

How influence shapes academic engagement: implications for university entrepreneurial behaviour in multistakeholder projects

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper investigates how business partners shape university behaviour within funded multistakeholder project consortia, addressing a gap in Academic Engagement and Entrepreneurial University literature on relational and systemic dimensions of partner influence.

Design/methodology/approach – The study adopts an abductive longitudinal case study of a project consortium (13 partners) within a European funding programme, over 30 months. It applies a systems thinking framework using causal loop diagrams to trace nonlinear feedback processes influencing university behaviour.

Findings – Influence operates through indirect, implicit mechanisms rather than formal authority. Symbolic and relational resources such as legitimacy, credibility and coalition alignment, emerge as the primary sources of power. Three sequential balancing feedback loops progressively marginalise the university, shifting its role from proactive innovation to defensive survival.

Research limitations/implications – The single-case design limits generalisability but enables in-depth theorisation of relational power and feedback dynamics in multistakeholder settings.

Practical implications – Universities should invest in coalition-building capabilities and institutional support structures to prevent marginalisation and mission drift.

Originality/value – The paper reconceptualises academic engagement as an emergent system property and extends stakeholder theory by incorporating informal, relational power dynamics.

Keywords Innovation, Entrepreneurship, Dynamic capabilities, Institutions

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

Participation in funded projects is a strategic activity for entrepreneurial universities, as it enables knowledge exchange with industry partners and access to external funding sources, in line with the university's *third mission* (Perkmann *et al.*, 2013; Etzkowitz, 2003b).

To this end, universities participate in multi-stakeholder partnerships and inter-organisational project consortia with Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and private firms. Such heterogeneous collaborations secure complementarity of knowledge and expertise to attain the project goals, but simultaneously, the interaction of university and business actors in a dynamic and constrained environment gives rise to tensions and mutual influences (Hasche and Linton, 2021).



Tensions and influences stem from different institutional logics and power asymmetries that characterise university-industry partnerships (Öberg, 2025; Decker-Lange *et al.*, 2024). Industry partners, driven by commercial or performance-oriented incentives, may impose project priorities, needs, and goals, thereby shaping universities' behaviour beyond formal governance mechanisms (Benneworth and Jongbloed, 2010; Perkmann *et al.*, 2013).

Hence, universities' participation in funded project partnerships and consortia poses crucial challenges for their entrepreneurial behaviour (Clark, 1998; Rothaermel *et al.*, 2007). Literature highlights several drivers of business partners' influence over universities, including the prevalence of business over university policy (Pacheco *et al.*, 2024) industry/business expectations over university capability (Öberg, 2025), and the shaping role of third-party digital infrastructures supporting universities-enterprises interactions (Linzalone *et al.*, 2020; Rippa and Secundo, 2019).

However, the way it occurs is only weakly addressed, despite scholars calling for greater attention to the micro-level processes and behavioural patterns through which project partners' influence is internalised by university actors (Jones and Coates, 2020).

Furthermore, previous research has primarily examined university-business relations from a collaborative perspective (Hasche and Linton, 2021; Perkman *et al.*, 2013), with limited attention to the mechanisms underlying tensions between universities and businesses. Among these mechanisms, influence plays a central yet underexplored role. The influence of partners changes universities' behaviour, affecting performance and organisational autonomy, and ultimately causing a "mission drift" (Benneworth and Jongbloed, 2010).

This paper addresses this gap by focussing explicitly on the mechanisms through which business partners shape university behaviour in funded project partnerships. The investigated research question is: *How is university behaviour shaped by business partners in funded project partnerships?*

To address this question, the paper builds on a single case study to explore the behaviour of a public university under the influence of a business partner. Namely, the paper examines the case of a public university that participated in a European funding program within a project consortium involving 13 partners, including NGOs and a private business firm. Over a 30-month period, the business partner, through direct and indirect influence, marginalised and isolated the university, which faced budget and role downsizing. The behaviour of the university partner in such business partner influence activities represents a *polar case* study (Pettigrew, 1990; Yin, 2018).

Our research uses an abductive, qualitative case study approach (Dubois and Gadde, 2002), combining participant observations (Czarniawska, 2012), project archives (Eisenhardt, 2002; Yin, 2018), and literature anchors (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). We adopt a Systems Thinking lens to analyse partner interactions and university behaviour as dynamic, multi-level conditioning processes (Hasche and Linton, 2021).

The contribution of this paper is twofold: first, it theorises how influence operates as a behavioural conditioning mechanism within funded project consortia; second, it offers propositions for the strategic management of university behaviour under asymmetric stakeholder influence.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on academic engagement, project partnerships, and stakeholder influence. Section 3 outlines the abductive case study design and analytical approach. Section 4 presents the case findings through a Systems Thinking lens. Section 5 discusses theoretical implications for entrepreneurial universities, and Section 6 concludes with contributions, limitations, and future research directions.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Entrepreneurial university and academic engagement behaviour

The concept of "Entrepreneurial University" emerged in the 2000s to describe universities that began to exhibit entrepreneurial behaviour (Etzkowitz, 2004). This means pursuing

strategically two main activities: Academic Entrepreneurship (Etzkowitz, 2004; Siegel and Wright, 2015) and Academic Engagement (Fuller and Pickernell, 2018; de Wit-de Vries *et al.*, 2019). Academic Entrepreneurship is “the process by which individuals affiliated with a university engage in innovative activities that lead to the commercialisation of knowledge, typically through licencing, patenting, or the creation of university spin-offs” (Shane, 2004) (p. 3). Academic Engagement (AE), instead, is a wide set of knowledge-related collaboration activities between academics and external organisations, ranging from firms to start-ups and spin-offs, up to public agencies and EU funding bodies, that involve direct interaction, without necessarily leading to formal commercialisation outcomes such as patents or spin-offs (Perkmann *et al.*, 2013).

In practice, AE frequently unfolds within formally constituted project consortia, defined as temporary, goal-oriented inter-organisational arrangements in which autonomous actors of different institutional types collaborate under shared governance while retaining distinct identities (Ring and Van de Ven, 1994).

AE is strategic for universities to diversify funding sources, enhance research relevance, strengthen legitimacy and reputation, and impact on business and economic wealth (Etzkowitz, 2003b; Perkmann *et al.*, 2013). Nonetheless, it is not without criticism. Academic entrepreneurial behaviour in project partnerships requires a critical interplay between entrepreneurial traits (e.g. opportunity-seeking, proactivity, and innovation) and public institutional logics (e.g. mission, bureaucracy, credibility, and university constraints). The behaviour of the university within AE projects, while underpinning the entrepreneurial university model (Clark, 1998), simultaneously faces key theoretical challenges related to goal hybridity, power asymmetries, partnering organisations, and stakeholder influence (Etzkowitz, 2003b; Perkmann *et al.*, 2013; Sydow *et al.*, 2004).

Within funded project partnerships, university behaviour plays a pivotal role in mediating between academic logics (e.g. public mission, non-profit orientation) and business logics (e.g. market orientation, performance-driven objectives).

This tension is amplified by the dynamic and intangible nature of inter-organisational interactions, characterised by power asymmetries, shifting interests, and evolving relational patterns that continually reshape partner behaviour (Aaltonen *et al.*, 2024; Fortes *et al.*, 2023). Understanding these dynamics is crucial for managing university behaviour across project lifecycles and for preventing marginalisation or resource erosion within consortia. Indeed, recent literature has emphasised the need to understand academic entrepreneurial behaviour as a set of adaptive responses to external influences and systemic conditions (Hasche and Linton, 2021; Pacheco *et al.*, 2024; Öberg, 2025). Accordingly, universities are increasingly viewed as behavioural systems in which entrepreneurial actions are co-shaped by internal capabilities and external expectations (Decker-Lange *et al.*, 2024).

2.2 Multistakeholder projects and academic entrepreneurial behaviour

Within project-based consortia, autonomous organisations with heterogeneous and often conflicting interests interact under conditions of limited hierarchy. In such settings, power asymmetries enable powerful partners to influence others’ behaviour, steering project trajectories toward their own interests and expectations (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995; van Marrewijk and van den Ende, 2022). Business partners typically exercise resource and market power, enabling agenda-setting and strategic influence, while universities rely mainly on knowledge-based and legitimacy power, with weaker bargaining leverage (Radko *et al.*, 2023; Perkmann *et al.*, 2013). NGOs, on their own, primarily exert normative and moral power, influencing problem framing rather than formal governance (Mitchell *et al.*, 1997; Etzkowitz, 2003b).

Powerful business partners can pressure universities with explicit demands or requirements, such as contractual performance levels, compliance rules, or budget constraints, or through (more subtle) influence that compels universities to adapt their behaviour (Morrison *et al.*, 2020; Radko *et al.*, 2023).

Influence is the relational process of shaping the behaviours of other partners through persuasion, negotiation, and other psychosocial processes, while leveraging resources such as expertise, legitimacy, networks, credibility, and reputation (Yukl, 2013). Influence processes can be targeted either directly at a Partner or at an intermediary partner capable of influencing the target.

Pressure, by contrast, denotes coercive or constraining actions that limit another partner's choice set, such as explicit threats, conditional resource allocation, deadline manipulation, or escalation to the project authority, and is often imposed rather than relational (Mintzberg, 1983). So, pressure exploits formal power asymmetries while influence leverages "soft", relational ability asymmetries (strategic power *asymmetries*). Even where partners are formally equal, asymmetries in relational power, such as network centrality, brokerage positions, leadership authority, legitimacy, and reputational capital, enable some actors to disproportionately shape others' behaviour (Emerson, 1962; Mintzberg, 1983). University behaviour is the set of organisational actions universities enact through governance structures, as represented by their representatives, in projects (Etzkowitz, 2003a). In project consortia, university behaviour manifests as patterned organisational actions and strategic responses enacted through representatives interacting with other partners under external influence (Perkmann *et al.*, 2013). The behaviour of a university within project consortia is a strategic, adaptable engagement process in which the university aligns its academic, financial, and reputational interests with those of multiple stakeholders. Literature highlights four fundamental behaviours: resource-seeking, legitimacy-seeking, adaptive, and brokerage. *Resource-seeking* behaviour is characterised by actions aimed at accessing funding, infrastructure, and networks (Clark, 1998; Perkmann *et al.*, 2013). *Legitimacy-seeking* behaviour tends to align with external partners' expectations and policy agendas to enhance credibility (Compagnucci and Spigarelli, 2020). *Adaptive* behaviour tends to reshape internal governance, incentives, and roles to fit the dynamics of heterogeneous consortia (Radko, 2023). Finally, the *brokerage* behaviour views the university as an intermediary among knowledge domains, disciplines, and stakeholder groups (Etzkowitz, 2013).

Influence from powerful partners is therefore a key determinant of university behaviour in academic engagement projects. Empirical research in the stream of university-industry collaboration shows that differences in partner goals and power contribute to conflict and affect collaboration success, indicating that dominant industry partners exert directional influence on universities' behaviour in funded projects (asymmetry studies on public-private collaboration).

Literature actually highlights that within consortia, the interaction with business partners acts as a double-edged dynamic: when aligned through constructive engagement, they enhance universities' entrepreneurial behaviour, fostering innovation and collaboration; when conflicts or power asymmetries dominate, they undermine autonomy, reducing entrepreneurial capacity and constraining adaptive behaviours (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978; Radko *et al.*, 2023).

Influence dynamics and behavioural processes are tightly linked, as behaviours are shaped by individual and collective sensemaking within inter-organisational contexts (Gabay-Mariani *et al.*, 2024). Universities' responses to partner influence reflect strategic adaptation and cognitive reframing, depending on internal belief systems, perceived legitimacy, and institutional constraints (Pacheco *et al.*, 2024). However, existing studies remain largely silent on the micro-level mechanisms through which such influence is enacted within project partnerships.

2.3 How partners influence university behaviour in multistakeholder project consortia

While entrepreneurial behaviour has been extensively examined at individual (Fayolle and Liñán, 2014; Nabi *et al.*, 2017) and organisational (Guerrero *et al.*, 2016) levels, project-based contexts introduce a distinct behavioural pattern.

In the project, university behaviour is enacted through project teams led by academic coordinators. The university coordinator represents a critical junction between business partners' influence and organisational behaviour. According to this last view, the academic staff person who initiates and leads externally funded project participation (i.e. the academic entrepreneur) (Etzkowitz, 2003a) shapes the university's interaction with partners through individual perceptions, interpretations, and discretionary decisions. The university's coordinator acts as a bridge between micro-level influence (individual actions) and macro-level influence (organisational outcomes). By aggregating, translating, and selectively channelling influence pressures, coordinators transform individual interactions into collective organisational responses affecting governance, legitimacy, and resource allocation (Huxham and Vangen, 2005).

A critical review of the project coordinator's position in university-led consortia highlights a structural tension that is widely noted, though often under-theorised, in the project and university-industry collaboration literature. Project coordinators are individual academics or managers, yet they simultaneously embody the university as an organisational actor within the consortium. As individuals, they exercise discretion, interpret project rules, negotiate informally, and engage in micro-political behaviour (Mintzberg, 1983). As organisational representatives, they are expected to protect institutional interests, comply with formal governance, and maintain legitimacy vis-à-vis funders and partners (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978; Perkmann *et al.*, 2013).

Despite this centrality, the mechanisms by which partner influence is transmitted through coordinators to shape university behaviour remain poorly theorised. Recent research conceptualises universities' behavioural responses to partner influence as emergent outcomes of complex social systems (Correia *et al.*, 2024; French *et al.*, 2022; Lichtenstein, 2016; Guerrero and Urbano, 2017). Furthermore, Correia *et al.* (2024) argue that the complex social systems in which universities operate are predominantly conflictual. Competition and institutional differences among partners generate power asymmetries that, in particular, hinder the participation of universities, often marginalising them within collaborative arrangements. The extant literature supports the project system's tendency to shape University partner behaviour (Tucker *et al.*, 2025). Indeed, it highlights that university-business collaborations are often hindered by discrepancies in resource allocation (such as funding delays, complexities in distributing funds, and conflicts in managing shared resources). These issues create tensions that impair academic actors' ability to operate entrepreneurially. Such processes are nonlinear and iterative, evolving through feedback loops that gradually reconfigure roles, priorities, and resources within consortia (Decker-Lange *et al.*, 2024).

In EU-funded projects, universities often have diminished agency when consultancies dominate coordination and budget distribution, while non-profits are pushed to peripheral roles (Vigoroso *et al.*, 2023). From an academic entrepreneurial perspective, this limits knowledge exploitation, hampers strategic learning, and undermines the entrepreneurial development of universities (Guerrero and Urbano, 2012). All in all, partner influence in multi-stakeholder projects should be seen as a systemic and behavioural phenomenon that operates through feedback loops, affecting universities' adaptive behaviour (Öberg, 2025). This view extends beyond structural power analysis and aligns with universities' capacity to navigate influences to preserve their entrepreneurial identity within complex collaborative systems.

This duality places coordinators in a boundary-spanning and brokerage role (Tushman and Scanlan, 1981), making them key mediators and moderators of partner influence. However, their personal incentives (career, reputation, workload reduction) may diverge from institutional priorities, creating risks of agency drift, informal capture by powerful partners, or selective translation of pressures into organisational behaviour. Despite their centrality, literature largely treats coordinators as neutral governance mechanisms, neglecting their behavioural agency, conditioning effects, and political vulnerability. This represents a significant theoretical gap, particularly in funded, multi-stakeholder project consortia.

3. Material and methods

3.1 Research methodology. Abductive, qualitative case study

To shed light on the RQ “How do business partners influence university behaviour in funded project partnership consortia?”, we focus on a *longitudinal single-case study* examining the participation of a public university in a project partnership consortium within a European funding programme.

This kind of study involves an “*in-depth examination of a phenomenon over an extended period of time, allowing the researcher to capture changes, developments, and processes as they unfold in their real-life context*” (Yin, 2018) (p. 44). Although case study findings are not statistically generalisable, they are well-suited for theory development and proposition building in underexplored research domains (Yin, 2018).

Across the various typologies of case study, we adopt an *abductive, qualitative case study* research design (George and Bennett, 2005; Dubois and Gadde, 2002). This approach iteratively combines empirical observations (e.g. participant observation and project documentation) with theoretical insights, allowing empirical evidence and theory to mutually inform each other.

Abductive case studies are particularly appropriate for investigating complex and poorly understood phenomena, such as multi-stakeholder project settings, where causal mechanisms and interaction dynamics are not fully theorised. By iteratively moving between induction and deduction, abductive reasoning enables the interpretation of surprising evidence, the refinement of constructs, and the development of plausible causal explanations (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). Pure deductive and inductive approaches are, in this case, not appropriate, since the phenomenon is weakly theorised and dynamically unfolding. Deduction would impose predefined constructs, risking theoretical forcing, while induction alone would limit explanatory power and abstraction. Abductive logic, by contrast, better accommodates surprises, enabling iterative refinement between data and theory and uncovering causal mechanisms in complex settings (Eisenhardt, 2002; Yin, 2018).

Participant observation captured informal interactions and implicit power dynamics, while project archives offered formal accounts of decisions and procedures. This dual source approach ensures that interpretations are not based on a single perspective but are cross-checked across data types (Miles et al., 2014) and triangulation (Yin, 2018).

To limit researcher bias and enhance analytical rigour, empirical observations were systematically anchored to established theoretical constructs (Miles et al., 2014) (Figure 1). This systematic integration of empirical and theoretical approaches involves iteratively moving between data and constructs, refining both as the process unfolds (Dubois and Gadde,

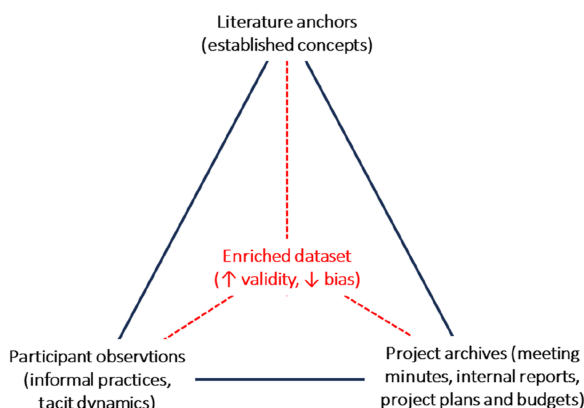


Figure 1. Triangulation in dataset creation. Source(s): Authors' own elaboration

2002). In practice, project events and partner interactions were coded using a combination of inductive (emerging from the data) and deductive (informed by stakeholder theory, systems thinking, and governance literature) coding.

Furthermore, we employed *pattern matching* (Yin, 2018), a systematic comparison of empirical observations with theoretically predicted dynamics, based on Systems Thinking archetypes (Senge, 1990; Sterman, 2000). This methodological combination strengthens internal validity by linking observed empirical patterns to established theoretical structures.

3.2 Case selection. Motivations and theoretical significance

The case study concerns a consortium of 13 partners involved in an international cooperation project called Creativo [1], funded by a European agency within a funding programme during the period 2014–2021. The project was selected as a polar case (Pettigrew, 1990) for the following theoretical and methodological reasons:

- (1) The project is a rare case of a university partner downsizing in a European-funded project consortium; the role and budget reallocation resulted from an economic dispute initiated by a business partner.
- (2) The university partner, despite public, due to the small size, lacked a dedicated office for European funded projects, allowing for direct observation of partner influence on academic behaviour without institutional mediation mechanisms.
- (3) The European funding programme requires multistakeholder project consortia as a form of project governance. It “*promotes transnational collaboration among diverse organisations, such as cultural institutions, creative enterprises, and broadcasters across EU member and associated countries by funding international cooperation projects*” (European Commission, 2023), offering a fertile ground for exploring stakeholder dynamics.
- (4) The business partner’s influence and the university’s behavioural unfolding occurred over a 30-month period, a fundamental methodological requirement for a comprehensive longitudinal observation. Stability and the lack of adaptation by the focal subject (i.e. the university) to the stresses of the partnership are essential conditions for observing unfolding causal mechanisms (Van de Ven and Huber, 1990; Pettigrew, 1990). In this case, stability consisted of maintaining the original role and budget allocation until a formal change was imposed by the funding authority.
- (5) As an international cooperation project, Creativo involved a heterogeneous set of actors, including government bodies, NGOs, private business firms, entities, and local communities, each with their own interests, objectives, and cultural backgrounds (Khan et al., 2022).

Although the analytical focus is on the university partner, the study considers the entire project partnership as an interdependent system, as isolating single-partner behaviour would overlook systemic influence dynamics. Accordingly, university behaviour within the consortium is conceptualised as an emergent system outcome shaped by feedback loops, interdependencies, institutional constraints, stakeholder interactions, delays, and unintended consequences (Meadows and Wright, 2008; Sterman, 2000). Systems Thinking, therefore, represents a suitable analytical lens for investigating multi-stakeholder project endeavours (Linzone et al., 2023), such as academic engagement initiatives.

3.3 Case study. An outline of the project creativo

Creativo’s objective is to develop an innovative Business Model prototype, along with associated implementation and management tools, to ensure the financial sustainability of European cultural and arts organisations. Indeed, its goal is to enhance the resilience and

sustainability of culture and arts organisations within the global Market of Culture and Creativity. Its duration is 48 months and involves 13 Partner organisations that have formally joined a Consortium. The project budget is €4 million, of which €2 million is funded by the European programme.

In line with the funder's requirements, the country, the statutory nature, and the specialisation of the Project Partners were diversified and complementary: universities, private business firms, and NGOs (i.e. Culture and Arts organisations) from eight countries of the European Union (Table 1).

These requirements, on the one hand, encourage cross-country and cross-sector knowledge exchange, cooperation, and work specialisation within the project environment; however, such a consortium structure results in limited proximity among partners. In fact, several elements of heterogeneity characterise the stakeholders: cultural diversity, geographical relocation, the political-economic frameworks of the home countries, the statutory nature, the interests in the project, and the Partners' missions, all of which influence their level of engagement.

Divergent interests among the Partners create tensions that often trigger influence activities from high-interest and high-power partners (Donaldson and Preston, 1995; Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Aaltonen and Kujala, 2010).

Creativo encounters very different levels and types of "interest" and budgets: some partners, like businesses and universities, had very consistent budget shares; others (i.e. cultural organisations) had limited budgets.

3.3.1 Empirical setting and consortium composition. This section provides a detailed description of the empirical setting and the composition of the project consortium. In line with qualitative case study standards and systems-thinking approaches, specifying system components and initial conditions is essential for interpreting interaction dynamics and feedback mechanisms (Stermann, 2000; Yin, 2018). Therefore, we explicitly characterise the actors involved in the project, their attributes, and their initial configuration within the consortium.

The empirical setting is represented by the Creativo project, funded under a European flagship funding programme. It supports the cultural, creative, and audiovisual sectors, financing transnational projects that promote cooperation, innovation, artistic mobility, competitiveness, and cultural diversity across Europe. As is typical of funded collaborative projects, the initiative required the formation of a transnational consortium composed of heterogeneous partners with complementary competencies.

The consortium involved organisations from eight European countries: Finland, Sweden, Greece, Italy, Slovakia, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Belgium. This composition combines diverse institutional, cultural, legal and economic systems, potentially capable of coordinating frictions and trust gaps among partners (Hofstede, 2001). Further, project partners differ in *type* (i.e. nature, mission, operational field). Multi-actor partnerships often

Table 1. Project consortium structure and key stakeholder types – Creativo

<i>Project Coordinator</i>	The project partner in charge for the project management of the project, and connection with the EU's funding agency
<i>Program Director</i>	European Union officer in charge as Director of the whole Program
<i>Steering Board</i>	Project Directing and decisional board made up of 5 Project Partners' representatives (contact persons)
<i>External Auditor</i>	The Financial Auditor of the project is an accounting service provider, appointed to certificate the project's expenses
<i>Project Partner (PP)</i>	Partner Organisation, with a legal entity, involved in the execution of the project, bonded to others using a Consortium Agreement. PP can be a private company, a public Institution (e.g. Universities, local administrations), a non-profit organisation

Source(s): Authors' own elaboration

generate coalitions, informal blocs, and political bargaining as actors pursue divergent interests and resources, producing tensions over influence, priorities, and control (Das and Teng, 2000). The consortium, in fact, comprises: 2 international networks, 6 cultural centres, 2 public universities, 2 cultural agencies, 1 municipality, and 3 theatre companies. Partners differ significantly in organisational size, role in the project, resource endowments, and prior experience with EU-funded collaborations.

A specific analysis is ultimately required to determine the *relational position* of each partner at the project start. Relational position is a construct that reflects an actor's ability to shape coordination, information flows, agenda-setting, and coalition formation. Relevant foundations include network centrality (Freeman, 1979), structural holes and brokerage (Burt, 1992), resource dependence and power (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978), and alliance governance (Provan *et al.*, 2007). Since it is a multidimensional concept, we assume 6 elements forming the relational position:

- (1) Frequency of interaction with others;
- (2) Formal governance role (coordinator/WP leader);
- (3) Brokerage between subgroups;
- (4) Resource/control contribution;
- (5) Reputation/expertise dependence of others;
- (6) Participation in informal coalitions.

The intensity of an actor in each of the six elements gives rise to 6 “relational positions” we identify in: *core-central actor*, *broker-boundary-spanner*, *semi-central operational actor*, *semi-peripheral actor*, *peripheral actor*, *isolated/symbolic partner* (Table 2), that capture relational positions of a project partner, with respect to the other partners in the consortium.

Assessing each partner to the scale, we coded and classified partners' position in Creativo project (Table 3). Their relational scores are interpretive (e.g. High/Medium/Low) and triangulate formal role, network embeddedness, brokerage potential, expertise dependence, and participation visibility. Final labels synthesise overall relational influence.

We finally frame the system conditions that characterise the empirical context of the consortium (Table 4) [2].

Several asymmetries characterise collaboration among project partners. First, the consortium exhibited significant resource asymmetries, particularly in terms of budget allocation and financial dependence on the project. Partners P10 and P11 held substantial budget shares, while others had limited or no direct financial allocation. Moreover, certain actors (e.g. P10) are small in size, with large budget/large grant shares, and are highly dependent on the project for their organisational sustainability, whereas others (e.g. universities) were not financially dependent.

Second, partners differed in their prior experience with EU-funded projects.

Some organisations had extensive experience in managing or participating in international consortia, while others had limited exposure. This asymmetry influenced their ability to navigate formal procedures, governance mechanisms, and informal coordination processes.

Third, the consortium was characterised by relational asymmetries, including differences in network centrality, proximity, and prior collaboration ties. Some partners occupied more central or brokerage positions, while others were relatively peripheral, with limited relational embeddedness within the consortium.

These structural asymmetries define the system's initial conditions, which are critical for interpreting the evolution of interaction dynamics and feedback loops within the consortium.

From a systems thinking perspective, such initial configurations influence how tensions emerge, how influence processes unfold, and how behavioural patterns evolve over time.

Table 2. Relational positions in project consortium. A scale

Level	Relational position/ Influence	Core meaning	Typical characteristics	Expected capacity to shape consortium dynamics	Main theoretical basis
1	Core-Central Actor	Highest structural and political influence within the consortium	Coordinator or lead partner; frequent interactions with many actors; controls agendas, routines, and strategic decisions	Very High	Freeman (1979) , Provan et al. (2007)
2	Broker/Boundary-Spanner	Influential through connecting otherwise separate actors or subgroups	Mediates conflicts; transfers information across WPs/countries; often strong informal power without formal authority	High	Burt (1992) , Tushman and Scanlan (1981)
3	Semi-Central Operational Actor	Relevant influence based on key deliverables or technical leadership	WP leader; regular interaction with core actors; recognised expertise but limited consortium-wide control	Medium–High	Gulati (1998)
4	Semi-Peripheral Specialist	Selective influence concentrated in niche expertise	Participates mainly in thematic tasks; limited governance role; consulted when specialist input is needed	Medium	Hardy and Phillips (1998)
5	Peripheral Actor	Low embeddedness and weak strategic influence	Task-specific participation; few ties; interacts mainly for reporting or assigned outputs	Low	Granovetter (1985) , Provan et al. (2007)
6	Isolated/Symbolic Partner	Formal member with minimal actual integration	Rare participation; weak deliverable ownership; included mainly for legitimacy, representation, or visibility	Very Low	Meyer and Rowan (1977)
Source(s): Authors' own elaboration					

Table 3. Relational position of Creativo's partners

Partner	Interaction frequency	Formal governance role	Brokerage capacity	Resource/ Knowledge control	Informal reputation power	Coalition participation capacity	Relational position
P1 (Coordinator)	High	High	High	High	High	High	Core-Central Leader
P2	High	Medium	High	Medium	High	High	Broker/Network Powerhouse
P3	High	High	High	High	High	High	Core-Central Broker
P4	High	Medium	Medium	High	High	Medium	Knowledge Core Actor
P5	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium	High	Institutional Semi-Central Actor
P6	Medium	Low	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium	Semi-Peripheral Specialist
P7	Medium	Low	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium	Semi-Peripheral Specialist
P8	Medium	Medium	High	Medium	Medium	Medium	Boundary-Spanning Semi-Central Actor
P9	Medium	Low	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium	Semi-Peripheral Specialist
P10	High	Medium	High	High	High	High	Broker/Influential Intermediary
P11	High	High	Medium	High	Medium	Medium	Administrative-Knowledge Core Actor
P12	Low-Medium	Low	Low	Medium	Low	Low	Peripheral Operational Actor
P13	Low-Medium	Low	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium	Peripheral/Symbolic Visibility Actor

Note(s): Partners' names are confidential
Source(s): Authors' own elaboration

Table 4. Empirical context of Creativo's consortium partnership

Partner	Country	Type	Size	Role in project	Project budget (%)	EUGrant (€/%)	EU project experience (refined)	Relational position
P1 (Coordinator)	Finland	Cultural centre	<i>Very large</i> (national flagship cultural hub, multi-tenant complex)	Project coordinator; research anchor	15.32	12.74	<i>High</i> (EU cultural cooperation + transnational cultural management projects)	<i>Core-Central Leader</i>
P2	Belgium	International Arts network	<i>Very large</i> (global performing arts network)	Sector advocacy + dissemination	4.91	3.74	<i>Very high</i> (EU-funded cultural cooperation programmes)	<i>Broker/Network Powerhouse</i>
P3	Sweden	European cultural network	<i>Very large</i> (EU-wide network, 100+ members)	Network dissemination + governance	11.74	14.02	<i>Very high</i> (long-standing EU cultural networks participation)	<i>Core-Central Broker</i>
P4	United Kingdom	Public University	<i>Very large</i> (major research university)	Academic research lead; evaluation	4.29	3.99	<i>Very high</i> (EU research + cultural policy projects)	<i>Knowledge Core Actor</i>
P5	Sweden	Municipal cultural policy unit	<i>Large</i> (<i>public authority</i>)	Policy integration + governance	1.32	0.00	<i>High</i> (EU cultural policy frameworks + city networks)	<i>Institutional Semi-Central Actor</i>
P6	Greece	Performing arts organisation	<i>Small–medium</i>	Artistic experimentation + pilot testing	4.61	7.19	<i>Medium</i> (EU cultural mobility + cooperation projects)	<i>Semi-Peripheral Specialist</i>
P7	Italy	Independent cultural centre	<i>Medium–large</i> (4,000 sqm autonomous cultural hub)	Pilot experimentation site	4.64	5.65	<i>Medium</i> (participation in EU cultural cooperation via Creative Europe)	<i>Semi-Peripheral Specialist</i>

(continued)

Table 4. Continued

Partner	Country	Type	Size	Role in project	Project budget (%)	EUGrant (€/%)	EU project experience (refined)	Relational position
P8	Slovakia	Cultural development agency	<i>Medium</i> (regional innovation agency)	Innovation tools + benchmarking	7.21	8.07	<i>Medium–High</i> (EU regional innovation and culture projects)	<i>Boundary-Spanning Semi-Central Actor</i>
P9	Slovakia	Independent cultural centre	<i>Medium</i>	Grassroots experimentation site	2.64	3.41	<i>Medium–High</i> (EU cultural cooperation networks via TEH)	<i>Semi-Peripheral Specialist</i>
P10	United Kingdom	Cultural consultancy	<i>Small</i> (specialised consultancy)	Capacity building + facilitation	7.51	14.95	<i>High</i> (frequent EU cultural advisory and training roles)	<i>Broker/Influential Intermediary</i>
P11	Italy	Public University	<i>Medium</i> (regional university)	Field research + case studies	21.11	19.90	<i>High</i> (EU research and regional development programmes)	<i>Administrative-Knowledge Core Actor</i>
P12	Netherlands	Cultural venue	<i>Medium</i> (established music/cultural venue)	Audience development pilot site	7.20	3.33	<i>Medium</i> (EU cultural collaboration networks)	<i>Peripheral Operational Actor</i>
P13	United Kingdom	Cultural venue + creative hub	<i>Medium–large</i> (urban creative infrastructure)	Urban creative economy pilot	7.50	3.03	<i>Medium–High</i> (EU cultural + urban regeneration projects)	<i>Peripheral/Symbolic Visibility Actor</i>

Note(s): Given the high heterogeneity of the partners', that radically differ in structure and outputs, we treat 'Size' as a multidimensional qualitative construct (Kimberly, 1976) combining four indicators: (1) staff and managerial capacity, (2) annual budget/resource base, (3) physical infrastructure or assets (venues, buildings, sqm, seats), and (4) geographic/network reach and stakeholder centrality. Categories were interpreted as follows: Small = niche/local actors with limited staff/resources; Medium = stable professional organisations with regional/national operations; Large = major public institutions or nationally relevant actors; Very large = transnational networks, universities, or flagship multi-site infrastructures with substantial resources and broad influence (Kimberly, 1976)

Source(s): Authors' own elaboration

Within this configuration, particular emphasis is placed on the interaction between P10 and P11, which constitute a critical dyad for understanding the influence dynamics analysed in this study. Their positioning in terms of resource control, relational proximity, and strategic interests played a key role in shaping the observed behavioural patterns.

3.4 Data collection and analysis

Data were gathered through participant observation (Czarniawska, 2012) and archival sources, including formal meeting minutes, emails, postal correspondence, and project deliverables. Following an abductive approach, conceptual anchors were repeatedly developed from the literature to guide the interpretation of empirical data. To reduce researcher bias, only factual, verifiable data were collected and systematically stored (e.g. project repositories, mailboxes, consortium reports, and internal and external project deliverables) (Eisenhardt, 2002).

Empirical data were consolidated into a single, chronological narrative, tracing partners' actions and their linked effects. Chronological organisation of data supported longitudinal analysis and facilitated identification of causal links, including those mediated by temporal delays (Senge, 1990; Sterman, 2000).

This approach further facilitated the identification of dynamic interactions and the extraction of tacit knowledge, consistent with recommendations for abductive inquiry in complex, multi-actor social contexts spanning diverse organisational and institutional settings (Dawson and Hjorth, 2011). As a result, we systematically reconstructed the evolving trajectory of partners' actions and their impacts (Table 5). It is assumed, according to the project archival codes, that the code P10 for the business partner and P11 for the university partner.

The (Table 5) was operationalised into a *Model boundary diagram* (Sterman, 2000; Meadows and Wright, 2008) (Table 6) by systematically mapping empirical observations onto a network of causal relationships, where each partner action and reaction is represented as a *cause-and-effect link* with *polarity* (Sterman, 2000; Eden and Ackermann, 2001). The *link polarity* is the directional nature of the relationship between two variables in a causal model, indicating whether a change in the cause reinforces or counteracts a change in the effect (Sterman, 2000). Positive (+) and negative (−) link polarities characterise the effect in the first and second cases.

The *theoretical anchors* guide variable and construct selection (Sterman, 2000; Bryson, 2004; Miles *et al.*, 2014; Checkland, 1981). Further, methodological rigour of the data elaboration is supported by traceable and transparent coding of *observations-to-constructs*, consistent with qualitative system modelling and Causal Loop Diagram practices (Sterman, 2000; Eden and Ackermann, 2001). The Model Boundary Diagram serves as the input dataset for the System Thinking mapping and analysis.

We analyse the data through a theoretical lens and the tools of System Thinking, an approach that guides theory selection and methodological choices, particularly well-suited to complex, multi-actor, dynamic contexts (Checkland, 1981; Sterman, 2000). In our case, it is suitable for modelling the complex interactions between actors in the project context, and for identifying the “system structures”. A key tool of System Thinking is the Causal Loop Diagram (Forrester, 1961; Sterman, 2000; Meadows and Wright, 2008). Then, feedback loops and system archetypes are detected and analysed; finally, *time-series graphs* are employed to study university behaviour. They are particularly useful for investigation, as they capture and visualise the dynamic patterns of a system, stimulate discussion about the underlying feedback loops driving behaviours (Senge, 1990), and compare expected versus actual or alternative scenarios of system evolution.

3.5 Validity

The research process was carefully scrutinised for validity (Yin, 2018). Assuming validity as credibility, accuracy, and trustworthiness of the link between empirical evidence and the

Table 5. Activities and facts of the stakeholder P10 (Data set for the CLD model)

Time (month)	Empirical observation	Conceptual anchor
0	Project kick-off: P10 (UK small consultancy) and P11 (Italian public university) hold the highest budget shares. P10 is highly dependent on the project for survival, whereas P11 combines institutional legitimacy with financial control	Power asymmetry emerges from budget allocation versus organisational scale: P10's survival dependence (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978) contrasts with P11's institutional legitimacy and financial authority (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983)
10	Currency fluctuations reduce P10's budget by 25%, generating dissatisfaction	Dissatisfaction arises when expected and realised outcomes diverge, motivating corrective actions (Ring and Van de Ven, 1994; Huxham and Vangen, 2005)
11	P10 communicates the issue to partners informally, proposing budget redistribution	Dissatisfaction triggers influence actions (lobbying, coalition building) to realign resources (Provan and Kenis, 2008; Mitchell <i>et al.</i> , 1997). P10 uses soft influence via sensemaking and informal framing to legitimise claims (Weick, 1995; Hardy and Phillips, 1998; Suchman, 1995)
12	P10 explores partners' positions, mediates expectations, and formalises a redistribution request to the Steering Board	Collaborative governance and participatory decision-making are applied through informal consultations and formal proposals (Bryson, 2018; Vangen and Huxham, 2013). Proximity (physical/relational) shapes acceptance of solutions (Driscoll and Starik, 2004; Mitchell <i>et al.</i> , 1997; Rajablu and Wan Fadzilah, 2015)
13	Steering Board rejects redistribution due to contractual and EU rules; P10's dissatisfaction escalates into urgency	Regulatory constraints enforce limits, while rising urgency drives strategic influence and adaptive governance (Vangen and Huxham, 2013; Bryson, 2018; Aaltonen and Sivonen, 2009; Mitchell <i>et al.</i> , 1997)
14	P10 targets P11 based on low proximity, high budget, and low interest to recover resources	Stakeholder prioritisation, power mapping, and tactical decision-making in collaborative governance (Bryson, 2018; Vangen and Huxham, 2013)
15–18	P10 identifies legal-technical non-compliance in P11's deliverables and escalates it formally	Institutionalising claims amplifies accountability and influence, triggering escalation (Stermann, 2000; Vangen and Huxham, 2013; Glasl, 1999; Aaltonen and Sivonen, 2009; Eskerod and Huemann, 2014)
19	P10's discursive actions reduce P11's credibility and raise P10's legitimacy; lobbying intensifies	Escalation and credibility leverage are strategic influence actions shaping perceptions, power, and legitimacy (Hardy, 1996; Vangen and Huxham, 2013; Bryson, 2018)
20	Increased networking and proximity allow P10 to form a coalition, reinforced by P11's resistance	Coalition-building is facilitated by relational dynamics and stakeholder influence within collaborative networks (Vangen and Huxham, 2013; Bryson, 2018)
24	P10 shares issues with all partners, gaining collective legitimacy for formal action against P11	Legitimacy-building and collective endorsement enable formalised corrective measures (Vangen and Huxham, 2013; Bryson, 2018)
25	Coordinator proposes a compromise; P11 radicalises opposition; P10 formalises a complaint	Conflict escalation, stakeholder polarisation, and institutionalised issue management shape partner behaviours (Stermann, 2000; Dutton and Ashford, 1993; Hendry, 2005)

(continued)

Table 5. Continued

Time (month)	Empirical observation	Conceptual anchor
26	Extraordinary Steering Board suspends P11; P11 is isolated from communications and deliverables	Asymmetric power dynamics and stakeholder exclusion affect legitimacy, participation, and governance (Vangen and Huxham, 2013; Bryson, 2018)
27	P11 initiates official actions to protect its position	Escalation and defensive behaviour by stakeholders under conflict conditions (Vangen and Huxham, 2013)
29	P10 coalition raises the dispute to the EU level; legal threats emerge	Escalation to higher institutional levels exerts pressure and activates governance hierarchies (Dutton and Ashford, 1993; Vangen and Huxham, 2013; Bovens, 2007)
30	EU intervenes, suspends the project, and reallocates P10's activities and budget to other partners	Institutional authority and legitimacy resolve disputes through governance interventions and resource redistribution in multi-stakeholder networks (Bovens, 2007)

theoretical claims derived from it, validity has been established by using literature (i.e. theoretical anchors) to connect empirical evidence and create reliable chains of evidence. The differentiated data sources further enabled cross-checking between qualitative and quantitative data, thereby enhancing trustworthiness. Internal validity was supported by identifying causal relationships in the empirical data and by cross-checking the authors' reasoning and explanations.

4. Findings

4.1 Feedback loops

By entering the data (Table 6) into System Dynamics software, we obtain the Causal Loop Diagram (CLD) of Creativo's partners' interactions that culminated in a university undermining (Figure 2).

The CLD reveals six feedback loops (Appendix), three of which are *dominant* and three are *latent* (Sterman, 2000). A dominant feedback loop is the feedback structure that currently exerts the greatest influence on the system's observed behaviour, shaping trends and patterns at a given time horizon. Dominance may shift over time as conditions change (Forrester, 1961; Sterman, 2000).

Our analysis focuses on the dominants, since they outweigh the others and shape the system's behaviour at any given moment. The three dominant feedback loops are the balancing loops: B.1, B.2, B.3. Dominant loops frequently change across project or system phases, a phenomenon known as shifting loop dominance (Forrester, 1961).

4.1.1 Balancing feedback loop B.1 – informal collective problem solving and proximity-based self-adaptation. In the first stage, the partnership interactions are regulated by the feedback loop B.1. This loop shows the system's tendency to zero out dissatisfaction within the partnership, despite partner P10's dissatisfaction due to the budget loss. The system aims to preserve collaboration among partners, adjusting interactions to balance actors' needs and maintain collective satisfaction and system stability (Checkland, 1981). From a systems-thinking perspective, a project partnership behaves as an adaptive relational system: actors' dissatisfactions are absorbed through balancing feedback loops involving negotiation, task redistribution, and emergent coordination, allowing the partnership to maintain stability despite inevitable tensions.

Based on partners' proximity and collaboration to restore satisfaction within the partnership through feedback loops and adaptive negotiation to balance actors' satisfaction

Table 6. Model boundary diagram/Causal loop diagram dataset

Cause	Effect	Link polarity	Empirical operationalization/Model mapping
P10 currency loss	P10 budget loss	+	Month 10: Euro-pound exchange reduces P10 budget by 25%, triggering financial strain
P10 budget loss	P10 dissatisfaction	+	P10 perceives gap between expected and realised budget, generating dissatisfaction (10–11)
P10 dissatisfaction	Issue rising and communication	+	P10 communicates problem to partners, initiating informal talks (11)
	P10 Urgency	+	Dissatisfaction escalates into urgency due to prolonged unresolved budget issue (13)
P10 Solution seeking and agreeing	Solution acceptance	+	P10 mediates and proposes budget redistribution to partners (12)
Solution Acceptance	P10 Budget loss	–	Acceptance of solution reduces P10's perceived loss (hypothetical damping)
P10 Budget loss	P10 Dissatisfaction	+	Persisting loss reinforces dissatisfaction, triggering corrective actions (13)
P10 Urgency	Target setting and Issue rising	+	Urgency leads P10 to strategically target P11 for influence (14)
Target setting and Issue rising	Broadcasting of P11 non-compliance	+	P10 identifies and shares P11's non-compliance with partners (15–18)
Broadcasting of P11 non-compliance	P11 Credibility	–	Publicising P11's non-compliance reduces its credibility (19)
P11 Credibility	P11 Legitimacy	+	Reduced credibility diminishes P11's legitimacy in consortium decisions (19)
P11 Legitimacy	P10 Solution acceptance	–	Lower P11 legitimacy increases chances of P10's proposals being accepted (24)
P10 credibility	P10 Coalition Building	+	P10 leverages credibility to form a coalition among partners (19–20)
	P10 Lobbying	+	Coalition supports lobbying activities to influence Steering Board (19–20)
P10 Coalition Building	Steering Board support	+	Coalition-building results in Steering Board alignment with P10 (20, 24)
	P10 Legitimacy	+	Credibility and coalition reinforce P10 legitimacy in consortium (19–24)
	P11 Marginalisation	+	P11 becomes excluded from communications and deliverables (26)
Steering Board support for P10	Marginalisation	+	Steering Board decisions enforce P11 exclusion, amplifying marginalisation (26)
	Legal Actions	+	Escalation triggers formal procedures at EU level (29)
Broadcasting P11 non-compliance to EU	Reputational Threat at EU level	+	P10 coalition communicates P11 issues to EU, increasing institutional pressure (29)
Legal actions	Reputational Threat at EU level	+	Legal procedures threaten EU program reputation, amplifying urgency (29)
Reputational Threat at EU level	EU Urgency	+	EU perceives high urgency to intervene (29–30)
EU Urgency	Budget redistribution	+	EU decides budget reallocation to address dispute (30)
Budget redistribution	P10 Budget loss	–	Reallocation mitigates P10 losses, completing feedback loop (30)

(Checkland, 1981; Senge, 1990). However, the lack of proximity among some partners and the threat of redistributing P10's economic loss among all partners hampered the system's goal-seeking. Proximity is both a resource and an outcome. This collective problem-solving effort is coordinated by interactions among partners to resolve shared or focal actors' problems through

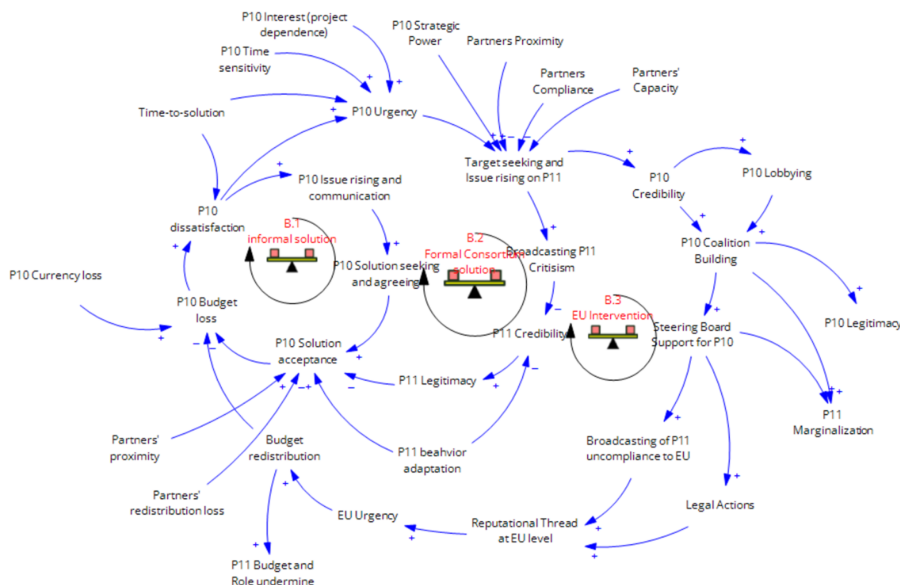


Figure 2. Causal loop diagram of the influence path within Creativo project. Source(s): Authors' own elaboration

information exchange and mutual adjustment (Provan and Kenis, 2008; Gray, 1989). As proximity decreases, relational distance increases; this, in turn, amplifies tensions and hinders further collaboration (Boschma, 2005; Granovetter, 1985). Additionally, the delay in solving the business partner's problem increases the *time-to-solution* and, in turn, the urgency of P10. The sudden increase triggers the dominance of the loop B.2, while the feedback loop B.1 extinguishes in magnitude. A shift in dominance then occurs.

4.1.2 Loop B.2 – strategic reframe of the issue. Once the feedback loop B.1 saturates, for proximity lack and solution inefficacy, the urgency of P10, that is time-sensitive (i.e. as time passes the urgency of the partner increases) (Boschma, 2005; Mitchell *et al.*, 1997), rises to shift the dominance on the feedback loop B.2. This makes B.2 dominating the system, thereby governing the behaviour in the next stage. This loop lays the foundation and prepares for the following *reframe of the problem*, as a necessary process to save the consortium's existence and stability.

When an individual actor's concern (problem, dissatisfaction, or claim) is redefined as a system-level issue, it represents a shift in framing from local rationality to collective rationality (Weick, 1995). This occurs when an actor strategically or cognitively translates private needs into shared system concerns, thereby mobilising attention and resources at the consortium or organisational level. In System Thinking, this is linked to feedback amplification and goal redefinition: the system absorbs the local tension by adapting its structures or norms to reduce systemic disequilibrium (Senge, 1990; Sterman, 2000).

The Business partner P10 erodes University (P11) credibility by detecting and broadcasting a technical incompliance in the internal deliverable. University, however, outweighs rigidity and regulatory compliance to protect its reputation in the eyes of the Partners. Adaptation and negotiation with the partners are discarded. While the university loses credibility, the business partner P10 gains legitimacy.

4.1.3 Loop B.3 – formal self-regulation. Dominance shifts from B.2 to B.3. This sequential shift in loop dominance creates *staged regulation*, in which each loop sets the conditions for the next to activate. This structure highlights layered stabilisation in complex systems: the

system keeps finding new balancing paths as earlier loops lose effectiveness, seeking long-term stability (Sterman, 2000).

The business partner P10 has reframed its request for budget recovery at the partnership system level. Lobbying with the Project Coordinator and the Steering Board is enabled. Here, balancing arises from collective partner dynamics: dissatisfaction spreads within the consortium, prompting governance mechanisms to respond more decisively. The balancing loop faces pressure: the collective voice hastens balancing attempts but also heightens the risk of escalation if the balancing action is weak. The loop B.3 seeks equilibrium by involving a higher authority (i.e. the funding agency) to enforce a solution. This represents a governance escalation loop in which balancing is delegated to a superior institutional body. B.3 shifts the issue to the broader system, affecting the reputation of the Agency programmes at risk, with legal and reputational threats extending to participating institutions.

In inter-organisational governance, balancing loops often depends on network coordinators, but their effectiveness relies on trust, legitimacy, and authority (Provan and Kenis, 2008).

All three loops (B.1, B.2, B.3) emerge to stabilise dissatisfaction in the partnership through governance responses (coordination, mediation, reputation management). B.1 and B.3 are directed towards solution, while B.2 mainly involves resource reallocation, as a means to reframe the issue at the system level. Balancing loops act as goal-seeking processes, pulling variables back towards a reference level (Sterman, 2000).

4.2 System's structure

The number, the type (*balancing* or *reinforcing*), and the interconnections between feedback loops as they emerge from the CLD determine the system structure responsible for the system's behaviour over time. System structure can be traced back to *system archetypes*, recurring patterns of structure and behaviour in complex systems that explain why certain problems or outcomes repeatedly emerge across different contexts, regardless of the specific actors or settings involved (Kim, 1992; Senge, 1990).

Creativo's structure has three balancing loops that operate across three temporal stages. They dominate each stage, thus primarily governing the system's behaviour over time, while the other three loops remain latent (Sterman, 2000).

4.3 Behaviour over time graph

The Behaviour Over Time (BOT) graph is a graphical representation of how one or more variables change over time, used to visualise trends, patterns, and dynamics in a system. BOT graphs help identify underlying feedback structures, delays, and causal relationships that generate observed behaviours (Meadows and Wright, 2008; Sterman, 2000). They are powerful diagrams representing normalised trends of the system's variables, like growth, decline, oscillation, or stabilisation, which emerge from causal loop diagrams. They illustrate how feedback structures shape system trajectories over time (Morecroft, 2015; Sterman, 2000). These graphs enable long-term analysis of system variables, offering insights into underlying feedback loops, delays, and nonlinearities. They support knowledge development by linking causal loop diagrams with observed or simulated trajectories, thus enhancing understanding of system behaviour and policy effects (Sterman, 2000; Morecroft, 2015).

We select and report six key system functions over time (Figure 3) because they are crucial to the analysis, both individually and collectively. They are specifically: business partner urgency, university credibility, coalition strength, coordinator urgency, sponsor intervention likelihood, and university marginalisation.

P10 Urgency captures the driving dissatisfaction of the orchestrating partner. Urgency acts as the motor for influence actions (broadcasting and coalition building). Without it, the process wouldn't activate. *P11 Credibility*, the target variable, is under attack. As criticism rises, credibility diminishes, weakening P11's role. It is key because credibility is the "currency" of

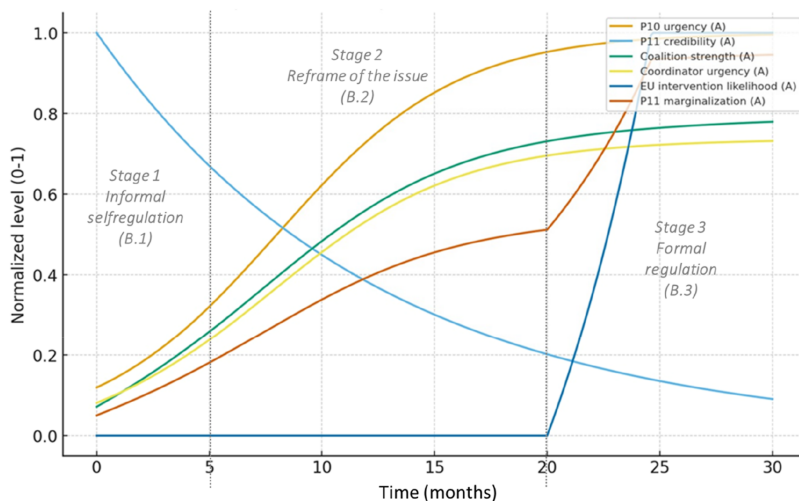


Figure 3. Key causal variables and effect variables over time. Creativo project. Source(s): Authors' own elaboration

academic partners in consortia. *Coalition Strength* indicates whether other partners align with P10 or P11. It amplifies reputational pressure. It is important to observe how the erosion of credibility leads to collective responses. *Coordinator Urgency* reflects pressures within the consortium, as the coordinator serves as the mediator among partners. In the feedback loops, it serves as the balancing counterforce: when the coalition grows, the coordinator is compelled to act. Sponsor *EU Intervention Likelihood* indicates the escalation layer (B.3 loop). If coalition and reputational issues persist, the conflict escalates beyond the consortium, risking the European program's reputation. University *marginalisation* is the outcome: the academic partner's role and budget diminish. It measures the success or failure of P10's influence.

Together, they map the core dynamics of resources and outcomes, showing how initial dissatisfaction (P10 urgency) leads to reputational attacks (P11 credibility), which in turn trigger alliance building (coalition strength), provoke balancing attempts (coordinator urgency), escalate the situation (EU likelihood), and ultimately result in marginalisation of the university (P11).

Under the pressures of the consortium system, the university P11 exhibits legitimacy-seeking behaviour by adhering to the formal arrangements agreed upon to enhance credibility within the partnership. The strategic construction of a role or identity in the dispute arena, intended to influence perceptions of legitimacy and power dynamics (Hardy and Phillips, 1998; Mitchell *et al.*, 1997), becomes problematic here.

P11 credibility decreases over time due to criticism, lobbying, and coalition attacks. P11 credibility diminishes exponentially as the consortium perceives a drop in reliability. P11 resources (Budget, Role) decrease linearly, following the influence of the Steering board and EU-level intervention, leading to a redistribution loop.

P10 Legitimacy/Influence increases as dissatisfaction translates into coalition-building and budget gains. It rises in a mirror-like fashion, gaining authority as P11 weakens. *Consortium cohesion* falls due to escalating disputes, reputational threats, and legal action. In essence, tensions in governance and budget allocations slowly erode cohesion and engagement.

5. Discussion

The study demonstrates how high-interest, high-strategic-power partners orchestrate influence actions aligned with the system's strategies, often to the detriment of universities

within funded project consortia. Influence involves multiple, iterative, and concurrent pathways of action, each operating at a specific level of authority (e.g. partners, consortium, steering board, European programme management director). Escalation from one level to another is supported by a sense of urgency. The core weakening of P11's role is achieved through influence actions (e.g. detecting and attributing criticism, lobbying, coalition building, steering board exclusion), which erode signalling resources such as legitimacy, credibility, and relational assets. These are key resources to control rather than financial ones (Clark, 1998; Etzkowitz, 2004). A fundamental managerial awareness for universities stems from identifying these core resources.

- P1. In multistakeholder-funded projects, universities' behaviour is mainly influenced by partners' strategic and relational power, as influence efforts focus on symbolic resources such as legitimacy and credibility rather than financial control.

In response to the system's adaptive, emergent behaviour, the university adopted a behavioural mix of *defensive entrepreneurship*, *reduced opportunity-seeking*, a *reactive posture*, and *path dependency*. In fact, P11 exhibits *defensive entrepreneurship*, investing effort to protect its role (from legal disputes and partners' lobbying towards European Agency legitimacy). At the same time, *opportunity-seeking* declines, as entrepreneurial initiatives such as innovation, dissemination, and engagement suffer under resource cuts and reputational threats. This leads to a *reactive posture*, with P11 shifting from proactive engagement in knowledge valorisation and partnerships to survival-oriented strategies. Over time, *path dependency* emerges, as repeated coalition targeting creates a self-reinforcing cycle in which P11 is progressively sidelined in future projects.

- P2. Under coalition pressures and escalating influence, universities exhibit adaptive and defensive entrepreneurial behaviours, progressively shifting from proactive innovation to reactive survival and path-dependent marginalisation.

Positioning in a dispute refers to the stance an actor adopts in framing the conflict. Positioning is then the strategic act of defining and communicating one's stance, role, and legitimacy in the conflict through explicit demands, narratives, or identity claims to influence how the dispute is understood and resolved (Hardy and Phillips, 1998; Davies and Harré, 1990). The university has taken an early position, thus remaining closed in this reputational cage.

University partner P11 demonstrates strictly formal, compliant behaviour, adopting a highly rule-bound stance to strategically enhance credibility and role (Hardy and Phillips, 1998). The behaviour of an academic partner who maintains a very rigid or adaptable stance in consortia can be described as a compliance-based credibility strategy: a conscious alignment with formal rules, contracts, and funding requirements, used to strengthen legitimacy and institutional role, even if it reduces partners' flexibility. This behaviour is characterised by procedural rigidity, marked by strict adherence to funding rules, deliverable formats, and reporting deadlines; non-flexibility, reflected in a reluctance to adjust tasks or concede to informal partner requests; legitimacy seeking, aimed at being recognised by funders and coordinators as credible and indispensable; and defensive positioning, often deployed in response to perceived threats of marginalisation or reputational attacks.

It is a positional strategy of credibility reinforcement through non-concession.

Results allow us to contrast with Hendry's pattern of solution seeking in project consortia: the mechanism pattern comprises problem-raising, positioning, and solution-seeking (Hendry, 2005). A stakeholder articulates a claim, concern, or dissatisfaction that challenges the system. It serves to frame an issue so that it becomes salient and difficult to ignore. After raising the issue, the subject engages in discursive positioning: aligning with allies, framing the issue in moral, technical, or institutional terms, and assigning responsibility or blame. This step concerns credibility and legitimacy: the issue is narrated in a way that resonates with broader audiences, shaping perceptions of who appears "right" or "reasonable". Once the issue is established and positions are clarified, stakeholders push for practical or negotiated solutions.

The process often involves compromise, but the party with greater legitimacy and coalition support ultimately shapes the outcome.

- P3. In power-influenced consortia, universities often adopt a compliance-based credibility strategy, rigid adherence to formal rules and procedures, to preserve legitimacy, though at the cost of adaptability and collaboration.

P11's behaviour demonstrates a static legitimacy-seeking orientation, suitable for public universities but inadequate in dynamic, power-driven consortia. An entrepreneurial approach would necessitate boundary-spanning, discursive reframing, adaptive compromise, resilience, and repositioning. To effectively counteract partners' influence and protect both the role and the budget, universities involved in collaborative project courses must implement staged behavioural strategies. Boundary-spanning in the initial phases facilitates access to diverse knowledge flows and the legitimisation of alliances, reducing exposure to dominant partners (Tushman and Scanlan, 1981). Progressing to discursive reframing, universities can strategically craft narratives and problem framings that highlight their unique academic contributions, thereby shaping perceptions of value and aligning project aims with institutional interests (Hardy and Phillips, 1998). In subsequent stages, adaptive compromise becomes essential: by selectively conceding on secondary issues, universities maintain trust and collaboration whilst safeguarding core mandates and resource allocations (Oliver, 1991). Finally, resilience and repositioning enable universities to transform setbacks into learning opportunities, bolstering adaptive capacity and securing a more prominent role in future project dynamics (Lengnick-Hall and Beck, 2025). Together, these stages form a dynamic behavioural repertoire that ensures universities can both withstand and strategically respond to shifting inter-partner power relations.

- P4. To effectively counter partner influence, universities should adopt staged behavioural strategies, boundary spanning, discursive reframing, adaptive compromise, and resilience that enable dynamic adaptation and long-term legitimacy within multistakeholder projects (Figure 4).

In funded project consortia, the entrepreneurial behaviour of a university partner (P11) is influenced not only by its knowledge contributions but also by stakeholder power dynamics

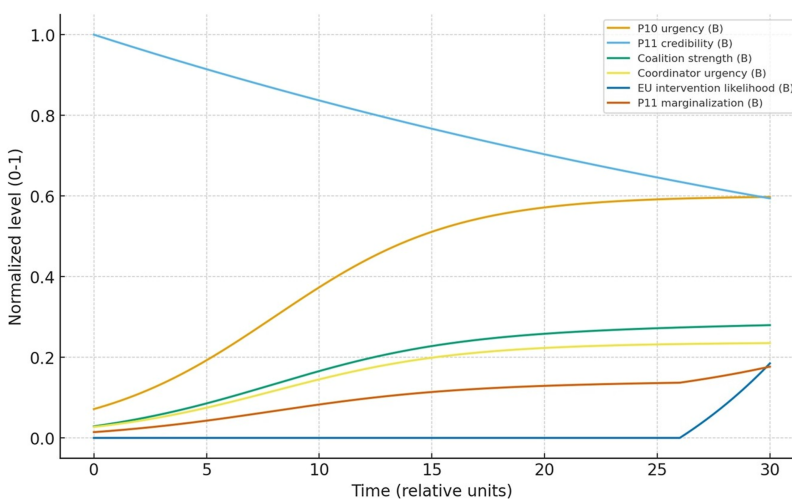


Figure 4. Key causal variables and effect variables over time, in the scenario of “University adaptive behaviour”. Source(s): Authors’ own elaboration

and coalition pressures. When targeted, the university's entrepreneurial role shifts from proactive innovation to defensive survival, constrained by typical system traps (e.g. *escalation, success to the successful*) (Sternan, 2000; Senge, 1990). Over time, this results in either the erosion of entrepreneurial identity or a redefinition of entrepreneurship as resilience and coalition-building rather than just innovation.

It is important to analyse the partner with strategic power who orchestrates influence actions in a consortium, known as the "orchestrator". This actor coordinates, aligns, and mobilises resources and influence among diverse partners (Dhanaraj and Parkhe, 2006; Hurmelinna-Laukkanen *et al.*, 2012). Resources managed by orchestrators are primarily symbolic and relational rather than financial. From a network theory perspective, it mediates flows of information, influence, and legitimacy between others (Burt, 2004; Levina and Vaast, 2005), and is thus regarded as a broker or boundary spanner. The orchestrator differs from the lead partner within a consortium. The lead partner is formally recognised and directs the overall strategy (Provan and Kenis, 2008; Sydow *et al.*, 2016); meanwhile, the orchestrator lacks formal authority but oversees symbolic resources. Universities could enhance their ability to recognise and manage symbolic resources, as well as to act as an institutional entrepreneur (Battilana *et al.*, 2009).

Recent literature emphasises dynamic capabilities, network brokerage, and institutional entrepreneurship in university AE (Battilana *et al.*, 2009; Dhanaraj and Parkhe, 2006; Levina and Vaast, 2005), highlighting adaptive boundary-spanning and coalition management. This study is in line with these insights on the one hand, but contrasts with empirical work tracing how high-power partners orchestrate influence to erode universities' legitimacy and credibility. Namely, the findings show the sequential escalation and defensive responses. Further, it extends literature by detailing a causal mechanism linking partner influence, symbolic resource erosion, and staged adaptive university behaviours, providing a fine-grained, longitudinal view of how multistakeholder power dynamics shape university entrepreneurial behaviour (Sydow *et al.*, 2016; Provan and Kenis, 2008).

6. Conclusions

This paper examined how a university's academic entrepreneurial behaviour is undermined in multi-stakeholder project consortia. Using a longitudinal case study analysed with a Systems Thinking approach, we found that a university's role is not fixed but dynamically shaped by intra-consortium power struggles and coalition pressures. These factors can force a university to shift from proactive innovation to defensive survival, a response constrained by typical system traps.

Our findings offer a new understanding of academic engagement as an emergent property within a complex social system, presenting a relational-systemic perspective that contrasts with earlier static and linear analyses. The study identifies four interconnected mechanisms, presented as propositions, that collectively enhance theory: (1) universities' behaviour is influenced more by partners' relational and symbolic power than by formal authority; (2) adaptive and defensive behaviours develop under coalition pressures; (3) credibility strategies based on compliance help maintain legitimacy but reduce flexibility; and (4) staged and resilient strategies support long-term adaptation and legitimacy. Overall, this research provides empirically grounded insights into a relatively under-explored area, emphasising the vital need for universities to foster resilience and strategic awareness when engaging in collaborative research projects.

Considering the limitations of a single case study, our findings are not broadly generalisable but provide a basis for future research. Further studies could use this systems-based framework to examine different consortia structures, project types, or institutional contexts to test the hypotheses presented here. This would enhance our understanding of the complex interaction between stakeholder influence and the changing nature of the entrepreneurial university.

Contributing to both theory and practice, this paper redefines academic entrepreneurial behaviour as an emergent, adaptive, and relational process rather than a deliberate managerial plan, offering a dynamic perspective on how universities operate within power-influenced systems. The methodology (i.e. longitudinal case analysis combined with CLD-based system thinking) allows for detailed temporal reconstruction and theoretical generalisation. Future research should test these propositions across diverse institutional contexts to evaluate their transferability and boundary conditions.

6.1 Implications

This study offers several key theoretical contributions by shifting from a static view of academic entrepreneurship to a more dynamic and systemic perspective.

First, it bridges a theoretical gap. The research fills a gap in the literature by illuminating the mechanisms and dynamics through which partners shape universities' roles in funded, multistakeholder project consortia. While previous work has identified external pressures as a factor, this study uses a systems-thinking framework and Causal Loop Diagrams (CLDs) to reveal the nonlinear, recursive processes and feedback loops that govern these interactions. This way, the study supports the idea that universities' behaviour in multistakeholder projects, such as many academic engagement projects, is an emergent property of a complex social system rather than a deliberate, linear managerial plan.

Secondly, it redefines power and behaviour. The paper differentiates between explicit pressures and more subtle, relational influences that develop dynamically during project implementation. It proposes that strategic power asymmetries, those related to differences in lobbying, networking, and framing capacities, can be more significant than formal or structural power in shaping a university's role and budget. This shift from emphasising proactive behaviour to a defensive, survival-driven entrepreneurial identity offers a new perspective for understanding universities' responses to conflictual, multi-stakeholder environments.

Third, it enhances Stakeholder Theory by incorporating an empirical study within the Academic Engagement domain. The findings advance Stakeholder Theory by illustrating how power dynamics and coalition-building among partners of equal standing can marginalise an academic actor in a collaborative setting. It shows that a partner's legitimacy can be diminished not only by its own actions but also by the collective efforts of a powerful coalition.

These three contributions directly reflect the four propositions advanced in the Discussion:

- (1) **Propositions 1 and 2** extend Stakeholder Theory by explaining how relational power and coalition dynamics drive adaptive and defensive behaviours in academic settings.
- (2) **Proposition 3** bridges institutional and entrepreneurial theories, showing that compliance-based credibility strategies protect legitimacy but constrain innovation and collaboration.
- (3) **Proposition 4** integrates resilience and dynamic capabilities perspectives, identifying adaptive and staged responses as key to maintaining long-term institutional legitimacy.

Some important implications for managerial practice can also be drawn. The findings of this paper provide practical insights for university administrators, project managers, and policymakers involved in EU-funded projects.

For universities, this research acts as a warning, urging institutions to adopt a more adaptable and resilient entrepreneurial approach. University administrators and project teams should not presume a balanced or cooperative environment solely because partners hold equal formal power. Instead, they must remain vigilant in recognising and addressing strategic power imbalances and be ready to build coalitions to safeguard their role and mission. The study underscores the importance of universities investing in internal support systems, such as

Table 7. Summary table of theoretical and practical results

Proposition	Core idea	Theoretical implication	Practical focus
P1	Symbolic and relational power drive university behaviour	Extends Stakeholder Theory toward non-formal influence	Monitor and protect legitimacy assets
P2	Adaptive and defensive behavior under coalition pressure	Links entrepreneurship and systems thinking	Detect early behavioural drift
P3	Compliance preserves legitimacy but limits flexibility	Adds defensive dimension to institutional theory	Balance credibility and collaboration
P4	Staged, resilient strategies foster long-term legitimacy	Integrates resilience and dynamic capabilities	Build learning and support structures
Source(s): Authors' own elaboration			

a dedicated offices to European funded projects, to prevent the loss of autonomy and mission drift.

For project managers and consortia leaders, the study highlights the vital importance of effective governance and conflict resolution from the start of the project. Consortia leaders should proactively monitor and tackle power imbalances and conflicting interests to ensure genuine co-creation rather than shifting towards a contractor-client relationship. Encouraging transparency, trust, and open communication can help prevent the “stress, tensions, and experiments” that result in negative emergent reconfigurations.

Policymakers, such as those in the European Union, should recognise that the intended benefits of transnational, cross-sectoral collaboration can be undermined by informal power dynamics. Mechanisms to protect the roles and contributions of academic partners, beyond formal contractual obligations, may be necessary to ensure that European funding effectively promotes academic entrepreneurship and innovation.

The propositions presented in this paper offer a unified theoretical and practical framework. Specifically, they demonstrate how universities’ entrepreneurial behaviour arises through recursive power–legitimacy feedback loops, illustrating that compliance and resilience together shape institutional adaptation, and providing practical guidance for developing governance structures and internal capabilities that strengthen strategic resilience in multi-stakeholder environments. The following table (Table 7) summarises these propositions and their corresponding implications.

Appendix

Loop Number 1 of length 4

- P10 dissatisfaction
- P10 Issue rising and communication
- P10 Solution seeking and agreeing
- P10 Solution acceptance
- P10 Budget loss

Loop Number 2 of length 7

- P10 dissatisfaction

P10 Urgency
Target seeking and Issue rising on P11
Broadcasting P11 Criticisms
P11 Credibility
P11 Legitimacy
P10 Solution acceptance
P10 Budget loss

Loop Number 3 of length 10

P10 dissatisfaction
P10 Urgency
Target seeking and Issue rising on P11
P10 Credibility
P10 Coalition Building
Steering Board Support for P10
Broadcasting of P11 in compliance to EU
Reputational Threat at EU level
EU Urgency
Budget redistribution
P10 Budget loss

Loop Number 4 of length 10

P10 dissatisfaction
P10 Urgency
Target seeking and Issue rising on P11
P10 Credibility
P10 Coalition Building
Steering Board Support for P10
Legal Actions
Reputational Threat at EU level
EU Urgency
Budget redistribution
P10 Budget loss

Loop Number 5 of length 11

P10 dissatisfaction
P10 Urgency

Target seeking and Issue rising on P11
P10 Credibility
P10 Lobbying
P10 Coalition Building
Steering Board Support for P10
Legal Actions
Reputational Threat at EU level
EU Urgency
Budget redistribution
P10 Budget loss

Loop Number 6 of length 11

P10 dissatisfaction
P10 Urgency
Target seeking and Issue rising on P11
P10 Credibility
P10 Lobbying
P10 Coalition Building
Steering Board Support for P10
Broadcasting of P11 in compliance to EU
Reputational Threat at EU level
EU Urgency
Budget redistribution

Notes

1. Confidential name.
2. Given the high heterogeneity of the partners', that radically differ in structure and outputs, we treat 'Size' as a multidimensional qualitative construct (Kimberly, 1976) combining four indicators: (1) staff and managerial capacity, (2) annual budget/resource base, (3) physical infrastructure or assets (venues, buildings, sqm, seats), and (4) geographic/network reach and stakeholder centrality. Categories were interpreted as follows: Small = niche/local actors with limited staff/resources; Medium = stable professional organisations with regional/national operations; Large = major public institutions or nationally relevant actors; Very large = transnational networks, universities, or flagship multi-site infrastructures with substantial resources and broad influence (Kimberly, 1976).

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