FOR-EU LIB Group

Co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union

Executive Summary

University Libraries: Key Players in European University Alliances

Survey on the role and activities of university libraries in European University Alliances

September 2024

This survey was conducted among members of the **FOR-EU LIB group**, an informal network of library representatives involved in European university alliances. The survey was conducted between February and March 2024. It used a public Google form with about ten closed and open-ended questions.

The survey provides important insights into the role and activities of university libraries within European university alliances. With responses from 55 universities representing 27 different alliances, the results underline the dynamic and collaborative nature of the emerging library network within each alliance.

Activities

Open science emerges as a central theme, with many libraries prioritising the integration of open science practices. This is evident from the high engagement in related initiatives. Additionally, there is a widespread effort to establish **librarian networks**, as reflected in the open-ended responses. These efforts aim to build robust, interconnected communities of practice to enhance knowledge sharing and collaboration across borders.

If librarians can easily engage in open science-related work within their alliance because of their almost automatic involvement, it might be beneficial to explore other networks, both within and outside of alliances, beyond open science. Libraries should not only aim to share best practice, but also focus on other library-based services and resources that support the core aims of the alliances. It is therefore important for libraries **to define their role and understand the structure of the alliance** in which they are participating. Participation in hybrid committees and fostering the spirit of the network are essential in this regard.

Although **resource pooling** is in the planning or early implementation stages for many alliances, it is a promising area for future development. The complexities involved in the legal, financial, and organisational aspects indicate that successful resource pooling could become a significant milestone for these alliances.

Operating

The survey results indicate that alliance libraries tend to receive information from project managers and administrators, highlighting a predominantly top-down management approach.

However, given the strong networks and personal communication skills of libraries, there is potential for a more inclusive bottom-up strategy. To deal with bottom-up approaches, which often exclude libraries from project proposals, it is essential to understand the structure of alliances and to take a role in writing project proposals within each area of expertise. This means clearly defining the role of libraries and **maintaining communication with key contacts within the alliances** to ensure they are well informed. Such an approach would encourage wider dissemination of information and participation.

Data shows that 40.7% of libraries reported collaborative activities involving all partner libraries within their respective alliances. Detailed analysis suggests a significant trend: alliances that integrated their libraries early in their activities showed more cohesive and collaborative progress. This underscores the importance of **early and proactive library involvement** to ensure smooth and productive collaboration among all participating institutions.

Reasons for the varying levels of involvement of individual libraries include the initial interest and voluntary participation of libraries, the organisational structure of each university, and the nomination processes within alliances. Alliances with established **library steering committees at an early stage** ensured broader representation and systemic involvement in activities, particularly in relation to Open Science, while others have faced more fragmented participation.

Observed and expected benefits

Librarians anticipate significant benefits from international collaboration, aligning with their goals of **promoting open science, improving access to resources, and enhancing training materials** through joint efforts. The expectation is that shared responsibilities and efficient project management will yield long-term benefits, including the promotion of a European professional culture and increased internationalisation.

However, the observed benefits for librarians are less pronounced than expected. Collaboration and joint projects stand out as the most important observed benefits, while expected benefits like budget efficiency and internationalisation have not yet materialised to the same extent. This discrepancy highlights the challenges in achieving the anticipated outcomes and **the need for ongoing effort and adjustment.**

Challenges

Libraries face several challenges, including **securing funding, navigating different institutional policies, and engaging libraries in alliance activities**. Limited resources, language barriers, and varying levels of awareness of open science among alliance members further complicate efforts. Additionally, the lack of dedicated time and clear roles for librarians within the project organisation hampers progress. Addressing these issues requires improved coordination, clear role definitions, and adequate resource allocation.

There is sometimes a mismatch between the ambitions of alliances and the expectations of libraries of European university initiatives. Libraries' requests to use the alliance budget to address workload or staffing constraints may not be well understood by the alliance governance bodies. However, it is possible to bridge this gap by **emphasising the shared values of equality and diversity in the provision of services and resources.** Developing a common language for communicating with alliance governing bodies and creating an environment that facilitates such expression can help to address these issues.

Future

There is a strong interest in expanding collaborative activities, particularly in open science, but areas of activity could go beyond open science. Planned initiatives include integrating open science into existing projects, organising workshops, establishing library networks, improving training in research data management or implementing innovative approaches, such as the French Open Science Discovery Week. Other initiatives beyond open science such as **developing a Library Network Charter, fostering interaction with society, and experimenting with organisational models** (designing expert groups, cooperation between alliances, etc.) demonstrate proactive efforts to harness library expertise and resources to advance common goals and address emerging challenges in higher education and research.

Overall, the survey underscores the crucial role of libraries in advancing the goals of European University Alliances. Continued efforts to build library networks, share best practices, and pool resources will be essential for the future success and impact of these alliances.

More information

- Quick presentation, recommendations and survey results are available here
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