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# **THE EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES INITIATIVE: COINING EUROPEAN EXCELLENCE?**

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*AGATA A. LAMBRECHTS, MARCO CAVALLARO & BENEDETTO LEPORI*





# RESEARCH AIMS

To examine the mechanisms which influence HEIs participation in the European Universities initiative and, specifically:

1. To what extent does participation in the European Universities initiative reflect the global level stratification hierarchy cast by rankings?

2. How does the status hierarchy interact with national specificities and the goal of achieving a wide European coverage?

3. Which processes explain the formation of alliances?



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# THE EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES INITIATIVE

The **European Universities initiative** aims to enable the creation of a new organisational form of long-term, sustainable, strategic transnational (regional) alliances of HEIs which are to cooperate in education, research and innovation.

The alliances are called '**European Universities**' and have to consist of at least 3 HEIs based in different countries.

Two types of members - **full members** - HEIs only (until now Erasmus+ and associate countries) and associate members (UK and Swiss HEIs self-funded /funded by the government but apparently considered by the alliances as full members; other HEIs, local government, NGOs, private companies etc.)



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# THE EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES INITIATIVE

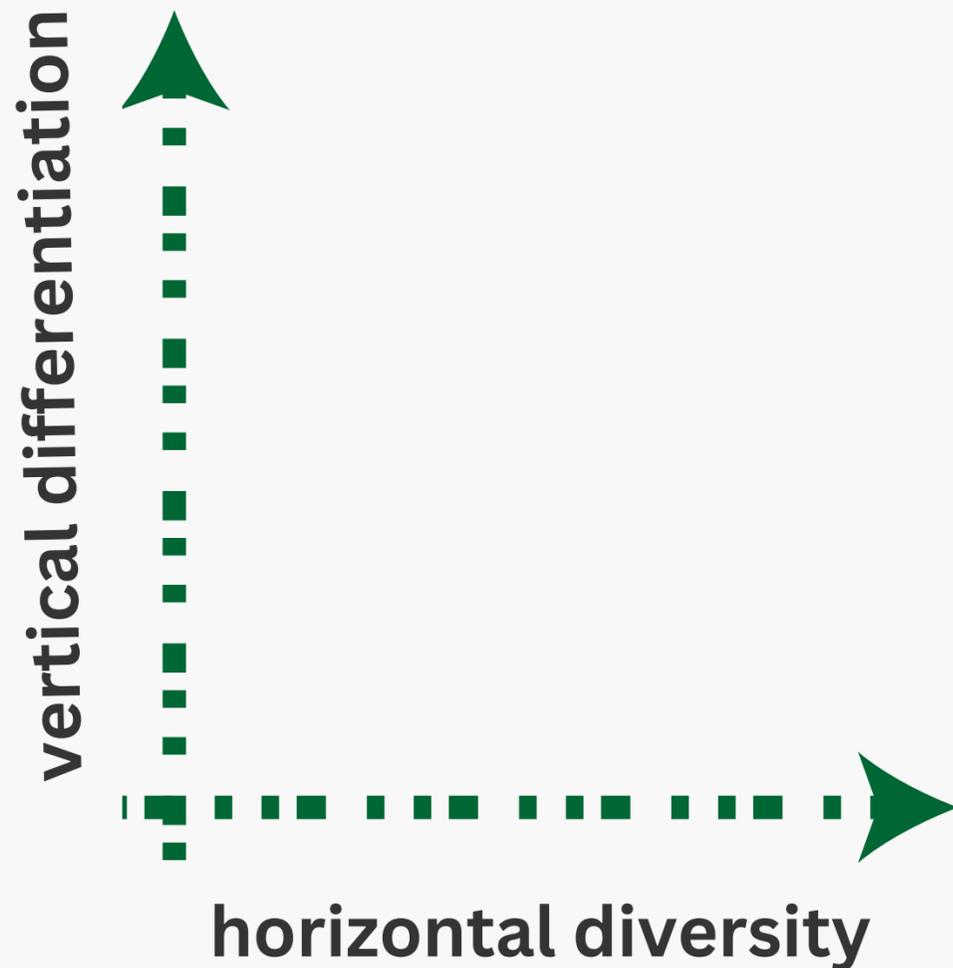
- 2 pilot phase calls (2019 & 2020) attracted 116 applications - **41 alliances** (17 in the 'first wave' and 24 in the second) with more than 280 HEIs involved. Budget: **€287 million** - up to €5 mln from Erasmus+ funds and up to €2 mln from Horizon 2020 for a period of **3 years** per alliance (irrespective of the size)
- Summer 2022 - first long-term support call received 52 proposals (from some 350 HEIs) - 16/17 of the 'first wave' alliances were awarded funding (all with additional partners), with 4 new alliances established. Budget: **€272 million** for a period of **4 years** (bigger overall pot for cont. alliances, smaller for new ones)
- Currently **44 European Universities** with more than 340 HEIs in 33 countries are involved (the 2022 call opened participation to all EHEA countries with e.g. Swiss and UK HEIs participating as 'associate members' )
- By mid-2024 some 60 alliances involving ~500 HEIs are projected (the latest call opened at the end of September)



# DEFINITIONS

**Status** - ascription of social rank / position in a hierarchy

The process of distinguishing HEIs by 'status'



A variety of higher education institutions by type or profile (e.g. research universities, educational HEIs, universities of applied sciences)





# BACKGROUND

European higher education (more recently):

- status diversity (VERTICAL DIFFERENTIATION/STRATIFICATION) as promoted through media and international rankings as well as national policies (namely, the introduction of quality assessment exercises and introduction of performance-based funding and research excellence initiatives e.g. in Germany )
- also affected by supra-national forces at the European level - the Bologna process, EU Framework Programmes and, most recently - European strategy for universities and its four flagship initiatives.





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# BACKGROUND

Research excellence (and research-based teaching) are the key criteria for status hierarchisation cast by rankings

social relationships/cooperation behaviorus tend to be linked to status  
(see Burris, 2004)





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# BACKGROUND

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We respond with empirical evidence to the earlier work of Andrew Gunn, who envisaged two potential scenarios for the initiative:

- an “inclusive [one], as a broader range of institutions have a place where they can find compatible partners”, or
- one which “may comprise of elite institutions, furthering the stratification of higher education in Europe” (Gunn, 2020, p.24).





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# RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. To what extent does the European Universities initiative reflect the global level stratification hierarchy cast by rankings?

## BEYOND STATUS - MECHANISMS OF ALLIANCE FORMATION

### SIMILARITIES

The literature on HEIs highlighted similar levels of research reputation as a core dimension of similarity explaining the formation of HEI networks, including associations (Brankovic, 2018; Dusdal et al., 2021; Zapp et al., 2021), respectively, of HEIs research cooperation (Lepori et al., 2013).

However, the EUI is focused on a broader set of cooperation rationales both in research and—primarily—in education. Therefore, we might expect that also **other dimensions of similarity** come to the forefront, such as disciplinary identity (‘arts’ universities or business schools), type of activity (such as postgraduate education) or geography.





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## BEYOND STATUS - MECHANISMS OF ALLIANCE FORMATION

# COMPLEMENTARITIES

Rooted in the resource-based view of organisations lies the belief that organisations come together to exchange resources and complementary capabilities (Cobeña et al., 2017; Hemel et al., 1989; Kim & Higgins, 2017).

Developing cooperation and synergies in education and research **across Europe** is the key and explicit goal of the EUi. Therefore, we expect the alliances to represent different geographical areas.





## BEYOND STATUS - MECHANISMS OF ALLIANCE FORMATION

### PRE-EXISTING TIES

Organisations are more likely to form alliances with actors with whom they already have ties, organisations they trust and with whom they share a history of a rich exchange of information. This helps to reduce the search costs and mitigates the risks associated with opportunism (Gulati, 1995; Gulati & Gargiulo, 1999).

As for European Universities, therefore, we expect that alliances are preferentially formed between HEIs already having ties, such as **research collaborations** or **being part of the same groups or associations of HEIs** (Zapp et al., 2021); in the European context, we also expect that alliances are formed preferentially between HEIs **already cooperating within the European Framework Programmes** (Paier & Scherngell, 2011) or the Erasmus+ programme (Fumasoli & Rossi, 2021).





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# RESEARCH QUESTIONS

2. How does the status hierarchy interact with national specificities and the goal of achieving a wide European coverage?
3. Which processes explain the formation of alliances?



# METHOD

## STEP 1

- a. Examine status markers, namely the position in the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) for both participating and non-participating HEIs (descriptive statistics)
- b. Alliance composition by status (descriptive statistics)

## STEP 2

- a. Calculate the correlation between the number of participations in EUI and the relative HE system size in different countries using Eurostat data (2018)
- b. Examine the country patterns (descriptive statistics)
- c. Assess how do the geographical patterns relate to institutional status (descriptive statistics)

## STEP 3

- a. Test whether alliances have been preferentially formed among HEIs previously collaborating in the European Framework Programme and/ or through exchange of students via Erasmus+
- b. Examining EUI members' participation in other institutional partnerships and networks preceding the EUI (hand search of various databases).
- b. Directed content analysis of public texts, such as the European University Factsheets and information published on alliances' websites, where the members express what they themselves consider as the basis for their compatibility [sample: 38 alliances excluding the new alliances and two where no relevant information was found in the public texts]





# INSTITUTIONAL PARTICIPATION

## FACTORS CORRELATING WITH INSTITUTIONAL PARTICIPATION IN THE EUI: EUROPEAN LEVEL ANALYSIS

Median	Organisational size	Education intensity	Master's intensity	PhD intensity	International orientation 1	International orientation 2	STEM orientation	Publication intensity	Patent intensity
EUI	1439.42	0.6827	0.3395	0.0416	0.3631	0.1019	0.2518	0.2466	0.0145
Non EUI	141.88	0.3956	0.2029	0.0170	0.2101	0.0688	0.0749	0.0000	0.0000
Mann-Whitney test - Z	19.118***	8.198***	8.768***	11.099***	6.811***	4.887***	12.750***	19.768***	16.648***

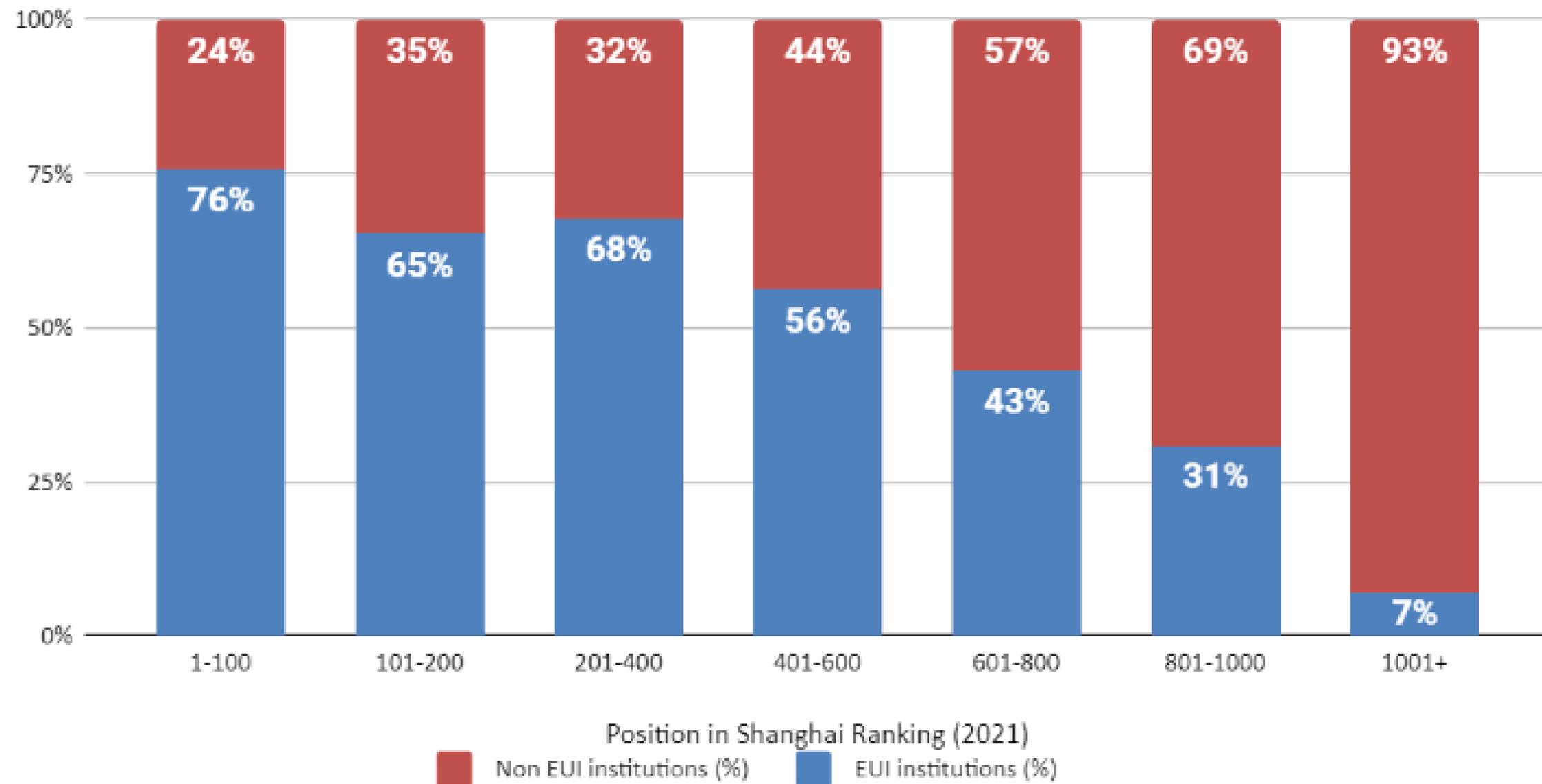
DIFFERENCE SIGNIFICANT AT THE 0.001 (\*\*\*), 0.01 (\*\*), AND 0.05 (\*) LEVELS

**PARTICIPATING HEIS COVER AT LEAST 54% OF THE SHARE OF DOCTORAL STUDENTS IN THE EU!  
FOR ISCED 6-7, IT'S 36%.**



# STATUS

## SHARE OF EUI PARTICIPANTS AND NON-PARTICIPANTS PER ARWU SHANGHAI RANKING (2021) POSITION

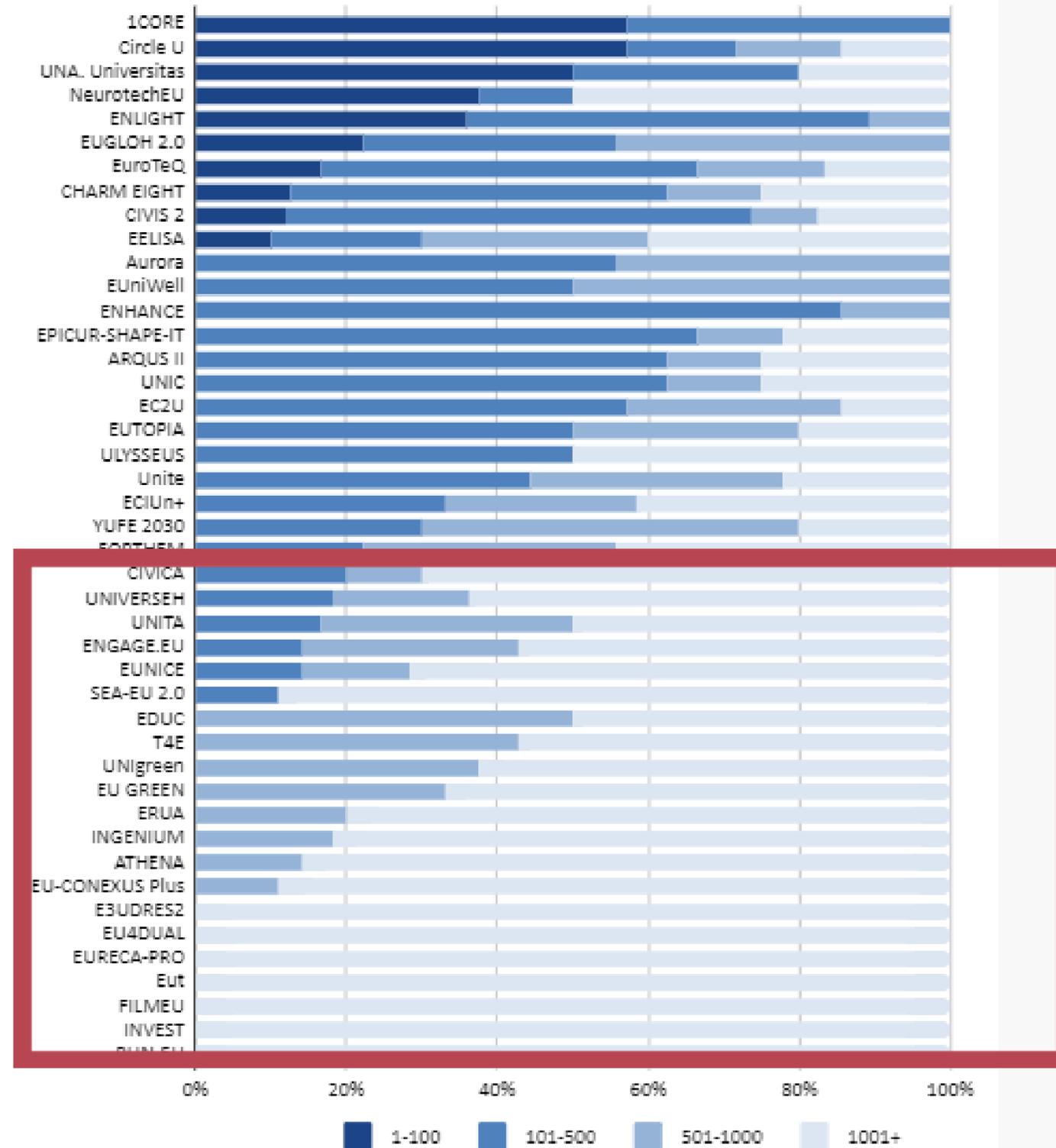




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# ALLIANCE COMPOSITION BY STATUS

COMPOSITION OF EUI ALLIANCES  
BY RANKING POSITION (ARWU  
SHANGHAI RANKING 2021)  
OF MEMBER INSTITUTIONS





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# IN SUMMARY

Global level stratification hierarchy cast by rankings influences both the participation of individual HEIs and—although to a more limited extent—the formation/structure of the alliances within the EUI

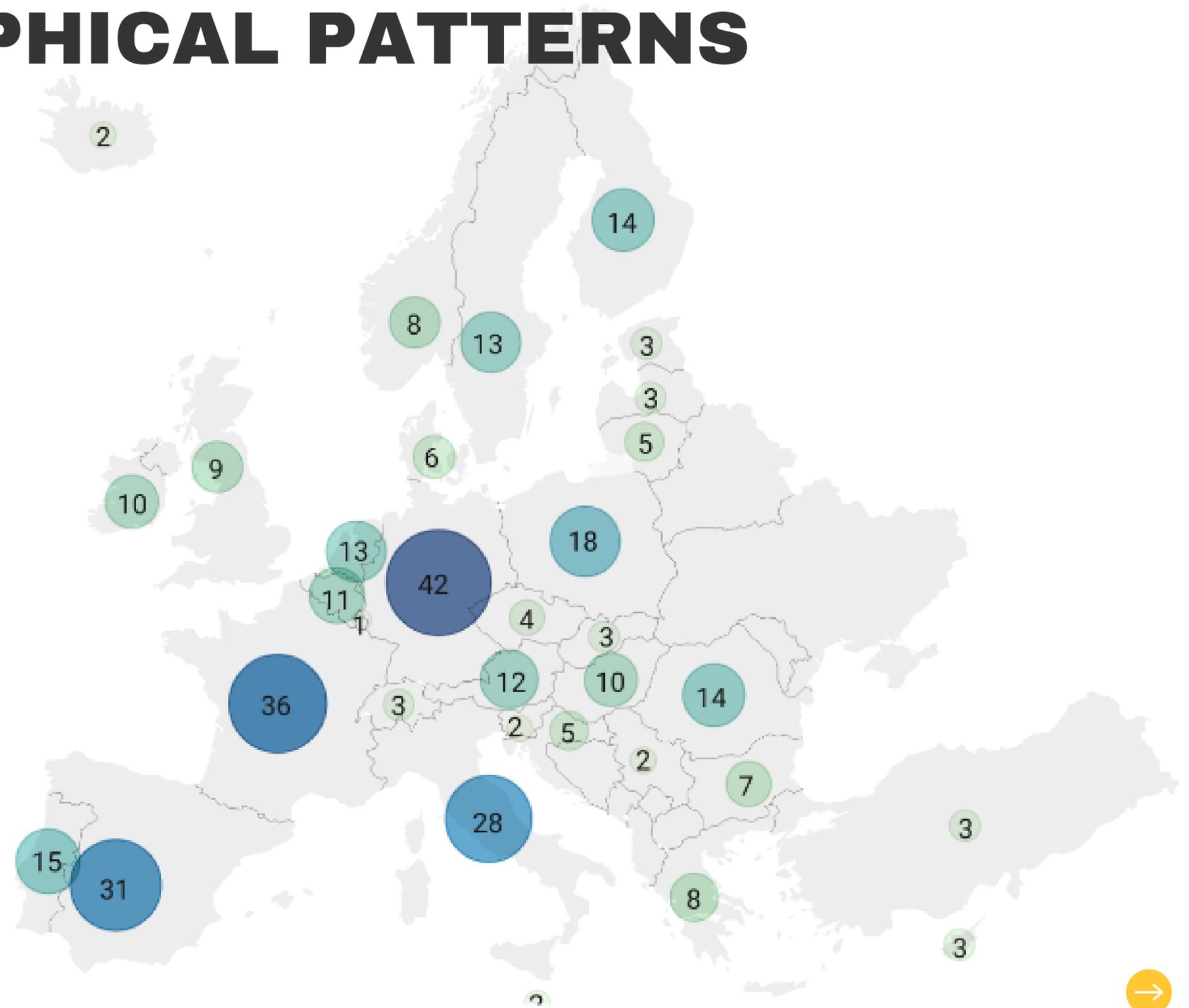




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# GEOGRAPHICAL PATTERNS

NUMBER OF  
PARTICIPATIONS  
IN THE EUROPEAN  
UNIVERSITIES  
INITIATIVE BY  
COUNTRY

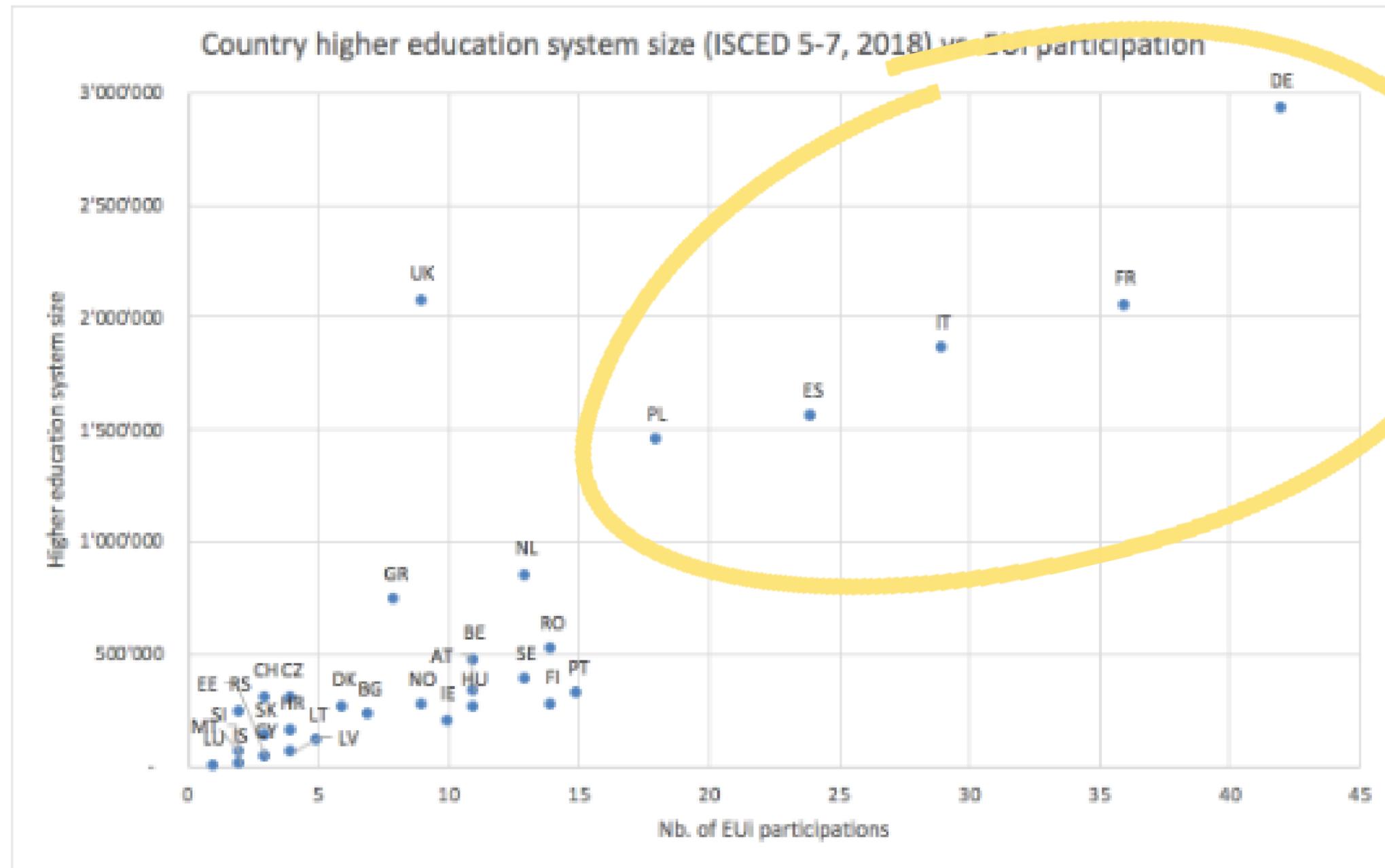




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# COUNTRY PATTERNS - RELATIVE TO SECTOR SIZE

**PARTICIPATION IN  
THE EUROPEAN  
UNIVERSITIES  
INITIATIVE BY  
COUNTRY RELATIVE  
TO THE HIGHER  
EDUCATION  
SYSTEM SIZE  
(ISCED 5-7,  
EUROSTAT 2018)**



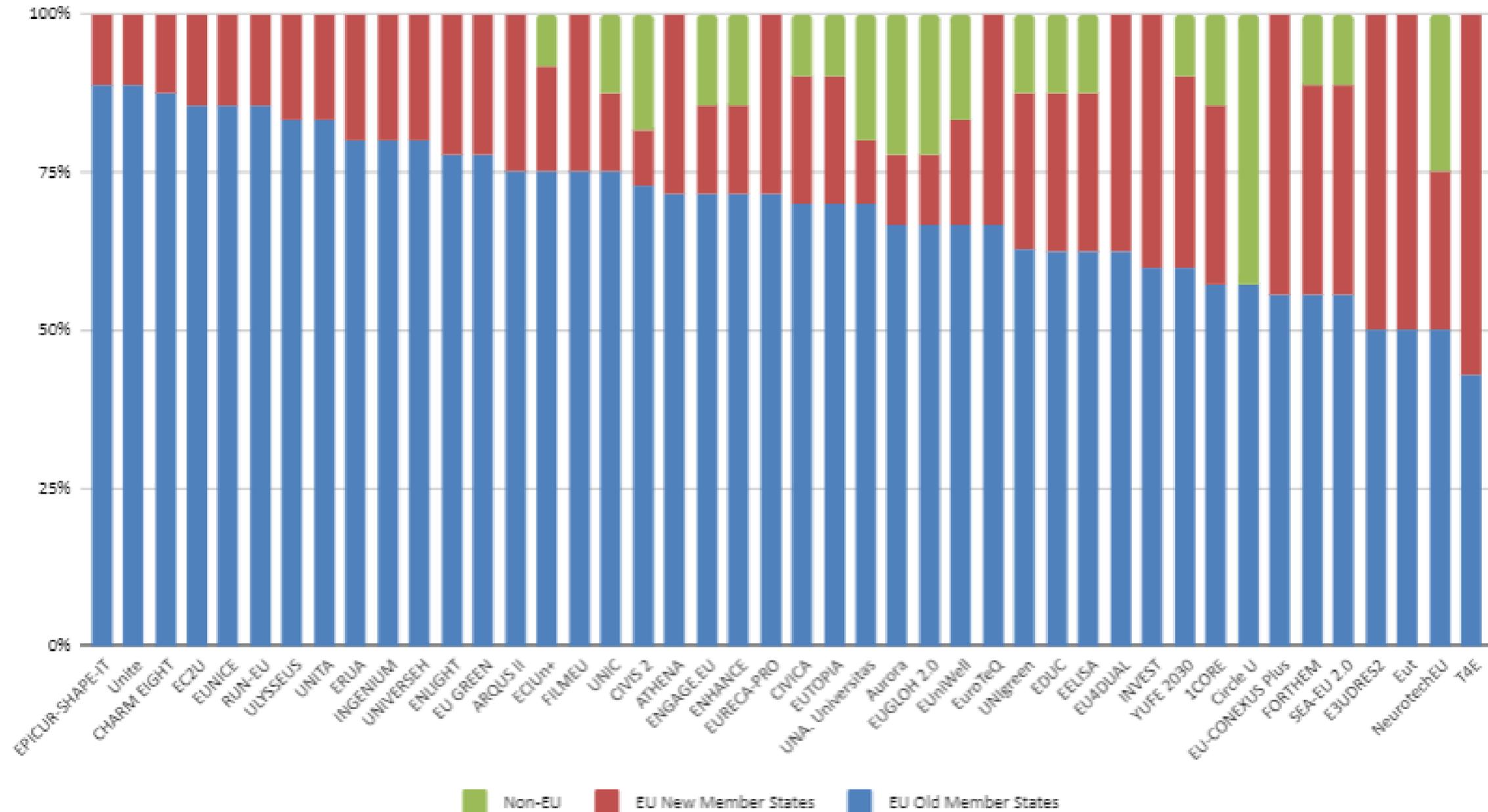


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# COUNTRY PATTERNS - GEOGRAPHICAL COMPLEMENTARIES

SHARE OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS WITHIN ALLIANCES PER COUNTRY TYPE

Share of HEIs within alliances per country type





# COUNTRY PATTERNS - STATUS

- **23%** EU13 (without Serbia)
  - **69%** EU15 (without the UK)
  - **8%** non-EU (UK, Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, Serbia)
- 
- **40%** of all EU15 participations include non-ranked positions
  - **72%** of all EU13 participations are those of non-ranked participations
  - only **25%** of all the non-EU members are non-ranked institutions

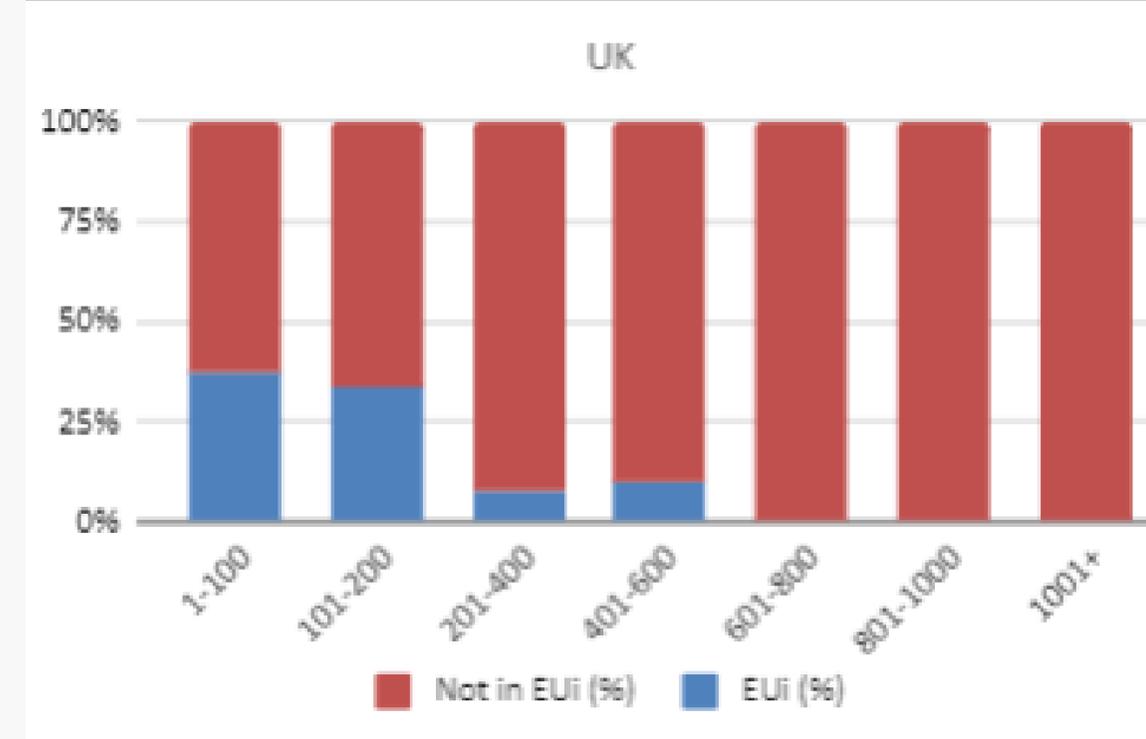
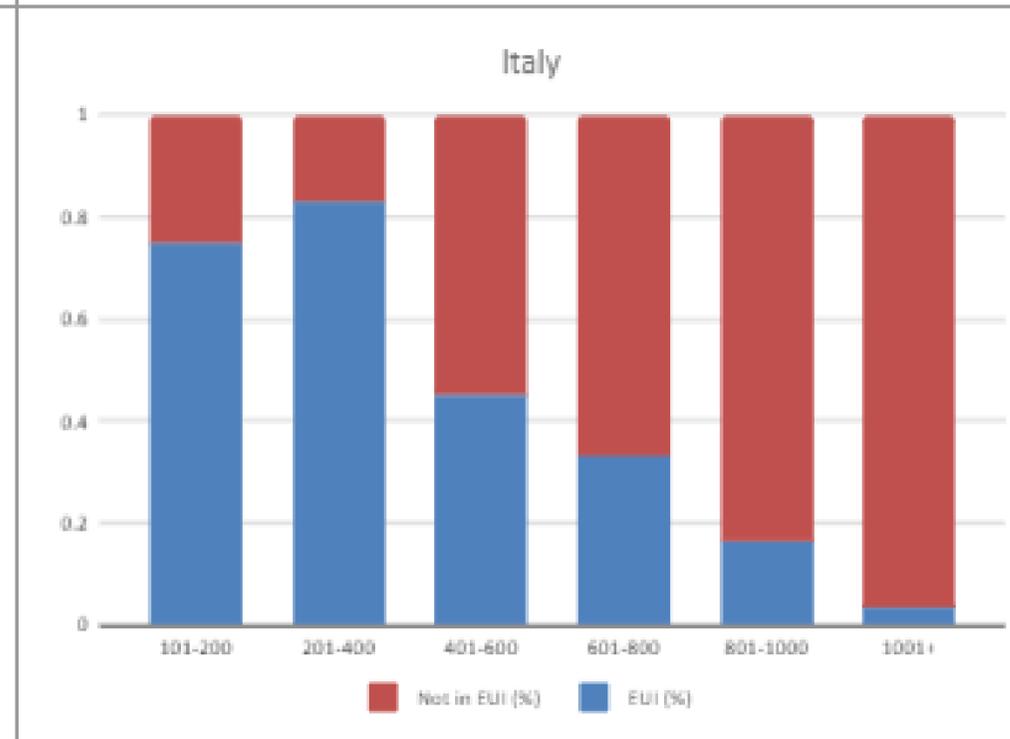
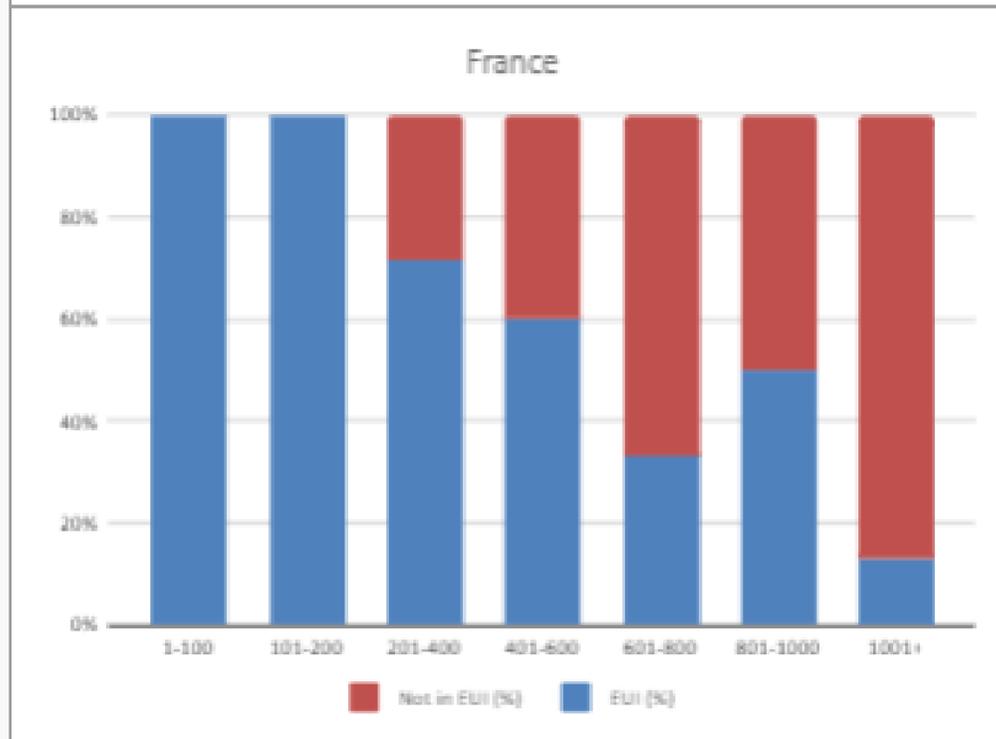
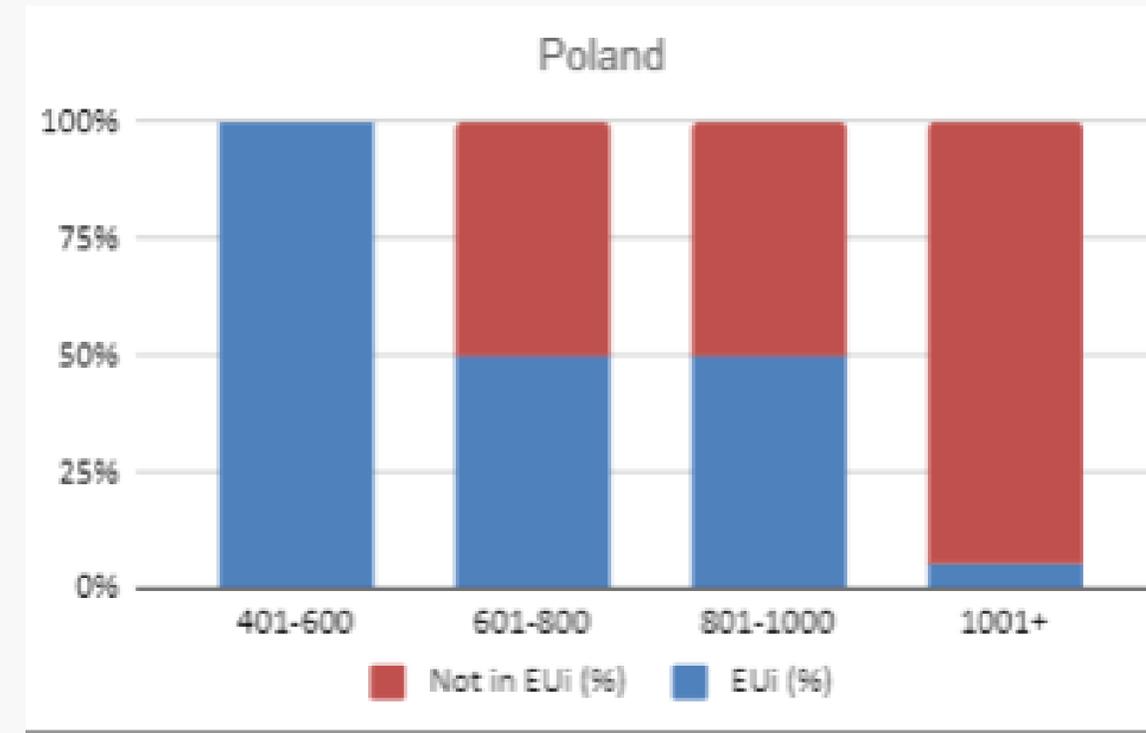
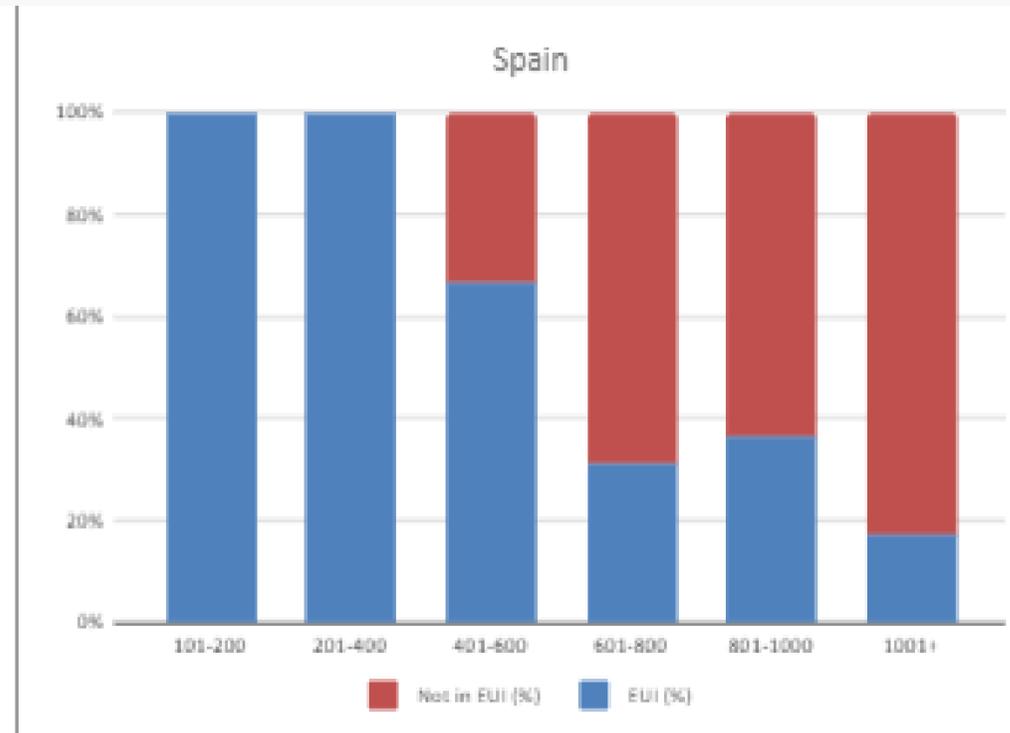
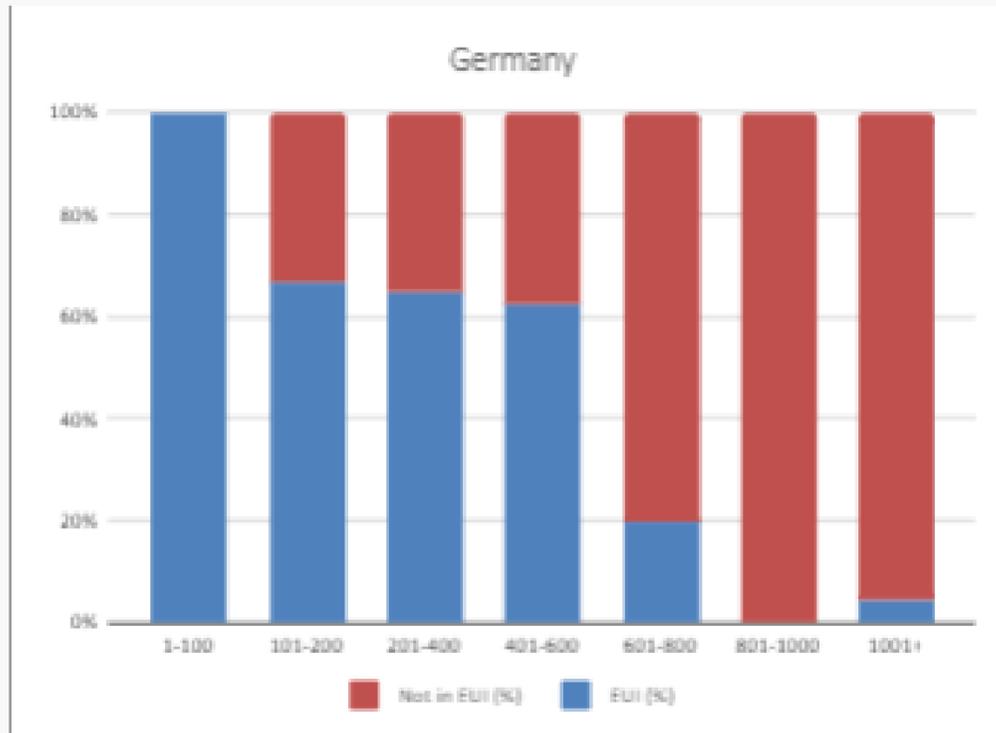
The patterns change somewhat when we look at the new members with an increase of non-ranked positions to:

- **58%** of *new* EU15 participations include non-ranked positions
- **79%** of *new* EU13 participations include non-ranked positions
- **40%** of *new* non-EU participations include non-ranked positions



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# COUNTRY PATTERNS - STATUS





# IN SUMMARY

some of the distinctive policy design measures, namely the requirement for broad geographical coverage and generically framed rules for participation, have generated opportunities for participation of the lower- and non-ranked HEIs in selected alliances, broadening the scope of the EUI beyond the core of top-ranked research universities







# PRE-EXISTING TIES, SIMILARITIES AND COMPLEMENTARIES

A relatively large number of alliances, reflected on their past experiences of (often long-lasting) bi- or multilateral collaboration in either research, education or mobility programmes (14), or through other associations or networks (5):



*"Our Alliance can thus draw on the experience, tested models and methods of collaboration at different academic levels in the various predecessor arrangements, scale these up to the level of the new confederation and enhance them by developing new structures and processes to make a quantum leap in cooperation." (ENHANCE)*

European University	Pre-existing networks and alliances
1EUROPA/Una Europa	4/8 members are also in the Coimbra Group, 5/8 are part of UNICA, 3/8 are in the Utrecht Network, and 4/8 are part of LERU. The memberships overlap in such a way that every alliance member is linked to at least some others through those pre-existing networks.
4EU+	3/6 members belong to LERU, and 3/6 are part of UNICA, with one institution belonging to both these networks.
ARQUS	All but one member institutions also belong to the Coimbra Group ("an association of long-established European comprehensive, multidisciplinary universities of high international standard" <a href="https://www.coimbra-group.eu/mission-statement/">https://www.coimbra-group.eu/mission-statement/</a> ) founded in 1985. The only member not part of Coimbra, shares membership with three other alliance members, in the Utrecht Network, active since 1987, bringing together universities "with a common mission to share best practice and enhance the <a href="https://utrecht-network.org/">internationalisation</a> process for both students and staff" ( <a href="https://utrecht-network.org/">https://utrecht-network.org/</a> )
Aurora	The alliance website states that the alliance originates from the Aurora Universities Network "an association of long-established European comprehensive, multidisciplinary universities of high international standard" ( <a href="https://alliance.aurora-network.global/">https://alliance.aurora-network.global/</a> ), established in 2016 (7/9 members were members).
CHARMEU	All members are also in the Coimbra Group.
Circle U.	5/7 members belong to The Guild, which, since 2016, "comprises twenty one of Europe's most distinguished research-intensive universities" ( <a href="https://www.the-guild.eu/about/">https://www.the-guild.eu/about/</a> ). The remaining two institutions share membership in UNICA, "a community of the Universities of the European Capitals" ( <a href="https://www.unica-network.eu/about-us/">https://www.unica-network.eu/about-us/</a> ) active since 1990.
CIVIS	6/8 members are part of UNICA.
EC2U	All members are also in the Coimbra Group.
ECIUu	The alliance stems from the ECIU consortium of "entrepreneurial universities" ( <a href="https://www.eciu.org/about-eciu">https://www.eciu.org/about-eciu</a> ), established in 1997.
ENHANCE	All members also belong to CESAER, an association of "universities of science and technology in Europe" ( <a href="https://www.cesaer.org/about/history/">https://www.cesaer.org/about/history/</a> ) founded in 1990.
ENLIGHT	Of the 9 member institutions, 5 are members of The Guild, 5 are in the Coimbra Group, and two share membership in the Utrecht Network. Two institutions do not appear to have been part of any pre-existing networks.
EPICUR	Half of the members (4/8) are also members of Eucor - European Campus alliance for cross-border cooperation in research and teaching, which originated from the European Confederation of Upper Rhine universities active since 1989.
EUGLOH	3/5 members belong to CESAER, 3/5 are part of LERU network of research universities ( <a href="https://www.leru.org/">https://www.leru.org/</a> ) active since 2002. One institution not part of either of these networks, shares a membership in the SGroup of "modern, internationally oriented universities" ( <a href="https://sgroup-unis.eu/page/about-us">https://sgroup-unis.eu/page/about-us</a> ), active since 1988, with one other.
EuroTeQ	The alliance Factsheet states that it "emerges from the well-established EuroTech Universities Alliance" with roots going back to 2006 (4/6 members).
UNIC	According to the alliance website, all member HEIs also participate in the longstanding IMISCOE (International Migration, Integration and Social Cohesion in Europe) research network.



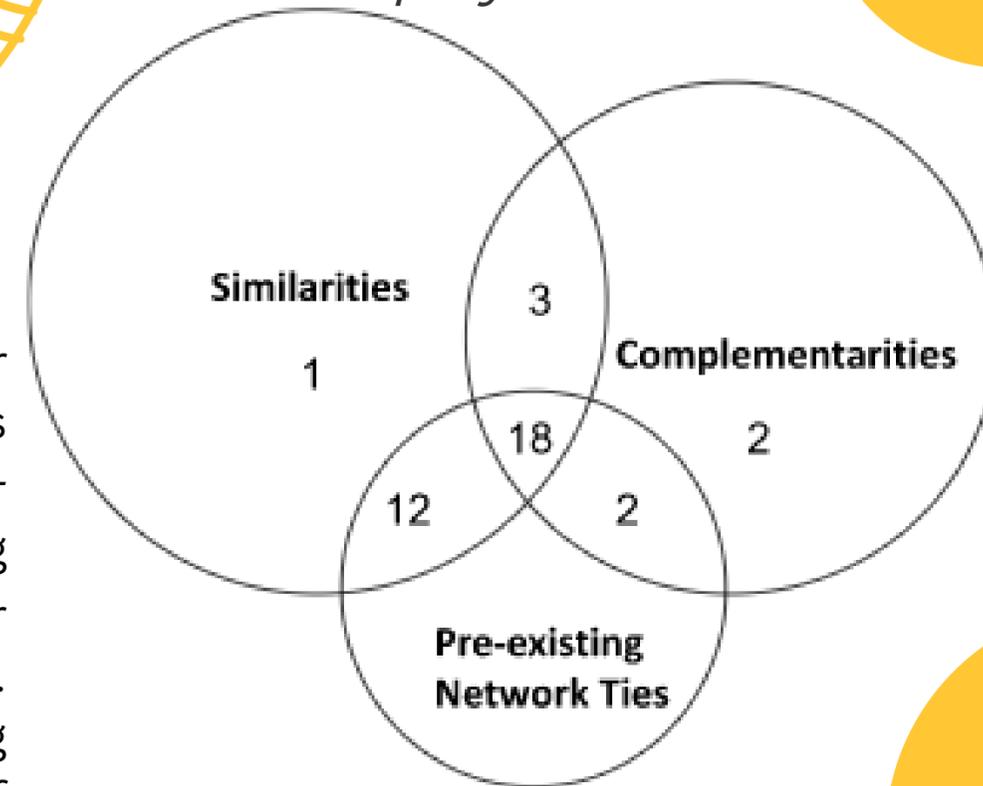
# PRE-EXISTING TIES, SIMILARITIES AND COMPLEMENTARITIES

*"Each member university brings its individual perspective – as shaped by its academic areas of specialisation (...) for the sake of collective value creation that surpasses the potential of single players" (ENGAGE.EU)*



Subject orientation: **most alliances do not have a specific thematic focus and offer a comprehensive range of education opportunities.** Others focus on specific themes and disciplines, such as brain research (NeurotechEU), engineering (EELISA, EUT), global health (EUGLOH- now EUGLOH 2.0) or space (UNIVERSEH)

12 alliances have described their members' **activity profile** as "research-intensive" or "research-based". Only 4 referred to being composed of "education driven" (or both research and education) HEIs. Other alliances (5), reported being composed of a specific type of institutions, such as universities of technology (EuroTeQ, Eut), entrepreneurial (ECIUn - now ECIUn+) or reform universities (ERUA).



Twelve of the alliances highlighted the high national or international standing, i.e. **reputation** of their members (32%)





# PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

1

participation in the EUI largely reflects the stratification hierarchy cast by rankings

2

the requirement for broad geographical coverage and other rules (e.g. each HEI can be a member of only one alliance) have broadened the scope beyond the top-ranked research HEIs

3

within the strata, other mechanisms, in particular, the pre-existing ties and similarities, play an important role in explaining the composition of alliances



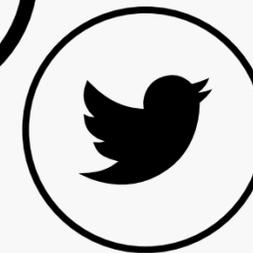
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# THANKS FOR JOINING THE SEMINAR

We would be happy to receive your feedback!



[agata.lambrechts@usi.ch](mailto:agata.lambrechts@usi.ch)



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