

transformative
social innovation
theory

DESIS Network TSI Narrative



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About TRANSIT:

TRANSIT is an international research project that aims to develop a theory of Transformative Social Innovation that is useful to both research and practice. It is co-funded by the European Commission and runs for four years, from 2014 until 2017. The TRANSIT consortium consists of 12 partners across Europe and Latin America. For more information, please visit our website: <http://www.transitsocialinnovation.eu/>.

About this Document/ Disclaimer:

This report provides a very short summary of a full case-study report that includes in-depth case-studies of the DESIS Network. Both, the full case reports and this summary, were guided by four empirical research questions based upon a preliminary conceptual framework of the TRANSIT-project. The four questions concern:

1. the overall development of the local cases and the transnational network(ing);
2. how they relate to different types of change and innovation (incl. social innovation, system innovation, game- changers, narratives of change and societal transformation);
3. how actors are empowered and/or disempowered in and by the local cases and the transnational network(ing), including topics such as governance, learning, resourcing and monitoring;
4. what are other relevant emergent issues with regard to understanding the dynamics of transformative social innovation.

This summary document focuses on the first three questions. It presents – in a highly reduced and generalised format – the interpretations of the researchers, and does not necessarily reflect the views and nuances of the initiatives and respondents themselves. For a full account of each transnational network and local case, including interview quotes and expressed nuances by respondents, we refer to the full case report, which is available via communication.transit@ihs.nl. Both the full case report, as well as this summary document, are the basis for future research activities and publications.

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Authors: Carla Cipolla, Rita Afonso, Maíra Prestes Joly

Contact: communication.transit@ihs.nl

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1 DESIS Network

DESIS Network is as an acronym for “Design for social innovation and Sustainability”. DESIS Network (one of the transnational networks under study in TRANSIT) is a network of design schools or design oriented schools in universities, and defines as its main aim to use design to trigger, enable and scale-up social innovation through design thinking and design knowledge. It works to co-create, with local, regional and global partners, socially relevant scenarios, solutions and communication programs related to social innovation to face the great challenges of contemporary society.

Desis Network is, since 2014, a cultural association and operates at *Politecnico di Milano*. Chaired by Ezio Manzini, a former full professor at *Politecnico di Milano* (that works as visiting professor in many universities around the world, mainly with active DESIS Labs), DESIS Network is coordinated internationally by Anna Meroni, associate professor at *Politecnico di Milano* and also the coordinator of Polimi DESIS Lab, one of the local manifestations under study. The other local manifestation is placed on Federal University of Santa Catarina, Brazil, called NAS Design (*Núcleo de Abordagem Sistêmica do Design*) and coordinated by the prof. Luiz Fernando Gonçalves de Figueiredo.

This TSI narrative presents the case of DESIS Network as a whole and the local manifestations in Brazil and Italy as it is visualized in the Figure 1:

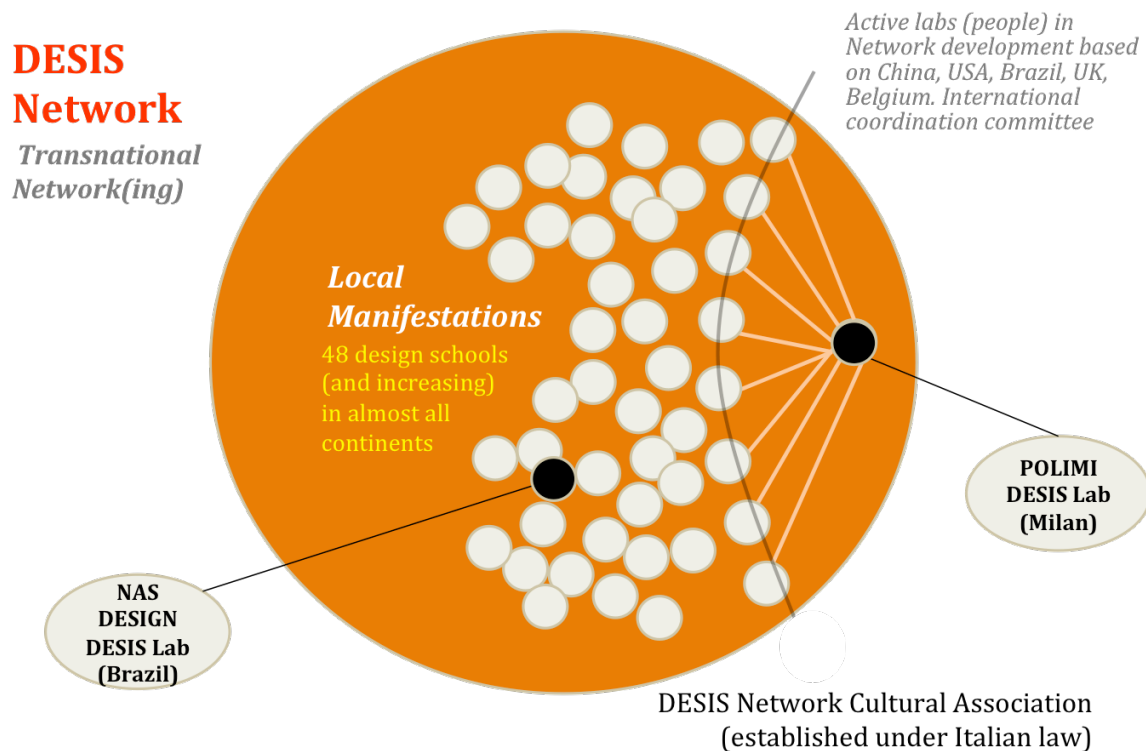


Figure 1: overview levels of DESIS Network

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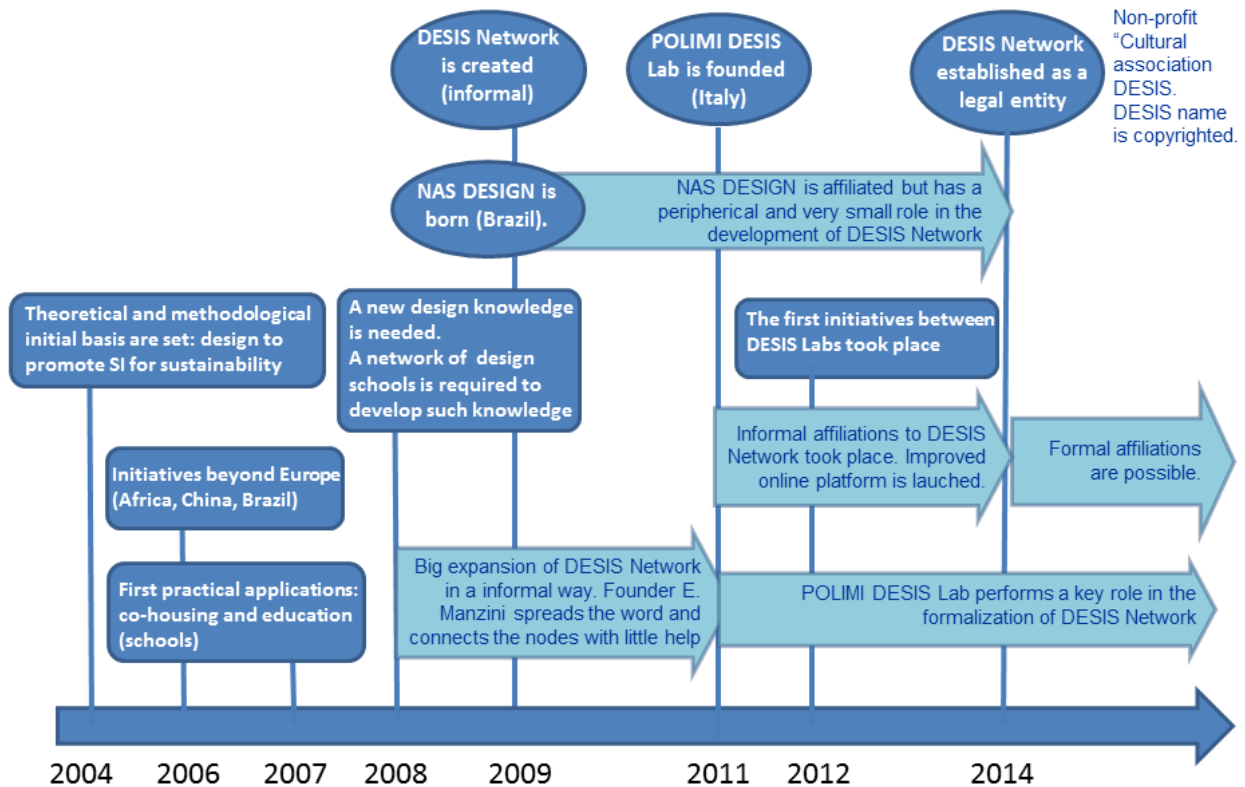
The direct relation between POLIMI DESIS Lab in Italy and NAS DESIGN in Brazil is inexistent. However, there is a common identity; they are working in the same direction but with specific strategies, considering their respective local contexts.

DESIS Network offers the possibility to promote joint initiatives between Labs and the participation in the Network development is stated as a formal duty for members of DESIS Association. Polimi DESIS Lab performs an active role in supporting and building the transnational network. NAS DESIGN participation in the transnational network is not active also if, together with Polimi DESIS Lab, it actively develops projects aligned with DESIS Network aims. Language is a key barrier for the Brazilian Lab: NAS DESIGN members, in general, does not fluently speak and write in English and expensive translations are required.

Together with Polimi DESIS Lab, there is a small group of Labs in DESIS Network that are very active, composed by members in USA, Brazil (not NAS DESIGN), China, Belgium and UK. The interpersonal relations between these members and Ezio Manzini and his role as the key actor promoting knowledge exchange between nodes was crucial for the initial development of the DESIS Network and its consolidation. The establishment of DESIS Association, which gave legal form to DESIS, and the intensification of joint initiatives between DESIS Labs, represents a new phase in the Network development, in which it starts to rely progressively less in the key role performed by its founder. Today, the expressive number of Labs in many continents provides reputation to the overall network and each DESIS Lab.

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1.1 Development of DESIS Network



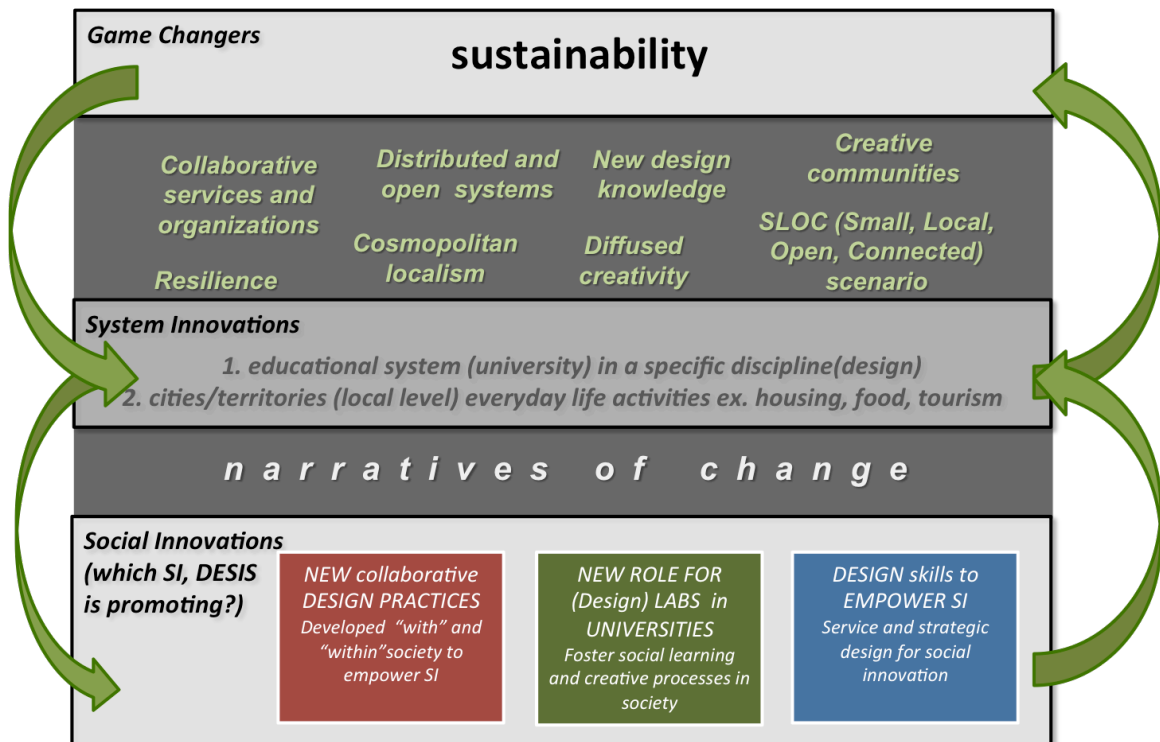
POLIMI DESIS Lab directly inherits the knowledge developed in the first research projects on design for social innovation, under the coordination of Ezio Manzini (DESIS Network founder) at Politecnico di Milano. Today, POLIMI DESIS Lab, coordinated by Anna Meroni, has a leading role in the development of DESIS Network.

The idea of DESIS Network has its beginnings in 2008. POLIMI DESIS Lab was founded in 2011. Between 2008 and 2011 the network followed a very informal development, based mainly on the work of Ezio Manzini in spreading the word and connecting the nodes, with little and informal help. Former PhD students from Politecnico di Milano, spread all over the world and have founded the first Labs (China, Brazil, China and so on), under the formal name "DESIS". Besides this, old established Labs, progressively joined the network.

The foundation of POLIMI DESIS Lab in 2011 and the expressive number of Labs that joined the network from 2008 – 2011 were key to foster the process of formalization and institutionalization of DESIS Network. It started in 2012, with the first informal affiliations and first self-organized initiatives developed by DESIS Labs, and finished in 2014, with the establishment of DESIS Network as a non-profit "cultural association" under the Italian law. DESIS Logo have been copyrighted, but it is freely usable by network members. All the knowledge generated in the network is openly available to internal and external members.

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2 Aspects of change and innovation



Design discipline was born and had a key role in the consolidation of the industrial revolution (industrial products). Now, DESIS Network is working largely to define what design discipline and design schools will be (or should be) in the future and how they should be able to bring about transformations in the current ways of living and doing.

DESIS Network.

What.

Changes required for the transition towards sustainability are to be designed through bottom up processes. **DESIS intends to identify and empower diffused creativity in the society.** This societal creativity is expressed for example in the grassroots innovations from below (social innovations) which anticipate possible and alternative futures, but it includes also other experiments and solutions developed collaboratively. Here, the design schools (DESIS Labs) have a role, being opened to the society, participating and empowering this diffused creativity and performing an actual role (developing projects that effectively promote change, also at local level). These projects simultaneously promote change and divulge and consolidate new design knowledge and practices. Society is a large laboratory of creativity and change, which requires centres (labs, solutions) that enable this creativity to flourish and develop. Design schools (DESIS Labs) aims to participate and empower these processes, being one of these centres or by being connected with other existing centres. In this, DESIS Labs, being based in universities have the flexibility to explore and consolidate new frontiers, but at the same time stimulates universities to be opened to society.

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How

The DESIS network promotes that based on four pillars:

- **Students** - educate them to promote change in collaboration with society, operating the shift towards a more sustainable future;
- **Paradigmatic projects** – projects developed in collaboration with society and which indicates that it is possible to operate the shift towards new ways of living and doing (and to create the desire to do so) based on diffused creativity. It also increases the demand for these new professional designers;
- **A new design knowledge** – to be produced to support both the students and professional new practices but not only: it constitutes a design knowledge that is able to help individuals, communities, institutions and companies to design feasible, solutions and take part in a complex social learning and creative process towards sustainable changes;
- **International networking** – to intensify the above-mentioned processes, to improve reputation at local level (DESIS Labs) and to enable joint initiatives between DESIS Labs.

Local manifestations and its projects

Specifically regarding local manifestations in Brazil and Italy, and its respective local projects, NAS DESIGN works with human groups focusing on their *social needs* (income and job need, development need) and sometimes opportunities (when thinking about their local culture as an opportunity). In contrast, POLIMI DESIS Lab is focused on *societal challenges* towards creating new *structures to society* (BEPA, 2011). In this, Polimi is more cosmopolitan, more connected and more directed to the **future**, while NAS Design is more local, strongly connected to the territory and oriented towards the **present**.

From DESIS Network members

The idea of change moves many of the Network members. It was mentioned that DESIS Network wants to ‘make the **revolution**’. Some members states that DESIS network is a kind of ‘**movement**’, a disciplinary movement on which people feel themselves as a ‘different kind of designers’. It is guided by a ‘technical and professional’ vision fostered (in students) and oriented (in professionals) to promote change. One of the interviews highlighted that this is the difference between DESIS and other SI networks (like and Transition Towns): DESIS Network have the point-of-view of a specific discipline and job. ‘**Passion**’ was a keyword used in one of the interviews to describe the motivation that lies behind the DESIS Network Labs. Passion to follow ‘visionary’ projects able to express a culture of change, of transformation.

2.1 Social Innovation

Socially innovative design solutions are built with non-professional designers through collaboration, in a bottom up way: teaching-learning-researching-designing process, generating a new design knowledge. Design and creativity are considered as diffused abilities in society to be recognized and empowered by designers which signs a new role for design labs in universities.

Design, as an organizational function that has been a tool for marketing and management activities in the organizations, shifts to a new practice and a new role, acting at a strategic

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level. This strategic approach to design is extended to the whole of society, including governments, NGOs, communities. It is *strategic design for social innovation*. One example: based on grassroots innovations, *design oriented scenarios* provides *visions* of possible futures to feed a social learning process towards a more sustainable future.

DESIS Network, in dealing with social innovations and setting up strategies and solutions, particularly services, to make them grow, and spread, keeps into focus that social outcomes *are not 'products' that can be easily made to formula and packaged*¹. In fact, one of the key narratives of DESIS Network is how to grow and spread, but keeping the original qualities that social innovations bring into light.

2.2 System Innovation

Level 1: DESIS seeks to foster changes in design education, with developments in the **formal education system and the universities** on which DESIS Labs/design schools are based. It updates universities practices and bring it close to societal capabilities, creativity and demands. It aims to boost and support the teachers' and students' action (from *ideas* to effective *action*) to design "within" and "with" the society and to promote effective change.

Level 2 (DESIS Labs projects at their local level): Through their local universities DESIS Labs can change a number of systems, which includes areas of knowledge, practices of companies and governments. It is possible to observe examples of influence at these levels. It is the example of the **co-housing project** in Italy, developed by Polimi (previously to the formal establishment of Polimi DESIS Lab) and other partners, that in approximately 7 years moved from being the first project of its kind in Italy, to become a diffused and recognized practice for housing, which has fostered changes in the sector, from small companies and social organizations to major brands, local governments, and education.

Local manifestations (DESIS Labs) act in the level of cities, mainly in urban settings, where they seek to promote system innovation. In this level, the relation with the public sector is being a key issue.

2.3 Game-changers

The demand for sustainability. The network seeks to enable sustainable futures.

It is possible to highlight other game changers as the 'sharing economy' and the 'spread of networks' based on the 'ICT revolution' (and the distributed, open, peer-to-peer organisations it generates). It is particularly evident when considering the theory and practice of the "collaborative services", extensively developed over the years in DESIS Network. These last game-changers have enabled the existence of DESIS Network itself.

2.4 Narratives of change

DESIS Network has a conceptual and theoretical base itself, continuously under development by DESIS local manifestations with other actors, and it is presented under different narratives. Ezio Manzini had (and still have) a key role in developing the *metanarratives* for DESIS Network, which gathered labs that identifies similarities with their

¹ http://youngfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Davies-Simon_Growing-social-innovation_ISIRC-2013.pdf

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own narratives and joined the network (NAS DESIGN in Brazil). DESIS Labs are developing initiatives that are favouring knowledge exchange process with other Labs, and therefore, they are being increasingly able to build new joint narratives.

The initial *metanarratives* that guides the transformative processes DESIS Network aims to foster in collaboration with society are listed below.

The **SLOC scenario (small, local, open and connected)**, *a distributed production and consumption system where the global is a “network of locals”. It a mesh of connected local systems the small scale of which makes them comprehensible and controllable by individuals and communities.* It is related to the narratives of the **distributed and open systems and cosmopolitan localism** (*enabled by ICTs, refers to the possibility of acting locally, but globally connected*). Focus is given in solutions able to foster interpersonal relations and collaborations between people. This is highlighted in the narrative of the **collaborative and relational services and organizations**, that are those which rely on participants’ own skills and capabilities to get commonly recognized results. It means a shift from passive users or consumers to participative members in a new generation of services and organizations. **Resilience** is another narrative of change that is being progressively developed in the network. All these practices are fostering a new design culture. A diffused design ability is required by the transition towards sustainability and forms a **new design knowledge**, to be developed through a vast research program, that involves not only expert designers but also other actors in the society. *All this can be imagined as a great co-creation phenomenon, where different individuals and communities interact in a vaster process of social learning and innovation: one which generates, and is itself regenerated by a new design knowledge.*

2.5 Societal transformations

Despite the recognition that design is a skill possessed in some grade by everyone, design was organized as a discipline that has had a history. It was born and had a key role in the consolidation of the industrial revolution and all its developments. From this, the transition towards sustainability, which requires the **germination and consolidation of new ideas of well-being**, has placed a huge challenge to design discipline and was one of the main drivers of DESIS Network development. The recognition of **diffused creativity in society** as a key resource to be considered to promote sustainable change (expressed in social innovations) was another driver that signed the beginnings of DESIS Network (2007).

These two drivers are guiding DESIS Network until now in terms of the social transformations it aims to promote through design schools (DESI Labs).

3 Aspects of (dis)empowerment

GOVERNANCE

Affiliation to an international network provides reputation to DESIS Labs, which enable them to innovate, at a local level. This reputation allow a DESIS Lab to operate in a university (as it is the case in Brazil) and helps to promote a favourable perception by society, by being part of a worldwide initiative.

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The key role of the founder in one hand has gathered DESIS labs around common objectives and narratives. DESIS has relied much on the leadership of its founder, however this is changing, with the **establishment of the DESIS Association (DESIS Network legal form is an association under the Italian law)** and transversal initiatives between DESIS Labs taking place.

The Network itself is kept as light as possible and is targeted to empower DESIS Labs. Practically the “centre”(international coordinator) only manages the website, organize the annual general assembly and defines a specific program for his/her mandate. All specific initiatives are self-organized between DESIS Labs themselves, following the conditions defined in the DESIS association statute.

DESIS Labs are based on universities, and its initiatives update universities practices and bring it close to societal demands and new trends. DESIS Labs are empowered by being based in well-recognized institutions. **This institutional framework may restrict DESIS Labs initiatives.** There could be a lack of recognition of a new design theory and practice (as practiced by DESIS Labs) among local colleagues, which acts as disempowerment. Academic demands can also restrict the way DESIS Labs operates.

SOCIAL LEARNING

DESIS boosts SI issues in European and international context and it is considered to be the first network on design for social innovation and one of the first worldwide focused on SI issues. In other hand there is a lack of recognition of these new design practices among society as a whole, which does not fit in the expectations of the social, government, business and management sectors. *Paradigmatic* projects are developed also to show otherwise.

DESIS empowers students, professors and professionals as transformation agents to participate in the social learning processes required to the transition towards sustainability.

DESIS supports non-designers to design by supporting citizens in expressing their ideas and in collaborating to solve their own problems. Some professional designers and professors can get opposed to this view of design practice that, accordingly to them, can bring lack of power and recognition for expert designers.

RESOURCING

Affiliation to an international network empowers some DESIS Labs to find partners for submit proposals to get funded. There is a huge potential for worldwide projects (48 labs in many continents and increasing). However the network is monodisciplinary (only designers) and this may be a problem to get funded in social innovation projects.

The DESIS Association statute does not allow the association to manage financial resources (it makes easier for the association to be managed and does not create concentration of power and resources) but this does not allow the Network as a whole to get funded, only single Labs. All financial resources are managed by the Labs, which can gather with other labs for joint initiatives. **A member of a DESIS Lab** (elected as international coordinator to accomplish a two year mandate) **manages DESIS Network using its own resources.**

Universities operation and resources empower DESIS Labs and DESIS Network, which find in the professors’ own duties, student’s activities and universities’

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infrastructures its main resources. Specific financial resources to projects are raised by DESIS Labs themselves. In the other hand, if there is a lack of local resources and infrastructures in universities, this restrict the possibility for DESIS Labs to connect and collaborate with the overall network.

MONITORING

First monitoring process in DESIS Network enables knowledge generation. It intensifies the production of (a common) knowledge between the DESIS Labs by analysing the impacts of the local projects in a number of fields (governance, job creation, etc). However, there is a **lack of network monitoring process** to verify consequences of DESIS processes in students (now and in their future professional practices) and in teachers. **Existing monitoring processes in universities disempower DESIS Labs** which activities may not fit in the existing evaluation metrics.