managers to construct narratives that resonate with diverse stakeholders, thereby reducing resistance and fostering collective buy-in. This research develops these insights by illustrating how middle managers tailor their communication approaches to address

distinct challenges in stakeholder engagement in the EUI, leveraging storytelling as a means of bridging the institutional objectives required by the alliance with localised concerns.

By shedding light on these processes, this study contributes to the broader discourse on internationalisation as a complex and often contested change process within HEIs. It calls for a deeper appreciation of the agency and expertise of middle managers, advocating for their inclusion in strategic discussions and decision-making processes. Ultimately, the findings reinforce the idea that internationalisation is not a top-down imposition but a dynamic and negotiated practice, shaped by those who operate at the intersection of policy and practice.

6.1. Reflection on Key Contributions of this Study

This study contributes to a growing body of research (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Sharma & Good, 2013) that positions middle managers as pivotal agents of change in HE. While much of the existing literature has traditionally focused on the strategic role of senior leadership or the macro-level implications of policy decisions, this research shifts attention to the intermediary space occupied by middle managers. It is within this space that institutional visions are translated into practical realities, requiring middle managers to navigate the complexities of staff engagement, logistical challenges and evolving international networks such as the EUI. An exception is the recent work by Antonowicz et al. (2025), which examines the impact of the EUI on non-academic staff in Poland, offering valuable insight into how internationalisation initiatives are experienced and mediated by institutional actors beyond academic leadership.

By highlighting the interpretive and mediatory functions of middle managers, this study affirms and extends Yardley's (2007) argument about the value of in-depth, context-specific research in uncovering nuanced organisational dynamics. While such research may not always lead to universally generalisable conclusions, it provides transferable insights that enhance our understanding of internationalisation as a context-dependent and relational process. This perspective is particularly valuable in the field of HE, where institutional cultures, governance structures and external policy environments vary widely across regions and contexts.

Moreover, the findings offer a more refined understanding of sensemaking theory by illustrating its dual role in both mitigating institutional ambiguity and fostering relational trust. Middle managers, through

their strategic communication and adaptive leadership, not only clarify institutional directives but also cultivate a sense of shared purpose among academic and administrative staff. The findings also challenge traditional hierarchical leadership models by revealing the extent to which influence and agency in internationalisation processes are distributed rather than centrally controlled.

A particularly significant contribution of this study lies in its demonstration of sensemaking as both an operational and relational process. While earlier research has largely examined sensemaking as a cognitive or interpretive mechanism, this study shows how it also serves as a tool for trust-building, stakeholder engagement and institutional alignment. To my knowledge, this dual function of sensemaking - simultaneously enabling practical implementation and reinforcing social cohesion - has not been sufficiently explored in prior studies, making it a unique contribution to this research.

6.2. Achievements and Implications

This study has provided actionable insights into the ways middle managers enable transformational change through sensemaking processes within internationalisation initiatives. Returning to the central theme introduced at the beginning of this research - the meaning-building - the findings illustrate how sensemaking affects comprehensive internationalisation efforts effectively. The findings highlight the transformative potential of internationalisation when sensemaking is leveraged as a trust-building and meaning-making tool. Rather than viewing internationalisation as a top-down mandate, this study demonstrates how middle managers can use strategic communication and relational engagement to encourage the participation of sceptical or hesitant stakeholders. Their ability to shape narratives, clarify uncertainties and provide a sense of purpose contributes significantly to institutional commitment and the long-term sustainability of internationalisation initiatives.

From a practical standpoint, the findings offer significant implications for institutions aiming to implement internationalisation in an holistic and integrated manner. In particular, this study advocates for the following strategies:

- Investing in professional development: Institutions should prioritise training programmes that enhance communication, negotiation and relationship-building skills. These competencies are

essential for facilitating productive dialogue, addressing resistance and fostering cross-institutional collaboration.

- Engaging stakeholders at an early stage and maintaining continuous dialogic communication: Meaningful stakeholder involvement should not be an afterthought, but an integral part of the internationalisation process. Engaging faculty, administrative staff and other key actors at the earliest stages - and ensuring ongoing dialogic communication - helps build shared purpose and institutional cohesion.
- Adapting narratives to different audiences: Recognising that academic and administrative staff may have distinct perspectives and concerns regarding internationalisation, middle managers should tailor their messaging accordingly. By framing internationalisation in ways that align with the priorities and values of different stakeholder groups, institutions can facilitate greater engagement and buy-in. Adapting narratives to the differing needs of academic and administrative staff ensures greater engagement and buy-in.

Beyond institutional practice, these insights also apply to policymakers and HE leaders. The findings underscore the need to reframe middle managers' roles - not as passive implementers of directive, but as co-creators of meaning and active agents of change. Their deep engagement in sensemaking processes positions them as indispensable actors in shaping internationalisation strategies that are not only operationally viable, but also widely embraced within in HEIs.

By acknowledging the critical role of middle managers and providing them with the necessary support, institutions and policymakers can strengthen the foundation for more sustainable and impactful internationalisation initiatives.

6.3. Lessons Learned and Limitations

Conducting this research within the specific context of a single EUI alliance provided an opportunity for in-depth exploration - but it also imposed limitations. The findings, while insightful, are bound to the unique dynamics of this alliance and the perspectives of middle managers, leaving other stakeholder groups' voices unheard. Faculty members, administrative staff, students and external partners all play a crucial role in the internationalisation processes, and their perspectives could provide a more

comprehensive understanding of how sensemaking unfolds across different levels of the institution. This limitation highlights the need for more inclusive approaches in future studies, as internationalisation is inherently a collective and multi-stakeholder effort. Expanding the scope to include these voices could offer richer insights into the interplay between policy, practice and institutional culture in shaping internationalisation strategies.

Another important lesson lies in the evolving nature of the HE landscape itself. Global disruptions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, economic crises and the rise of populist movements continue to challenge traditional models of internationalisation (Stein, 2021). These factors introduce uncertainty, making it essential to examine how institutions - and specifically, middle managers - continuously reinterpret and reshape their approaches to internationalisation in response to external pressures. A longitudinal perspective could have provided deeper insights into how sensemaking adapts over time, especially in institutions that are not yet sufficiently receptive to deep change. Capturing these temporal shifts would enable a more dynamic understanding of how different organisational structures and leadership models influence the enactment of internationalisation strategies.

6.4. Future Research Directions

Building on these lessons, this study proposes several avenues for future investigation to deepen our understanding of sensemaking in the context of EUAs and beyond:

1. **Comparative analysis:** Expanding the scope to multiple EUAs could offer insights into the varying dynamics of sensemaking across institutional contexts and alliance development stages. Investigating how different organisational structures, leadership models and policy environments shape middle managers' roles could help identify best practices and common challenges in fostering internationalisation.
2. **Inclusion of diverse stakeholders:** While this study focused on middle managers, future research should incorporate the perspectives of academic and administrative staff, as well as students and external partners. Understanding how different stakeholders experience and contribute to sensemaking could provide a more holistic view of internationalisation processes. Additionally,

exploring how middle managers' efforts are perceived by others could help refine sensemaking strategies, so as to better align with institutional and stakeholder needs.

3. Longitudinal Studies: Tracking the evolution of sensemaking processes over time in the same case study alliance or across multiple alliances could reveal the sustainability and long-term effects of these strategies. By observing how sensemaking adapts to changing institutional priorities, leadership shifts and external pressure, researchers could develop a more nuanced understanding of the factors that enable or hinder lasting organisational change.
4. Cultural and National Influences: Examining the role of cultural and national contexts in shaping sensemaking practices could deepen our understanding of how internationalisation initiatives are adapted and implemented across different institutional and national settings. Comparing universities in different geopolitical and cultural environments within other alliances could shed light on the extent to which sensemaking is shaped by local norms, regulatory frameworks and societal expectations.
5. Digitalisation and technological integration: With the growing role of digital tools in HE, future studies could explore how virtual collaboration platforms, AI-driven analytics and digital communication channels influence sensemaking or complicate internationalisation efforts, providing valuable insights for institutions seeking to enhance engagement across borders.

By addressing these areas, future research can further illuminate the complexities of sensemaking in HE internationalisation, offering practical guidance for institutions navigating global challenges and opportunities.

6.5. Final Reflection

Stepping back from the specifics of this research, the study underscores a broader perspective: successful internationalisation is not simply a matter of policy or strategy, but of people and relationships. Middle managers in supportive contexts emerge as the lynchpins of this process, bringing institutional visions to life through trust, dialogue and adaptability. Their role, often underestimated, deserves recognition and support as HEIs continue to navigate the complexities of a rapidly changing world.

In the context of the EUI, this research provokes a rethinking of what internationalisation truly means. It is not merely about mobility flow or compliance with funding requirements; rather, it is about creating meaningful, sustained and relevant change within institutions, not only within the HE area. In this sense the juggling act of middle managers lies not in interpreting the grand directives but in the everyday actions of meaning-making and meaning-building that enable institutions to realise their internationalisation goals in ways that are both aspirational and achievable.

I hope that this study will serve as a foundation for future research and practice, inspiring other ‘jugglers’ to build on its insights and continue exploring the intricate, relational dynamics that drive internationalisation in HE with that “human touch” that will make a difference.

My Personal Journey

Change – Meaning – Transformation: these three words have shaped my life.

As a child of a migrant family, I was born in one country, raised in another, and have moved countless times. Adaptation became second nature—I navigated different cultures, languages, and systems, learning resilience before I even knew what it meant.

Early on, I discovered "translation" beyond words. I translated letters from my grandmother's brother in the U.S., blending English and Sicilian. This curiosity led me to study translation, where I realised that meaning is shaped by context, relationships, and perspective. Mediation became a core skill—whether in personal or professional settings, I found that understanding and empathy could bridge divides.

When I began my PhD, I was a dreamer. I wanted to transform my institution by fostering internationalisation, but I encountered resistance. Small successes, however, came through human connection—a smile, a conversation, listening to concerns. I saw sceptics become supporters, even change agents themselves.

My research journey was humbling. It meant constantly relearning, feeling inadequate, and struggling to refine my focus. Balancing a PhD with a full-time job was exhausting—no weekends, no holidays, just relentless dedication. Yet, through this, I transformed from a practitioner into a researcher, reshaping my perspective along the way.

I pursued this PhD purely out of passion, with no career ambitions attached. But life unfolds in unexpected ways. I changed jobs a month after starting the PhD and again just before submitting my thesis—this time, for an opportunity I couldn't refuse.

Looking back, I realise that when you truly believe in something, even without expecting rewards, life has a way of giving back. Now, I look forward to rediscovering balance—cherishing those who supported me and embracing what comes next.

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Websites:

www.criticalinternationalisation.com

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Ethical Board Approval

Gemelli



Comitato Etico

FONDAZIONE POLICLINICO GEMEL
PROTOCOLLO UNICOTipo Atti: In Uscita
Prot N. 0016367/23 - Del 26/05/2023
SEGRETERIA COMITATO ETICOGent.ma Prof.ssa Antonella Marchetti
Coordinatrice dottorato Scienza della Persona e della FormazioneGent.ma Dott.ssa Agata Mannino
PhD School Scienza della Persona e della Formazione.**Oggetto: Progetto "Sensemaking in Higher Education Internationalisation"**

Gentilissime,

Si comunica che Il Comitato Etico, nella seduta dell'11/05/2023, ha valutato la documentazione pervenuta con email dello 03/05/2023, relativamente al progetto in oggetto. In particolare, è stata valutata la seguente documentazione:

- Research description form;
- Project information for participant;
- Human Research Ethics Application Form;
- Interview questions;
- Modulo di consenso al trattamento dati personali.

Alla luce della documentazione presentata, il Comitato Etico prende atto del Progetto proposto.

Cordiali saluti
Il Presidente del Comitato Etico
Prof. Andrea BacigalupoFondazione Policlinico Universitario Agostino Gemelli IRCCS
Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore
Largo Agostino Gemelli 8, 00168 Roma
T +39 06/30156124 - 5556
comitato.etico@policlinicogemelli.it
www.policlinicogemelli.itSede Legale
Largo Francesco Vito 1, 00168 Roma
Sede Operativa
Largo Agostino Gemelli 8, 00168 Roma
Codice Fiscale e Partita IVA 13109681000

Appendix B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

INTERVIEW GUIDE – MIDDLE MANAGERS

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this project and to be interviewed today.

As you will have read, I'm studying how middle managers may make sense of the EUI implementation of internationalisation in their own institutions.

By "middle managers" I refer mainly to Heads of International Offices – Local Senior Lead / Local Operations Officers for the European Universities Initiative Alliance

The purpose of the interviews is to provide some empirical data for my Ph.D study. The interview will last 40-60 minutes.

Before starting, I'd like to make sure that:

- You've received and signed the consent form, and that you've read the project information sheet.
Is there anything you'd like to ask me? Any concern?
- Approval to record the interview: do you agree that I record this interview? (Press record button when interviewee approves)

As you've seen from the Consent form and the Project information sheet, neither your identity nor your responses will be accessible to other persons.

Getting started: your role at the university

What is your position in the institution?

How long have you been working in this institution?

Guided conversation

- Let's talk about your university and the EUI:
 - a) Could you tell me about your work with the EUI?
 - b) How did it all start?
 - c) How has it been like working with the EUI?
 - d) Have there been any difficulties?
 - e) What have been the challenges?
 - f) What has the impact of working with the EUI been?
 - g) What do you think that the purpose of the EUI is?
 - h) Could you tell me about your experience of working on internationalisation through the EUI?
 - i) Has it been different from how you worked before to work with internationalisation through the EUI?
 - j) Is there anyone else who is involved in leading the EUI in your institution that you think I could talk to?

At this point the first round of interviews could be concluded. The information gathered so far, and most of all the story telling, will help me in first instance to define for each institution if there are more middle managers in other roles relevant to be interviewed for the purpose of this study. In this case, I'll proceed with interviewing them as well.

Finally, from the interpretation of this first part of data, a number of universities (and correspondingly a relevant number of middle managers in each of this university) will be selected for a second semi-structured on-site interview.

The scope of these interviews, will be to guide the interviewee through a deeper conversation to better find out about key concepts related to sensemaking in the specific framework of the EUI. Most of the

questions are presented as prompts to be used only if needed, aim of the conversation is namely to let the interviewees speak freely about their experience of the initiative in their institution:

- 1) Who do you work most closely with?
... and most frequently with?
- 2) Who do you talk to about internationalisation?
- 3) Who do you talk to about the EUI?
... how would you describe the nature of those conversations (regular – formal – informal – sporadic - spontaneous)?
- 4) How do you see the role of staff in this initiative?
- 5) How has staff responded to this project?
...has there been any surprises or challenges?
- 6) Could you tell me about how you see your role being between your own institution and the Alliance?
... and your role in this process?
- 7) How is this process rolled out in your institution?
...is it similar to what it was before being part of the initiative?
...was internationalisation disseminated differently?
- 8) Would you like to tell me something about how the initiative is communicated within your institution?
... do you have any role in that?
- 9) Could you tell me about any changes you have noticed in internationalisation activities since the EUI started?
... success stories that can be shared?
... something that surprised you?
- 10) Is there anything that we haven't talked about, that you would like to share or add – reflections, questions, ideas?

Appendix C

SECOND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

SECOND ROUND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS – CASE UNIVERSITIES

How are decisions made at your institution?

how does this operate in the context of the EUI?

what works well or not?

how as MMs do you navigate this process?

What do you think you do well as an institution and why?

When things work well, what are the elements that make it happen? or

What happens in the face of challenges, obstacles... using the EUI as an example?

Summing up of where you see changes happening, how do you explain that change, and where change is not happening, what it would take to make that happen?

Appendix D

EMAIL TEXT FOR INTERVIEW APPOINTMENT

EMAIL for first contact

Dear ...,

As anticipated by ..., I'm a PhD student at the Centre for Higher Education Internationalisation (CHEI) at Cattolica University in Milan, and I also work at the University of Padua.

Some details on my research.

My study intends to investigate Higher Education institutions participating in the European Universities Initiative (EUI) experience, that is considered a highly complex project deeply changing internationalisation processes in the European Higher Education Area.

Especially, it intends to look at **middle managers' role** in the initiative, at their way of working with and relating to different internal stakeholders in their institution, their experiences in taking part in the initiative, their perception of change through the initiative especially with regards to internationalisation processes.

I'm conducting a qualitative case study based on interviews, and this is the purpose of my writing today.

I've chosen the xxx alliance as a case study, and it would be important for me to interview those senior international officers that had a role in the starting phase of the initiative and also other main actors in the institution, such as project managers or similar roles.

I kindly ask you if you may consider being interviewed. The interview will take you around 45-60 minutes. For more details on the interview itself, please find attached the "Project information for participant". In case you accept to be interviewed, I'll send you an "Informed consent" form to be signed, as well as a Calendly invitation to schedule the meeting.

I appreciate your availability in this issue and thank you very much in advance for your support.

My kindest regards,

Agata

EMAIL for second contact

Dear ...,

my name is Agata Mannino, I'm a PhD student at the Centre for Higher Education Internationalisation (CHEI) at Cattolica University in Milan, and I work at the University of Padua. I got your contact from ..., and I'd like to properly explain my research project to you.

My study intends to investigate Higher Education institutions participating in the European Universities Initiative (EUI) experience, that is considered a highly complex project deeply changing internationalisation processes in the European Higher Education Area.

Especially, it intends to look at **middle managers' role** in the initiative, at their way of working with and relating to different internal stakeholders in their institution, their experiences in taking part in the initiative, their perception of change through the initiative especially with regards to internationalisation processes.

I'm conducting a qualitative case study based on interviews, and this is the purpose of my writing today.

I've chosen the ... alliance as a case study, and it would be important for me to interview first those senior international officers that had a role in the starting phase of the initiative and then also other main actors in the institution, such as project managers.

I've already interviewed ..., and together we think that you could give me another point of view on the topic.

Therefore, I kindly ask you if you may consider being interviewed. The interview will take you around 45-60 minutes.

For more details on the interview itself, please find attached the "Project information for participant". In case you accept to be interviewed, I'll send you an "Informed consent" form to be signed, as well as a Calendly invitation to schedule the meeting.

I appreciate your availability in this issue and thank you very much in advance for your support.

My kindest regards,

Agata

Appendix E

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANT

INFORMED CONSENT

I am a PhD student at the Centre for Higher Education Internationalisation at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Via Carducci 28/30, 20123 Milan, Italy.

I would like to thank you for dedicating your time to participate in the study and be interviewed.

The topic of the study is.

SENSEMAKING IN HIGHER EDUCATION INTERNATIONALISATION: THE CASE OF THE EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES INITIATIVE (EUI)

Agata Mannino

I, _____ (*participant's full name*), declare that I have received detailed information about the study, as follows:

1. My participation in the study is voluntary.
2. The length of the interview will be 30-45 minutes.
3. The interview will be recorded and subsequently transcribed.
4. Participant anonymity will be kept throughout the research by assigning an anonymous code, and separating identifying details and the informed consent form from the interview contents.
5. The data will be used for the sole purposes of the present study.
6. I will have free access my personal data throughout the research.
7. Audio files of my interview will be destroyed upon completion of the study.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix F

PROJECT INFORMATION FOR PARTICIPANT

Dear participant,

Many thanks for your time in taking part in this (online) interview.

My name is Agata Mannino, and I am a doctoral student at the Centre for Higher Education Internationalisation (CHEI) at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (UCSC) in Milan, Italy.

This interview is part of a PhD study entitled “Sensemaking in Higher Education Internationalisation”, and it is part of a project conducted by me under the supervision of Dr. Fiona Hunter and Prof. Catherine Montgomery of the Centre for Higher Education Internationalisation (CHEI).

This study intends to investigate Higher Education institutions participating in the European Universities Initiative (EUI) experience, that is considered a highly complex project deeply changing internationalisation processes in the European Higher Education Area.

Especially it intends to look at middle managers’ role in the initiative, at their way of working with and relating to different internal stakeholders in their institution, their experiences in taking part in the initiative, their perception of change through the initiative especially with regards to internationalisation processes.

By appreciating the demand on your time, I estimate that the online interview should take around 45 to 60 minutes. In case you’ll be invited to a second on-site interview this will take approximately the same amount of time.

Both types of interviews will be recorded and transcribed. A transcript of the interview will be provided to you upon request.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and your responses will remain anonymous. Your name and contact details will not be revealed in the final study, where you will be referred to by a pseudonym or code. Any references to personal information that might allow someone to guess your identity will be removed.

Should you wish to withdraw from this study at any stage, or withdraw any unprocessed data you have supplied, you are free to do so without prejudice.

For any further information, questions or concerns, this is my contact information:

Agata Mannino

PhD Candidate

Ph.: +393383097941

Email: agata.mannino@unicatt.it / agatamannino73@gmail.com

Appendix G

CODE BOOK

CODE BOOK									
Code	Comment	Code Group 1	Code Group 2	Code Group 3	Code Group 4	Code Group 5	Code Group 6	Code Group 7	
Activities to involve	Meetings and other formal activities taken place to involve and inform internal stakeholders								
Believer	The participant is a real believer of the EUI, and it comes out from his/her words								
Bottom-up approach	The EUI is considered a bottom-up project								
DIFF:Brexite	Brexite is considered as part of the reasons for joining an alliance/Brexite is considered as a reason for other effects of the alliance	DIFFICULTIES							
DIFF:Budget	Budget or financial aspects are cited as being an issue	DIFFICULTIES							
DIFF:Covid	Covid is mentioned as having influenced relations, developments, or engagement	DIFFICULTIES							
DIFF:Difficulties main	Difficulties includes any challenge, obstacle or difficult perceived or concretely described by the speaker	DIFFICULTIES							
DIFF:Perception of Alliance	All kind of feelings and perceptions connected to the alliance	DIFFICULTIES							
DIFF:Solution to difficulties	Ways in which the speaker or the institution has tried to solve difficulties	DIFFICULTIES							
DIFF:Workload	Clear reference and understanding of the fact that alliance-related activities are perceived as an add-on, and people are already overloaded with work	DIFFICULTIES							
DISS:Clarity on purpose	The purpose of EUI is not clear and participants are referring to this missing information		DISSEMINATION						
Dissemination	Dissemination refers to any kind of communication activity, tool or procedure related to the alliance		DISSEMINATION						
ENG:Engagement main	Engagement refers to if and how stakeholder are or are not engaged, refers to any topic in the involvement of people or units in the institution 17/01/24, 17-24, merged with What is it about? Either the speaker or people in the institution that are being involved directly and explicitly as what alliance is.			ENGAGEMENT					
ENG:Making understand	How did the speaker tried to make people around the institution understand what alliance is, why it is important, what is its essence.			ENGAGEMENT					
ENG:Motivation	Any reference to motivation, how they tried to motivate people, giving value to the alliance, or words from which you feel the speaker's own motivation			ENGAGEMENT					
ENG:Purpose of the EUI	What does the speaker think of the purpose of initiative			ENGAGEMENT					
ENG:Tailored communication	Communication efforts specific for one stakeholder group			ENGAGEMENT					
ENG:Trust	If and how trust in the person who has the role to implement and involve in the initiative has (or has not) played a role			ENGAGEMENT					
Alliance legal entity	Speakers refer to the legal entity recently achieved by the Alliance, and give to it any kind of sense								
Executive board	Refers to one governmental unit of the alliance								
Felt importance of EUI	Being part of the alliance is felt important, relevant for the speaker him/herself or for the institution								
ID:Identity main	The identity of the institution is referred to as being influenced by the initiative: references (as well not explicitly) are made to the concept of institutional identity				IDENTITY				
ID:negative perception	The perception of being part of the alliance in the institution is negative and not seen as advantageous				IDENTITY				
ID:positive aspect of alliance	Things that are felt to derive directly from the alliance and that are felt to be relevant				IDENTITY				
ID:Transformation	Being part of this initiative has already caused changes in the institution in internationalisation procedures, mind-set, institutional environment				IDENTITY				
Incentives to engage	Different ways used or solutions applied in order to engage people, working units etc.								
Inclusive attitude to collaboration	Refers mainly to relations among partner universities and to collaboration among them								
Internationalisation	Procedures, attitudes, mindset that have changed, slightly or deeply, due to the implementation of the initiative that can be related to the internationalisation of the institution								
Motivation to join the alliance	From what the speaker says you understand which were the motivation to join the alliance or why it is felt to be important to be part of an alliance								
POWR:Hierarchy	The internal hierarchy in the institution acquires importance and influences engagement or any other activity / decision					POWER RELATIONS			
POWR:Leadership	Leadership has a role in decision to be part of the project; leadership is called to "impose" involvement;					POWER RELATIONS			
POWR:Power relations main	Evidences that show power relations in the institution or how powerful roles influence decisions and involvement					POWER RELATIONS			
POWR:Rector's role	Explicit reference to the Rector's (President) role					POWER RELATIONS			
POWR:top-down initiative	The initiative is considered a top-down one, or the words express this way of embedding the initiative among the institution					POWER RELATIONS			
ROLE:Admin staff role	The role or importance of administrative/support staff						ROLES		
ROLE:Internal organisation	Any reference made to how the institution is organised internally						ROLES		
ROLE:Role in home university	The speaker's role in home university (past and present and time)						ROLES		
ROLE:Role in the alliance	The speaker's role in the alliance						ROLES		
Second phase partner	These universities joint the alliance in the enlargement phase of the alliance (important to know to understand the level of integration of the alliance in the institution)								
SM:Sensemaking among partners	Anything that relates to activities that bring back to sensemaking concepts (applied to relations among partner universities), but also that are opposite to it (in which sensemaking has not been applied)								SENSEMAKING
SM:Sensemaking main	Anything that relates to activities that bring back to sensemaking concepts (in the institution) but also that are opposite to it (in which sensemaking has not been applied)								SENSEMAKING
SM:storytelling	Any longer description of how they joint the alliance, what happened internally, how they are organised, what their responsibilities in the alliance are...etc								SENSEMAKING
SM:team-work	Explicit reference to importance go working in teams								SENSEMAKING
Structure of alliance project	Reference to the alliance structure								