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Citation

Paulissen, T., Fraussen, B., & Van Hecke, S. (2022). Individual and collective representation: the organisational form of higher education lobbying in the European Union. *European Journal Of Higher Education*. doi:10.1080/21568235.2022.2105372

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



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To cite this article: T. Paulissen, B. Fraussen & S. Van Hecke (2022): Individual and collective representation: the organisational form of higher education lobbying in the European Union, European Journal of Higher Education, DOI: [10.1080/21568235.2022.2105372](https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2022.2105372)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2022.2105372>



Published online: 07 Aug 2022.



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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Individual and collective representation: the organisational form of higher education lobbying in the European Union

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ABSTRACT

Recent scholarly work on higher education institutions (HEIs) within an EU context has focused on how universities and their core activities have been affected by EU education policy. The organisation of HEIs in order to shape European decision-making on higher education, mainly through their presence in Brussels, has received much less attention. This article therefore focuses on how HEIs organise their EU representation and explains their choice for a specific *organisational form*, distinguishing between individual (i.e. a Brussels office), collective (i.e. via an association) and mixed representation (the combination of both a Brussels office and membership of an association). After systematically mapping the organisational form of 250 HEIs, we apply a mixed methods design to test our hypotheses derived from previous research on interest representation and lobbying. Our findings illustrate that the distance from Brussels is a key factor in the decision to open a Brussels office or join an association, whereas financial resources appear imperative for combining both forms of representation. Furthermore, we identify additional underlying motives for choosing a particular mode of representation, in particular the importance of information exchange, visibility and networking.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 26 October 2021

Accepted 30 June 2022

KEYWORDS

Higher education;
representation; lobbying;
organisational form;
European Union

Introduction

In September 2019, the League of European Research Universities (LERU) published *Universities and the Future of Europe*, a paper aimed specifically at the European Union (EU) institutions. The goal of this publication was to influence the agenda of the new European Commission while also allowing newly-elected Members of European Parliament (MEPs) to gain a thorough understanding of EU policy on research, innovation and education. Its introduction exhibits a clear aspiration to reach a variety of policy goals such as extra funding via the Multi-Annual Framework 2021–2027. It concludes with the following statement:

We are proud of our engagement in Brussels, Europe and beyond, working with many politicians, administrations and stakeholder organizations. We are looking forward to continuing this close working relationship with you in the period 2019–2024. (LERU 2019, 5)

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LERU presents itself as an association actively representing higher education institutions (HEIs) and their interests at the EU level, one that is also explicitly attempting to influence European policy and policymakers in Brussels. This mirrors the shift of the European public sector towards multi-actor arrangements, as non-state actors such as interest groups and stakeholder organisations increasingly participate in policy-making and often organise themselves into European associations to do so (Hanegraaff and van der Ploeg 2020). In the higher education and research sector, HEIs are clearly performing similar undertakings, yet relatively little is known about their pursuit of influence on European policy (see also Vukasovic and Stensaker 2018). This article attempts to be a preliminary exploration of this topic, thus providing insights into the ways higher education actors organise themselves to represent their interest at the EU level.

Existing literature on HEIs in the political framework of the EU has focused mostly on the relationship between European policy and changes in national policies, as well as the effects of these changes on HEIs and their core activities (see Elken and Vukasovic 2014; Enders et al. 2011; Gideon 2015, 2017; Tavares and Sin 2018). Research on HEI involvement in European policy has traditionally been fairly limited and mostly focused on how they function within the confines of the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Beerkens (2008), for instance, studied the sector's push for the institutionalisation of a 'European Higher Education and Research Area', while other scholars tackled topics such as student participation in EHEA policy-making (Klemenčič 2012) or agenda-setting in the Bologna Process (Yagci 2014). More recent literature has increased our understanding of (trans)national actors representing multiple HEIs, such as university alliances or other stakeholder organisations, and their activities (see Vukasovic and Stensaker 2018; Vukasovic 2017; Nokkala and Bacevic 2014; Fumasoli, Stensaker, and Vukasovic 2018). In the last few years, these actors have become increasingly present on the European stage, where they are mandated to 'act as advocates of the interest of their members regarding different European actors, including EU institutions' (Vukasovic and Stensaker 2018, 350).

However, while higher education policy, as many other public policy domains, is undeniably 'multi-s' – multi-level, multi-actor and multi-issue – in nature (Chou et al. 2017), the scholarly focus on the aforementioned (trans)national actors has left HEIs largely underexposed as entities that actively pursue their interests at the European level. While questions on how and why universities and other institutions seek influence and/or representation in the European policy arena are often discussed by solely looking at the alliances/stakeholder organisations and their activities, equal value could lie in exploring the ventures of *individual* HEIs. How do they attempt to weigh on policy decisions? What different avenues of interest representation do they pursue? An important step towards a better understanding of the role individual HEIs play in shaping European policy involves examining how these institutions organise themselves politically to make their voices heard at the European level. The goal of this article is thus to identify and explain the organisational form of the representation of HEIs in the EU. Our research analyses the role of organisational characteristics as well as specific motives for choosing a particular organisational form, thereby complementing existing studies into the organisational representation of institutions at the EU level (Donas and Beyers 2013). The central research question is: *Why do HEIs opt for a specific organisational form to represent their interests at the EU level?*

The next section introduces our theoretical framework and corresponding hypotheses, for which we build upon previous research on lobbying and interest representation. Subsequently, we clarify our mixed methods research approach designed to achieve both generalisation through a quantitative segment and a deeper understanding via a qualitative part (Creswell 2003). The analysis provides a descriptive overview of the organisational form of the 250 HEIs in our population based on a systematic mapping, as well as a discussion of key results from the multinomial logistic regression analysis. In the qualitative segment, we explore possible motives for opting for a specific organisational form based on a thematic analysis of 10 interviews with representatives of several HEIs and HEI associations from our population.

The combined results of our quantitative and qualitative analysis show that an HEI's choice for a specific type of organisational form at the European level is informed by factors such as financial resources, as well as the geographical distance to Brussels. In addition, motives such as information collection and exchange, visibility and networking also play an important role. We clarify these key findings and address their broader implications in the conclusion of this article.

Theoretical framework

Organisational form as a concept knows a lengthy history in organisational studies, and over the past two decades has been increasingly applied to study how both societal groups, as well as public and private public institutions organise themselves to represent their interests at different levels of government (e.g. Albareda and Braun 2019; Halpin 2014; Marquez 2016). To determine which organisational form is most suitable, the following question is key: 'How should we be organized to achieve our aims and mission?' (Halpin and Nownes 2011, 59).

In this paper, we build upon Bouwen's seminal work (2002, 2004), who applied the concept of organisational form to analyse how interest groups organise themselves as they attempt to influence EU institutions. Here, a core distinction is made between *individual* and *collective representation*: the first pointing to an actor attempting to lobby policymakers and public policy on its own, while the second indicates cooperation with other political actors in order to reach certain policy goals. The impact and consequences of this decision was described by Bouwen (2002) in his theory on the access of corporate interests to the EU institutions. He states that the organisational form of the representation of a company determines which *access good* or type of information they are able to deliver to European policy makers, which in turn shapes their chances of gaining access to specific EU institutions. Donas and Beyers (2013), in their study of the organisational form of regional representation at the EU, provide a concrete operationalisation of these two concepts of individual¹ and collective representation: they distinguish representation via a liaison office in Brussels from representation through transregional associations, respectively. Extrapolating this distinction to our discussion of the organisational form of higher education representation, we distinguish between 'liaison office in Brussels' and 'membership of an association/network/organization' (e.g. LERU). However, one must also take into account that actors can choose to combine multiple organisational forms (see Baumgartner and Leech 1998) and that these two forms are

thus not mutually exclusive. When individual is combined with collective representation, we use the term ‘mixed representation’.

The hypotheses that we present below are embedded in and deducted from research on interest groups and interest representation, with the central assumption being that lobby actors have some agency in choosing how they engage in advocacy (Bouwen 2002; Donas and Beyers 2013; Gray & Lowery, in Donas and Beyers 2013).

A first variable involves the resources of HEIs and their associations. Bouwen (2002) and Bernhagen and Mitchell (2009) state that the more financial resources an actor possesses, the more likely it is to turn to individual representation, with the opposite being true for collective representation, as this forms an effort to maximise the little resources available. This is known as the *Resource Push Hypothesis* (Donas and Beyers 2013), which forms the foundation for the first two hypotheses:

H1: More financially resourceful HEIs are more inclined to pursue individual representation.

H2: Less financially resourceful HEIs are more inclined to pursue collective representation.

In addition, Marks et al. (1996) formulate the *Resource Pull Hypothesis*: when an actor receives many (financial) resources from the EU, they are much more likely to be active on the European level and to strive for individual representation, as they are aware of the EU’s resource pools and the possibility to benefit from this (Marks et al. 1996). Furthermore, the mere possibility of EU funding can be a motivation for an interest group to locate themselves close to policy makers (Marks et al. 1996). This leads to the following hypothesis:

H3: HEIs that receive more financial resources from the EU are more inclined to pursue individual representation.

Furthermore, the type of HEI can have an influence on the choice of organisational form, as is the case with corporate entities (Bouwen 2002): a large corporation might look at the EU as an important conversational partner with a legal framework crucial for their operations, making it more valuable and important to open a liaison office in Brussels to stay in direct contact with European policy makers (see also Mayrhofer 2014). At the same time, small companies might opt for membership of an association as this enables them to stay informed of legal and political changes on the European level and shape EU policy on (a more limited set of) issues that are of concern to them. Such a distinction might also apply to a large research university on the one hand and a small university of applied science on the other, resulting in different strategies and/or approaches to European policy makers. There is no uniform categorisation of HEIs for all EU Member States. Belgium, for example, differentiates between universities and *hogescholen*, also known as universities of applied science, but this classification does not apply to the United Kingdom, for instance. To accommodate for this lack of an overarching classification, we chose to apply the university/non-university dichotomy, resulting in the following hypothesis:

H4: Universities are more inclined to pursue individual representation than non-university HEIs.

Finally, EU membership of the country where an HEI is located and the geographical distance to Brussels are two other factors that might shape the choice of organisational form.

Considering EU membership, Bernhagen and Mitchell (2009) state that Norwegian corporate actors lack a representation in Brussels through MEPs or a national government since they originate from a non-EU member state and are therefore more likely to pursue individual representation. Considering that this might also be the case for HEIs leads to H5:

H5: HEIs originating from non-EU member states are more inclined to pursue individual representation.

On the subject of geographical distance, Borck and Owings (2003) state that a larger distance to Brussels results in higher transportation costs, which is something actors wish to avoid. Organisations in the periphery of the EU will therefore be more inclined to establish themselves in the ‘state capital’ (Borck and Owings 2003, 142), in this case being Brussels. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H6: The larger the distance between Brussels and the country in which an HEI is based, the more inclined an HEI will be to pursue individual representation.

Research design

To test the above hypotheses, this article uses a mixed methods design as it is best suited to achieve both generalisation through a quantitative segment and a deeper understanding of a certain phenomenon via a qualitative part (Creswell 2003).

Quantitative segment

The quantitative part of the research analyses the effects of different variables on the organisational form of HEIs. As we focus on the representation of HEIs at the EU level, we included all HEIs that have education as a core activity, and demonstrated a minimal amount of political engagement at the EU level. To identify these HEIs, we selected all 250 HEIs that are registered in the European Transparency Register, an approach that has frequently been used to identify (bottom-up) populations in research on lobbying and interest representation at the EU level. As argued by Berkhout et al. (2018), the Transparency Register ‘comes closest to such a bottom-up overview of policy-active groups’, as it is ‘explicitly intended for all types of organisations showing some interest in the EU’ (Berkhout et al. 2018, 50–51). Furthermore, the importance of registration in the TR has only increased in recent years. As clarified by Bunea (2018, 379):

Access to Commission and [European Parliament] decision-makers is conditioned upon joining the Register and complying with its information disclosure requirements and code of conduct. Although the Register is voluntary, decision-makers meet only with registered organisations. This makes it *de facto* mandatory (...).

When one or more faculties/departments of an HEI are independently registered, only the institution as a whole is included in the population.

The data collection involved a systematic mapping of these organisations, a technique regularly used in research on interest groups and their mobilisation in a specific environment (Halpin and Jordan 2012; Berkhout and Lowery 2008; Donas and Beyers 2013). This article combines data from European and national registers/sources in order to

Table 1. Operationalisation of variables and source of data.

Variable	Operationalisation	Source of Data
Individual Representation	Office/establishment in Brussels	European Transparency Register – Most recent registration up to 2020
Collective Representation	Membership with an association/network/etc.	European Transparency Register – Most recent registration up to 2020
Mixed Representation	Combining individual and collective representation	European Transparency Register – Most recent registration up to 2020
Financial Resources	Lobby budget in €	European Transparency Register – Most recent registration up to 2020
EU Financing	Subsidies received from the EU since 2007 until 2018 in €	Financial Transparency System of the European Commission
Type	University status in country where HEI is established	Government website
EU Membership	Status as EU Member State of the country where HEI originates from	Own calculation
Distance	Distance in KM	Own calculation

operationalise the independent and dependent variables discussed in the theoretical framework. Table 1 shows how all variables are measured and the specific data sources. The European Transparency Register allowed us to collect information on an HEI's organisational form and its budget, for which the most recent registration of the institution was used up until January 2020. The dependent variable *Organisational Form* distinguishes four forms: (1) *No representation*; (2) *Individual representation*, (3) *Collective representation*, which we operationalise by observing whether, according to the Register, a specific HEI has an office/establishment in Brussels and/or is a member of an association/organisation/network respectively; and (4) *Mixed representation*, since HEIs can also opt for a combination of individual and collective representation (Baumgartner and Leech 1998). For lobby budget, our operationalisation of *Resources*, the Register displayed either a specific number or an estimation between two values. If the latter was the case, we took the average of the two numbers. When looking at *EU Funding*, we used the Financial Transparency System (FTS) which tracks direct contributions from the European Commission to a wide variety of actors between 2007 and 2018, and calculated the total amount of funding received since 2007 (if available). *Type* was determined by consulting the websites of national/regional governments in order to see if they classify a specific HEI as a university or not, while *Distance* was based on our own calculations.

Qualitative segment

The quantitative approach described above provides first insights into the factors that might shape the organisational form of an HEI's political representation at the EU level. A next step in our research involved obtaining a deeper understanding of what drives the choice for individual and/or collective representation via a qualitative analysis. Through semi-structured interviews with representatives of institutions in our data-set, we aimed to gather more insight in the motives underlying this decision. Table 2 provides an overview of the interviewed HEIs and the organisational forms they rely on to represent their interests in Brussels. While a random sample of over 40 institutions selected out of the Transparency Register were contacted, only six responded positively, which is likely related to the fact that the data collection occurred at the early stages of the Covid-19 crisis (April 2020). Thus, in order to attain additional insights and triangulate the

Table 2. Overview respondents representing HEIs and their input on the organisational form of their institution.

Resp.	Institution	Country	EU Funding	Budget	Organisational form
1	No explicit description, university	Cyprus	€53.876.857,00	€25.000,00	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Part of a shared national representation office • Member of European organisations and networks aimed at universities • Supervisors, academic staff and researchers in committees and groups of the EU
2	No explicit description, university	Italy	€27.509127,00	€149.999,50	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Office in Brussels • Member of several networks • Through Italian representation in Brussels • Researchers in strategic positions in EU committees • Delegates members to strategic programmes • Alumni that achieved a position in the European Commission through financed internships
3	Cantonal University	Switzerland	€119.160.323,00	€17.499,50	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Office in Brussels • Member of several associations • Through Swiss Mission at the EU • Researchers in strategic positions in EU committees
4	Polytechnic University with multiple campuses	Norway	NA	€74.999,50	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Office in Brussels • Attempts to be 'adopted' by MEPs from a different country • Participation in several local platforms and membership of a network
5	Federal Polytechnic University	Switzerland	€386.425.446,00	€37.499,50	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared office in Brussels with other universities • Member of several associations and networks • Through Swiss Mission at the EU
6	No explicit description, business school	France	€3.844.222,00	€4.999,50	Respondent 6 takes on full representation on their own, without any additional resources. They attend hearings, keep in touch with MEPs and senior officials and is present in Brussels three to four times a year.

responses of the representatives of the HEIs, we also contacted all 28 associations registered in the European Transparency Register and conducted interviews with representatives from four associations that responded positively to our interview request (see [Table 3](#) for an overview). This offers the potential to investigate the underlying motives from a different perspective, namely those of associations. Our respondents reflect four different types of associations, 3 of them gather HEIs within the same country (albeit in different ways) and 1 being a transnational association (gathering HEIs of 3 neighbouring countries). While this approach yielded valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge that these respondents consider the question of organisational form from another point of view, and might emphasise more general points shared by all their members, while individual HEIs could highlight more specific reasons for choosing a particular organisational form, tailored to their situation and objectives.

Table 3. Overview respondents representing associations.

Respondent	Association	Budget
7	Cross-border University Alliance – 5 universities spread over 3 countries	€17.499,00
8	Association for HEIs in a specific region, 8 in total	€149.999,00
9	National association for 14 universities of applied science	NA
10	Strategic partnership between 3 universities in a specific region	€74.999,00

Results

Quantitative research: multivariate analysis of organizational form

The distribution of variation in *Organisational Form* is displayed in Table 4. Out of 250 HEIs, 146 do not have any representational form in Brussels, while 14 of them solely have an office/establishment, 76 are only members of an association, and 14 combine both forms. This means that, in total, 28 HEIs have an office in Brussels and 90 institutions are members of an association. This descriptive overview provides some first relevant insights. HEIs that pursue collective or mixed representation have, on average, a higher budget. Furthermore, if we compare HEIs with some level of representation to those who are absent in Brussels, we notice that the latter on average receive less EU funding, and are also more distant from Brussels.

Our quantitative analysis aims to study the effect of 5 independent variables on the organisational form of 250 HEIs. These are the continuous variables *EU Funding*, *Distance* and *Resources* and the categorical variables *University Status* and *EU Membership*. Due to skewed data distribution for the continuous variables, we used log-transformation to improve the model fit. We perform a multinomial logistic regression to take into account the four categories of the dependent variable. ‘No organizational form’ is used as a reference category, as we are interested in how our independent variables are related to the probability of choosing for an office, membership of an association, or both, versus not opting for any form of representation. Our model is a significant improvement in fit over a null model [$X^2(15) = 27.103$, $p < .05$], while both the Pearson [$X^2(594) = 629.833$, $p = .149$] and the Deviance chi square [$X^2(594) = 399.334$, $p = 1.00$] indicate the model fits the data well.

Table 5 provides information comparing each organisational form against the reference category (no organisational form). When comparing individual representation against the reference category, only *Distance* was a significant predictor ($b = -.589$, $s.e. = .266$, $p < .05$) in the model. The odds of choosing an office over no representation decreases as the distance from Brussels increases. We see almost identical results for

Table 4. Description dataset of HEIs.

Organisational Form	Total Sample (N)	EUMS (N1)		University (N2)		Subsidies (N3)		Distance (N4)		Budget (N5)	
		Yes	No	Yes	No	Av.*	SD*	Av.	SD	Av.*	SD*
None	146	135	11	116	30	52.099,9	94.965,9	1.040,91	1.115,43	120,8	196,4
Individual	14	11	3	13	1	73.339,3	102.622,9	842,48	602,01	164,6	257,1
Collective	76	74	2	64	12	76.950,2	103.982,7	715,54	603,06	135,3	232,8
Mixed	14	13	1	11	3	74.151,6	68.362,9	520,66	396,94	225,6	374,5
Total	250	233	17	204	46	62.898,5	97.138,3	901,75	944,20	133,5	224,1

*Numbers x1000.

Table 5. Explaining organisational form.

		B	Std. Error	Sig.	Exp(B)
Individual	Intercept	−.472	4,228	,911	–
	EU Funding (natural log)	,085	,177	,629	1,089
	Distance (natural log)*	−.589	,266	,027	,555
	Lobby Budget (natural log)	,124	,167	,457	1,132
	EU Membership (1) University (1)	−1,400 ,635	,911 1,206	,124 ,599	,247 1,887
Collective	Intercept	,121	2,353	,959	–
	EU Funding (natural log)	,055	,090	,543	1,056
	Distance (natural log)**	−.493	,183	,007	,611
	Lobby Budget (natural log)	,042	,080	,596	1,043
	EU Membership (1) University (1)	,461 ,793	,840 ,614	,584 ,197	1,585 2,210
Mixed	Intercept	−5,807	4,533	,200	–
	EU Funding (natural log)	,271	,198	,172	1,311
	Distance (natural log)*	−.607	,249	,015	,545
	Lobby Budget (natural log)*	,378	,193	,050 ^a	1,459
	EU Membership (1) University (1)	−.868 −.604	1,167 ,970	,457 ,533	,420 ,546

Note: Multinomial Regression Results; $N = 250$. Reference category = 'No Organizational Form'. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. EU Membership & University show results for 'no' compared to reference category 'yes'.

^aRounded upwards from 0.497.

collective representation, with *Distance* being the only significant predictor ($b = -.493$, $s.e. = .183$, $p < .01$). For 'Mixed Representation', *Distance* is also a significant predictor, ($b = -.607$, $s.e. = .249$, $p < .05$), but here also *Budget* has a significant effect ($b = .378$, $s.e. = .193$, $p < .05$), as HEIs with a higher budget are more likely to combine both individual and collective forms of representation.

In order to also capture in how our independent variables are related to the probability of choosing for an office versus membership of an association on one hand, and of choosing for mixed representation over just one of the two on the other hand, we ran two additional multinomial regressions. Table 6 shows how individual and collective representation compare to mixed representation' (the reference category), but no significant predictors were found. Finally, Table 7 compares individual with collective representation (Reference Category), but once again, no significant predictors were found.

In general, we can conclude that distance from Brussels has an about equally negative effect on the likelihood of an HEI choosing for any form of representation, while those HEIs with a larger budget are more likely to choose for a combination of individual and collective representation over no representation at all. All other variables in our model are non-significant. While previous research on lobbying identified these factors as key explanatory variables, these null findings suggest that other organisational (e.g. type of HEIs or their thematic educational focus) or contextual factors (such as length of EU membership or their relations with (sub) national government(s) of their state) drive the representational choices of HEIs included in this sample.

Table 6. Explaining organisational form.

		B	Std. Error	Sig.	Exp(B)
Individual	Intercept	5,335	5,708	,350	–
	EU Funding (natural log)	–,185	,251	,461	,831
	Distance (natural log)*	,019	,277	,947	1,019
	Lobby Budget (natural log)	–,254	,241	,292	,776
	EU Membership (1) University (1)	–,532 1,239	1,340 1,462	,691 ,397	,587 3,454
Collective	Intercept	5,928	4,571	,195	–
	EU Funding (natural log)	–,216	,203	,287	,805
	Distance (natural log)**	,114	,213	,591	1,121
	Lobby Budget (natural log)	–,336	,195	,085	,715
	EU Membership (1) University (1)	1,329 1,397	1,301 1,040	,307 ,179	3,775 4,044

Note: Multinomial Regression Results; $N = 250$. Reference category = 'Mixed'. EU Membership & University show results for 'no' compared to reference category 'yes'.

Table 7. Explaining organisational form.

		B	Std. Error	Sig.	Exp(B)
Individual	Intercept	–,593	4,299	,890	
	EU Funding (natural log)	,031	,183	,866	1,031
	Distance (natural log)*	–,096	,239	,689	,909
	Lobby Budget (natural log)	,082	,171	,631	1,085
	EU Membership (1) University (1)	–1,861 –,158	1,078 1,265	,085 ,901	,156 ,854

Note: Multinomial Regression Results; $N = 250$. Reference category = 'Collective'. EU Membership & University show results for 'no' compared to reference category 'yes'.

Qualitative research: motives underlying organizational form

In addition to the quantitative analysis, we conducted semi-structured interviews with representatives from six HEIs and four associations in order to explore the possible motives underlying the choice in organisational form. The interviews revealed several respondents highlighting the important role financial resources play. Limited resources are a strong disincentive for opening an office, as this involves high financial investments. To compensate for the lack of a Brussels office, less resourceful HEIs often choose for collective representation through an association or other collective forms (see below) in order to share costs and maximise the limited resources they have available.

While the quantitative analyses did not demonstrate significant differences between HEIs with and without a university status, the possible relevance of this variation in organisational type was underlined by respondent 9, who represents a national association for universities of applied sciences. The respondent argued that these types of institutions are more practice-oriented and concerned with the social impact of their

research, but also less well-known by the EU institutions (as is their specific type of research). In the respondent's view, EU policy is less attentive to the specific issues of non-universities, and more tailored towards universities. As a result, they have less incentives to pursue intensive forms of representation, while universities have a much smaller threshold to overcome. The EU sees universities as a very logical and important policy partner, which increases the (possible) influence these institutions can have and makes them more likely to invest in individual representation via a Brussels office. Universities appear also more likely to receive EU funding and therefore opt for individual representation. Respondent 5 for instance stated that their job was specifically created because of the importance of European Research Council (ERC) funding for his institution. Likewise, a representative of an association indicated that some of their member universities were receiving large amounts of funding from the EU, which in turn played an important role in the association's decision to open up an office. The institutions were more familiar with the system and considered it to be a largely risk-free undertaking, 'because they knew what they were getting into and there was already quite a lot of academics or professors who were part of EU projects and thus had ties with Brussels and with other parts of the EU as well' (Respondent 10).

In addition to the factors included in our theoretical framework, the respondents highlighted several additional motives that could play an important role in the choice for a specific organisational form of HEIs. Information collection and exchange, for instance, is raised by several respondents as a reason to pursue mixed representation (Respondents 2 & 4). In the latter form, more specifically, information, good practices and knowledge concerning European projects for higher education and research is shared amongst HEIs. Equally, HEIs look to raise their visibility and improve the image of their institution in order to (a) promote their own capabilities so these can be reflected in calls for proposals from the EU institutions, thus increasing their odds of being selected, and (b) valorise these capabilities and prove to EU policy makers that they are capable of providing excellent research. In both cases, individual representation offers the best way to achieve this (Respondent 4 & 8). Finally, the respondents indicated that the targets of collective representation are not always policy makers. Via associations, they also aim to connect with other academic players active in Brussels in order to expand their networks and increase opportunities for research cooperation (Respondents 1 & 3). [Table 8](#) offers a summary of all possible motives for choosing (+) or not choosing (–) either individual or collective representation, along with illustrative citations.

Finally, it is important to emphasise that the respondents also highlight other forms and channels to build and maintain a presence in Brussels. For instance, Respondents 1, 2 & 3 mentioned that including researchers or other affiliates in committees of the European Parliament also provides an important strategy. This strategy could be labelled *delegated representation*, as it involves placing delegates of one's own organisation within the structures of the European institutions. An important motive here is close proximity to information sources, as respondent 3 argues:

Also by putting our researchers in very strategic committees, and also people like me are working together in different European committees too. And representatives from our federal authorities are walking in those committees too and you are exchanging a lot, and that's a part of being well informed and of being at the same level of information. (Respondent 3)

Table 8. Overview of motives for choosing (+) or not choosing (–) a specific organisational form.

Main Motive	Sub-motive	Individual Representation	Collective Representation	Empirical evidence
Resources				
	Lack of Resources	–	–	‘Je n’ai pas de budget [...] si je disposais d’un peu de financements je ferais mieux’ (Respondent 6).
	Representation Costs	–	/	‘[...] we consider that the resources that you have to mobilize in order to have representation in Brussels do not justify the outcome.’ (Respondent 7)
	Efficiency (Resources)	/	+	‘There are very many interest groups in Brussels, very crowded place with lots of offices, and if you add another player into that Brussels game, it’s not so sure whether that’s really that efficient.’ (Respondent 7) ‘There are quite a number of people who are already there, who are well-connected, who are part of the game and who can help us, with whom we can work together and that is more efficient than having an own office’ (Respondent 7)
Type				
	Specificness of type of HEI	+	+	‘Universities of Applied Science have looked towards cooperation several years ago in order to represent themselves in Europe concerning practical research since the research is different from what universities do, different impact and approach.’ (Respondent 9)
	Lack of EU Recognition	–	+	‘If you look at [...] official policy documents of the European Commission, it almost never states Universities of Applied Sciences. When dealing about research or innovation, it’s always “universities”.’ (Respondent 9)
	Reputation Already Substantial	–	/	‘If you are smaller you might feel that it’s worth the investment, [...] while the more traditional universities might feel they do not need to do that because their reputation supersedes them.’ (Respondent 10)
EU Membership				
	Representation Compensation	+	+	‘[...] because we do not have any access to MEPs or a Commissioner’ (Respondent 10, IR) ‘There are historical reasons; we were a founding member of LERU and it was always really important to be a part of it. There is the historical reason that [my university] is like a bridge between Switzerland and the EU.’ (Respondent 3, CR) ‘We follow the example of Norway. Norway is in everything that is not formal. Networks, platforms, associations, they are over it like a rash.’ (Respondent 8, CR).
Information				
	Information Collection and Communication	+	+	‘The real challenge of this job is the collection of good information, collection of anticipatory news, of opportunities. But in terms of info collection, which is one of the levels that the office works on, the real challenge is to have it exploited and fulfilled at home. [...] you have the knowledge and perspective and understanding about what is going to boom in terms of EU initiative here. And of course this perception is diluted as far as you go from Brussels. And

				when it arrives home, [...] people do not have the perception about the potential impact that it can have for the organization.' (Respondent 4, IR) 'Especially UnLiON is very interesting, because all the research offices and representation offices of the old universities in EU, they meet [...] so we can exchange information and decisions, [...]. It's a bit like gossip.' (Respondent 2, CR) '[...] we don't pretend to express any position, it's an informative network. [...] It's an information sharing platform, [...] a mutual collaboration pool, we share opportunities also.' (Respondent 4, CR).
Visibility				
	Promotion of Own Capabilities	+	/	'[...] we want to achieve visibility for a set of reasons. We want our voice to be heard, [...] promoting at the same time our priorities and our capabilities in order to have them represented in potential future actions in calls for proposals, platforms or whatever.' (Respondent 4)
	Valorization towards EU	+	/	'[...] you invite the Commission and if it is hit by your capabilities and competences, they can involve you in working groups, [...] see that you can have a value for a constructive dialogue.' (Respondent 4) '[...] events that showcase research excellence [...] in areas that [the universities] want input for' (Respondent 8).
	Raise Prestige	+	/	'Another important goal is to improve success rate for participation in European projects, which has as a consequence that the institutions get a better name, leading to more exposure, which has an impact on certain rankings, the attractiveness for international students, follow-up research, attaining better professors. [...] For this, Europe is seen as a way towards improvement.' (Respondent 9)
Networking				
	Network of Academic Staff	-	/	'[...] maybe the greater challenge is not so much in Brussels but here, on the ground, with ourselves, bringing together the EU activities and influence and network that we already have, [...]. So we do not only have to look at Brussels but also at our own institutions and dig up the hidden champions of EU influence that we maybe have but we are not aware of.' (Respondent 7)
	Better Contact with Actors and More Effective Activities Within Networks	+	+	'These kinds of associations are strongly represented in Brussels, so it's very useful for us to get to know them and understand what they do and interact with them.' (Respondent 2, IR) 'Being on the grounds, it is also a justification for the office. You could say that a lot of this, you can do back in your own country or region. Some of it yes, but the issue of having a permanent presence in Brussels is that you could build up the contacts, build up the relationships. You can't do that if you are in the region. Even if you come to Brussels once or twice a month you lose out still on a lot. [...] it's all about to know the right people, the right officials in Brussels.' (Respondent 8, IR)

(Continued)



Table 8. Continued.

Main Motive	Sub-motive	Individual Representation	Collective Representation	Empirical evidence
				<p>'Interest in becoming more international, being part of networks, [...] networking, research cooperation.' (Respondent 1, CR)</p> <p>INTERVIEWER: 'So a core reason for your form of representation is to strengthen all kinds of relations?'</p> <p>RESPONDENT 2: 'Yes, with the institutions is one thing, but with actors in field is another aim, it's knowledge.' (Respondent 2, CR)</p> <p>'For Swisscore, it's a mix of institutional contacts and very good personal contacts.' (Respondent 3, CR)</p>
	Increase Research Opportunities	+	/	<p>'So there is a certain feeling that they are world class, but that that is not necessarily known in Brussels, to the EU institutions and to other stakeholders like universities and industry. This is what the main part is of my work; that presence, raising profile, mentioning names of universities and linking the excellent research what they do and try to get connections at a EU level.' (Respondent 10)</p>

Furthermore, Respondent 5 mentions the use of a shared liaison office, in which several institutions pool their resources to cover the representation costs. This calls for the introduction of a new concept, *shared representation*, that can be defined as a small-scale cooperation between different lobby actors through a shared office. This organisational form is smaller in scale than a collective organisation, but provides more potential for individual input, making it different from a transnational association that has an office in Brussels. Looking at the motives that drive the choice for shared representation, it is first of all related to EU membership, as it offers HEIs from non-EU countries the chance to retain some form of access to the European level. Respondent 5, for example, stated that using a shared office lets his HEI overcome the non-EU membership of Switzerland, making sure his institution still receives access to information and decision-making normally out of reach: '[it gives us] access to a broader, pan-institutional level [and] information you might not get access to as a Swiss because in some types of committees the Swiss are not allowed to be in' (Respondent 5). Next to that, Respondent 10 claims that an establishment in Brussels remains useful since their country will have less official representation channels due to Brexit. A final motive for choosing for shared representation can be found in that it allows for the representation costs to be divided, which results in attaining the advantages of individual representation with a significantly lower investment: 'We are a club of six, and there is a cost of having the office and we are now paying 1/6th of the budget' (Respondent 5).

Discussion & conclusion

This article is a first assessment of how HEIs shape their lobbying activities at the EU level and the factors and motives that play a role in determining their chosen organisational form of representation. It contributes to the literature on European higher education as it demonstrates the value of analysing the concrete activities of HEIs within the context of the EU. Additionally, we illustrate that HEIs deserve to be recognised and discussed as a separate type of external stakeholder within the field of interest representation. Universities (and similar institutions) are underexposed and often included in the same broad category as think tanks and research institutions (see Greenwood 2017; Dialer and Richter 2019), which often receive less attention in research on interest groups and lobbying (activities of firms, business associations and NGOs have received more scholarly attention). Yet, HEIs nowadays demonstrate an extensive presence in Brussels, which confirms the vital importance of interest representation to these institutions.

Our research also offers a methodological and theoretical contribution to the study and the concept of organisational form. Firstly, where other authors such as Donas and Beyers (2013) attempt to explain variation in organisational form through quantified indicators, we combine a quantitative assessment with a qualitative analysis of underlying strategic motives. This mixed methods approach allows us to attain deeper insights and explore alternative motives that can be integrated in future (quantitative) research. Additionally, from a theoretical perspective, we introduce two alternative organisational forms: shared and delegated representation. This offers a more fine-grained understanding of the concept of organisational form and different forms of representation in the context of HEIs.

This article identifies and attempts to explain the variation in organisational form of the representation of higher education institutions (HEIs) at the EU level, distinguishing between individual and collective representation. We systematically mapped the EU representation of 250 HEIs, and subsequently applied a mixed methods approach by performing a quantitative multivariate analysis followed by a qualitative thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews. It is relevant to note that almost all of our quantitative results are not statistically significant. Future work might consider a different operationalisation of (some) independent variables, and include some of the factors that emerged during the qualitative interviews. Still, our analysis highlights several factors and possible underlying motives explaining choices for a specific form, most importantly the geographical distance between an HEI and Brussels, and in case of mixed representation substantial financial resources. At the same time, the trade-off between these forms of representation is also shaped by the consideration of other factors, in particular increasing visibility in Brussels, building and leveraging networks, and the value of information collection and exchange.

Our approach has some important limitations. First, we relied on the Transparency Register to identify HEIs with a minimum of political engagement at the EU level. Hence, our sample is not entirely representative of the whole population of HEIs in Europe. While we expect HEIs that consider representation at the EU level somewhat important to register in the Transparency Register, future work would benefit from applying this framework to the full population of HEIs, as that enables a comparison of representational strategies among all HEIs, also including those without (direct) engagement at the EU level.

Second, we mainly focused on the distinction between (typical) individual and collective forms of representation. As previous work has demonstrated (e.g. Donas and Beyers 2013), institutions (like HEIs) might be member of multiple associations. An interesting avenue for future research involves examining the possible interactions between these forms of representation, and for instance identifying key trade-offs between opting for membership of multiple associations, individual representation or reliance on shared representation, another form that was highlighted in our qualitative analysis.

Furthermore, a better perspective on and understanding of the organisational form through which HEI's try to influence European policy-making is only a (necessary) first step to address other key questions. In this paper, we do not analyse the political activities and strategies of these distinct organisational forms, and do not assess their level of success in shaping EU education policy. Future research should therefore not only focus on the means but also the goals (e.g. funding, rankings, policy influence, ...) of HEI's different forms of interest representation, and ideally assess to what extent and why some (combinations of) form of representation are more effective. This research provides an important foundation to answer these questions, as variation in forms has been linked to the possession of certain types of information (or 'access goods'), which are assumed to shape the nature of the relations between interest groups and (EU) policy-makers (Bouwen 2002).

Note

1. Note that Donas and Beyers (2013) use the term *direct* instead of *individual representation*, even though it has an identical meaning.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all respondents who participated in our qualitative research for their valuable input as well as the anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The authors did not receive support from any organisation for the submitted work.

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Data availability statement

All data support the published claims and are available in the Open Science Framework: https://osf.io/uc29w/?view_only=4c952a441d624d62b02543c7fe6dac50.

Consent to participate and for publication

All respondents have either signed an informed consent form or have given their explicit consent for participation and publication.

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