

How to Become a European Social Science Library

Benefits and Challenges of Libraries Working Across Ten Borders

1. Introduction

If knowledge knows no borders, why should libraries? As academic institutions increasingly engage in cross-border collaboration, their libraries are called to follow. Researchers and students already move freely around Europe, supported by mobility programmes such as Erasmus+. University administrations also benefit from these opportunities to develop international partnerships. International cooperation has become standard practice across higher education through networks, research projects and European universities alliances. The time has come to include libraries in these developments. The CIVICA alliance¹ – The European University of Social Sciences – offers a model of international library cooperation within a European university framework. This report outlines the rationale, structures, benefits and challenges of this library cooperation, drawing on practical experience to advocate stronger international engagement by academic libraries.²

2. The CIVICA context

CIVICA is one of 65 European Universities Alliances initiated by the European Commission as part of the European Universities Initiative.³ With support from Erasmus+, these 65 alliances, which involve 570 higher education institutions, aim to establish pan-European university campuses, enhance competitiveness, and promote strategic partnerships in research, education, and service to society. Each alliance has its own disciplinary focus. CIVICA unites ten leading higher education institutions specialising in the social sciences, bringing together over 72,000 students, 13,000 faculty members and staff, and 3,000 researchers. The alliance spans nine European countries and comprises the following institutions: the Hertie School (Germany), Sciences Po (France), Bocconi University (Italy), the London School of Economics and Political Science (United Kingdom), Central European University (Austria and Hungary), the Stockholm School of Economics (Sweden), the SGH Warsaw School of Economics (Poland), the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (Romania), IE University (Spain), and the EUI (intergovernmental). The disciplinary focus provides a coherent framework for collaboration. CIVICA offers joint teaching and training opportunities across its member institutions, including shared bachelor's and master's modules, policy labs and a teacher development programme. The alliance also supports collaborative research by providing thematic hubs, mobility schemes for faculty members and early-career researchers, and shared infrastructure, including libraries and data resources. Furthermore, CIVICA promotes civic engagement and student-driven initiatives with the aim of creating a transnational academic community.

1 CIVICA, Libraries, <https://www.civica.eu/research/libraries>, last accessed: 11.07.2025.

2 This paper refers to the author's presentation with the same title on 26 June 2025 at the 9th Library Conference (113th Biblio-Con) in Bremen, Germany.

3 European Education Area: European Universities initiative, <https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/european-universities-initiative>, last accessed: 27.08.2025.

Within this alliance, libraries provide support to stakeholders who are expected to contribute to the alliance's goals. There are 330 staff members working in the libraries of the CIVICA member institutions. The libraries engage in various projects, delivering services to research infrastructures, student learning and technical improvement for the entire CIVICA community.

3. CIVICA library network: a shift in international library cooperation

As part of the deliverable goals defined by the alliance's management, a network dedicated to library cooperation was launched within the CIVICA alliance in 2019. This represents a shift in the way in which academic libraries collaborate across borders. Traditionally, international library cooperation has taken place through exchange programmes, conferences, job-shadowing opportunities, and Erasmus staff weeks.⁴ Additionally, professional associations such as IFLA and LIBER, as well as subject-specific projects like the European Open Science⁵ initiatives provide valuable opportunities for exchange, benchmarking, and advocacy. There are also projects of inter-university cooperation that include capacity building, study tours and scholarships.⁶ While these activities are enriching on an individual level, they are often short-term and based on voluntary exchanges rather than focused on developing and sharing library services.

By contrast, European Universities Alliances such as CIVICA introduce an advanced model of cooperation. Rather than merely informally networking, libraries are institutionally mandated to collaborate by developing services, aligning strategies and contributing to binding objectives. This EU-funded collaboration is designed to become an integral part of everyday operations.

Currently, there is little systematic documentation or evaluation of how libraries contribute to, or benefit from, the new alliances established by the European Universities Initiative. This topic is largely absent from library science literature and professional discourse. Consequently, operational international cooperation among academic libraries, particularly within structured alliances, remains a largely unexplored field. CIVICA offers a valuable case study for the broader academic library community.

4. Governance and structure

The CIVICA Library Network is governed by the Library Steering Committee, which provides strategic direction. A dedicated coordinator and a project manager oversee the collaboration, operational tasks and progress. Assigned staff members at each institution ensure continuity. A key element of the network are its six thematic working groups:

4 For example the FU Berlin international staff week, <https://www.fu-berlin.de/en/international/faculty-staff/mobility-staff/staff-week/index.html>, last accessed: 11.07.2025.

5 Open Science Europe: overview, <https://www.openaire.eu/open-science-europe-overview>, last accessed: 11.07.2025.

6 For example the Open Society University Network, <https://opensocietyuniversitynetwork.org/>, last accessed: 11.07.2025.

5. Outcome of the cooperation

The collaborative setting has encouraged cooperation in terms of services. One example of this is the CIVICA OpenAIRE Gateway⁷, a shared platform that provides open access to publications, datasets and research outputs produced by the alliance. This initiative aligns with the EU open science principles.

In the area of teaching support, the libraries have launched a joint project to purchase e-books for reading lists of the shared bachelor's and master's modules. By coordinating acquisitions, the libraries ensure that students from different institutions have equal access to essential materials, regardless of their physical location. This consortia approach is facilitated by CIVICA funding.

Another collaborative initiative is the "information literacy skills barometer". This large-scale survey will be conducted in autumn 2025 among all 72,000 CIVICA students. The survey aims to evaluate information-seeking behaviour, documentary resource usage and attitudes towards fake news and AI of CIVICA students. The findings will contribute to a shared understanding of students' needs regarding library services and teaching practices across the network.

The CIVICA libraries have also started to provide parts of their online information literacy courses, including content on reference management programmes, citation methods, academic integrity and searching legal databases. Through this offer, students from CIVICA institutions benefit from a broader portfolio of training materials. These courses are promoted across the network of libraries, enabling students to sign in and participate online.

The library cooperation has also benefited professional development. Through the CIVICA Librarian Mobility Programme, staff have met in person to develop the common workflows. For instance, 14 librarians gathered in Bucharest in June 2025 to collaborate on topics such as providing literature for intercampus teaching. Other staff mobility programmes and on-site workshops have been held in Stockholm, Milan, London and Paris. These exchanges enable staff to improve services, reduce institutional barriers, and foster working relationships.

To maintain ongoing engagement, CIVICA librarians have introduced regular events such as the CIVICA Librarian Cafés. These informal virtual meetings provide an opportunity for librarians to exchange ideas on practical topics, such as how to promote library collections in discovery systems or how to organise library visits. These meetings offer insight into the day-to-day work of the partner institutions.

In addition, the recently formed CIVICA AI Community of Exchange brings together colleagues from all partner libraries to explore the impact of artificial intelligence on library services and tools. The group addresses current developments in areas such as discovery systems, academic integrity and informa-

7 Improving the visibility of research and collaboration through the CONNECT Gateway, <https://www.openaire.eu/improving-the-visibility-of-research-and-collaboration-through-the-connect-gateway>, last accessed: 15.07.2025.

tion literacy. In response to these emerging challenges, the CIVICA libraries intend to establish another AI-related working group in 2026.

These examples show how CIVICA's cooperation model allows libraries to share expertise, develop new services together, and address emerging topics. International cooperation within the CIVICA library network has concrete outcomes at strategic, operational, and professional levels. Participation in governance structures, such as working groups, has particularly helped to clarify the role of the libraries within the alliance.

6. Challenges, lessons learned, and recommendations

Establishing an international library network within a university alliance such as CIVICA demands long-term commitment and coordination. Institutional, technical and cultural barriers must be overcome. Although the benefits of cooperation are considerable, the process is not without its challenges.

One recurring difficulty lies in the diversity of institutional contexts. Libraries differ in terms of size, structure, staffing, governance and national frameworks. These differences affect what is feasible and how quickly progress can be made. Harmonising workflows, tools and even terminology across ten institutions demands flexibility and patience. Another challenge relates to resources. Sustained collaboration requires dedicated staff, funding and coordination. These factors are often underestimated or vulnerable to shifting institutional priorities. Motivation and engagement can also fluctuate over time.

Several lessons and practical recommendations emerge from these experiences. First, a strategic approach is essential. The library directors in the CIVICA Library Steering Committee recognised that operational cooperation alone, as organised through the working groups, is not sufficient to maintain a sustainable network. Long-term collaboration requires a shared strategic focus. A strategic development workshop held in Berlin in May 2025 marked the beginning of the process of defining common priorities across the network that are regularly aligned with the CIVICA alliance's overall goals.

Second, not every initiative has been successful. Projects that do not deliver results should either be redefined or terminated. For example, despite initial interest from the network libraries, the plan to jointly license library databases was not feasible. The legal complexities involved, institutional licensing practices, and the fact that most member libraries are part of national consortia made such resource sharing impractical. Recognising and accepting these limitations early on enabled the network to refocus its efforts on more achievable objectives.

Third, starting with small, high-impact initiatives can build early confidence and demonstrate value. The emerging AI Community of Exchange is a strong example. The rapid developments in artificial intelligence affected all CIVICA libraries simultaneously, raising urgent questions around academic integrity, information literacy, and search systems. Sharing knowledge and expertise in this area has been useful, enabling libraries to respond more effectively than they could have done alone.

Fourth, dedicated coordination is crucial for keeping processes on track. Appointing a library coordinator and a project manager within CIVICA has been essential in ensuring continuity, follow-up and cross-institutional alignment.

Lastly, the value of in-person meetings should not be underestimated. Although digital collaboration tools are invaluable, trust and understanding are most effectively established through meeting face-to-face. On-site visits and workshops help to foster the relationships that make collaborating online smoother and more productive.

In short, international library cooperation requires planning, resources and resilience. However, when approached strategically and backed by sustained institutional and financial support, it can open possibilities for shared development, innovation and professional growth.

Libraries have long contributed to the internationalisation of higher education through collections, services, and expertise. The CIVICA experience demonstrates that an operational collaboration is both feasible and beneficial. It enhances the visibility of libraries, strengthens infrastructure and enriches professional practice. As more universities join European Universities alliances and other international partnerships, library directors and staff should seize the opportunity to engage actively.

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