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Preface

Under the impulse of the European Commission, the number of alliances has grown through successive funding calls, from 17 in 2019 to 64 in 2024, with over 560 higher education institutions in Europe involved in experimenting with new models of integrated cooperation. Through the Erasmus+ and the Horizon funding programmes, as well as differing levels of support from national governments, the emerging "European University alliances" benefit from unprecedented levels of funding and freedom to develop university-wide cooperation activities outside the established framework of existing Erasmus+ actions.

This volume was born from the editors' and authors' realisation of the potential of the European Universities Initiative (EUI) as an object of study, from various disciplinary perspectives. The editors' role in designing and setting up one of the alliances of the first wave gave them a privileged position from which to appreciate the strategic political importance of the initiative in the light of the ongoing Europeanisation of Higher Education, but also as a unique field in which to observe this process playing out through everyday practices within universities. While preparing a first research article published in the special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary European Research* (Frame & Curyło, 2022), they launched a call for papers in 2021, collected and selected contributions, and hosted an authors' workshop in 2022, in order to present the assumptions of their articles and work on the complementarity of the various contributions to the volume. As research interest in the EUI grew, through panels at European Studies conferences in Belfast (UACES, September 2023) and via monthly online meetings of an informal network of scholars interested in the EUI as an object of research, organised by Nadia Manzoni, further chapters were subsequently integrated during the book development process.

The ambition of the collective volume, which, to the best of the editors' knowledge, is the first to be published specifically on the EUI, is to provide some systematic analysis of the context and the way in which the initiative developed, to underline the potential of this object of study for further research and to suggest some further lines of enquiry in light of its current and probable future developments.

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6 Critical cosmopolitanism as a theoretical and methodological approach to the EUI

Almudena González del Valle-Brena, María-Jesús Díaz-González and María-José Ferrari

Introduction

The European Universities Initiative (EUI) was launched by the European Commission (EC) in October 2018 as its most ambitious step towards establishing a European Education Area (EEA) by 2025. It responded to the conclusions of the Gothenburg Social Summit on the future of education in November 2017, which aimed to create transnational alliances of higher education institutions from across the EU that would come together in "European campuses" to "strengthen strategic and in-depth transnational collaboration for the benefit of students, teachers and society." (European Commission, 2020, p. 1). The project's long-term objectives included fostering shared European values and a stronger European identity by bringing together a new generation of Europeans who can cooperate and work within different cultures,[1] in different languages, and across borders, sectors and academic disciplines.

As of December 2023, there were 50 active European Alliances and the initiative stated the intention of reaching up to 60 European Universities and more than 500 higher education institutions from Europe by mid-2024 (European Education Area, 2023). It is a significant increase from the previous years in which the initiative was launched and started to develop: in 2022, at the end of the second call, there were 41 alliances, amounting to 215 member universities from EU member states and five partnering countries (European Commission, 2020, p. 1). The reason is to be found in the results of the evaluation of the third call and the expected results from the fourth call. The calls were published on 30 September 2022 and 3 October 2023, respectively.

The literature on the role of higher education institutions in promoting a European identity aligns with the EC's view that culture and education play a significant role in "strengthening the sense of belonging together and being part of a cultural community" (Council of the European Union, 2017, p. 3). Fostering young people's commitment to Europe, in its dual implications of identifying as a European and expanding a European way of citizenship (Cram, 2012), has been at the core of Erasmus since its inception. However, studies on the achievement of these objectives show inconclusive results in both the "cultural" and the "civic" dimensions of European identity (Jacobone & Moro, 2015; Mitchell, 2015; Mazzoni et al., 2018;

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Van Mol, 2018). Several studies show a clear correlation between intra-European mobility and the reinforcement of a European identity, while others highlight the "stratified" aspect of the phenomenon, whereby only a small number of already "pro-European" students benefit from this form of cross-border interaction, making their experience peripheral in the formation and expansion of a European identity (Kuhn, 2019; Fligstein et al., 2012). As Gunn (2020) explains, the EUI has been conceived with an awareness of these challenges in mind, giving it the potential to achieve a level of cooperation that triggers European integration in a way that surpasses all previous attempts.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the potential contribution of the EUI to European identity and the Europeanisation process by studying the programmatic texts of the initiative under the light of the theoretical framework of critical cosmopolitanism, as proposed by Delanty (2009). The aim is to set out the case for the idea that critical cosmopolitanism is a valid entry point to assess whether the EUI can be a primary vehicle for the Europeanisation process and contribute to the construction of European identity.

To do so, the chapter is divided into four sections. The first section states the theoretical characteristics of critical cosmopolitanism (Delanty, 2009; Delanty & Harris, 2019). The second section explains the methodology used to analyse the discourse of the programmatic texts. The third section displays a discussion of the main results. Lastly, the chapter ends by summarising the main conclusions and suggesting that the Europeanising potential of the initiative in bringing about or reinforcing the conditions for a shared normative culture seems to be present but not fully achieved yet, affecting its potential to contribute to a European identity, one of the EUI main aims.

Theoretical framework

As part of the European Education Area, the EUI rests on a transactionalist approach to the process of European integration; as stated in the Council's address in Gothenburg, "strengthening our European identity remains essential and education and culture are the best vectors to ensure this" (Council of the European Union, 2017, p. 3). Transactionalists such as Deutsch et al. (1967) claim that the sustained interaction between people of different national and cultural backgrounds generates a shared identity and sense of belonging. Promoting networks and opportunities to bring Europeans together leads to a social form of European integration that functions beyond the political and the economic (Deutsch et al., 1967; Mazzoni et al., 2018). While some argue that the new supranational identity that arises from this contact implies the dissolution of the national (Castells, 2002) or leads inevitably to political conflict (Hooghe & Marks, 2009), others claim that it is possible to have a multifaceted identity where the national and the supranational coexist (Haas, 2008; Radaelli, 2003; Delanty, 2009).

Whether Europe may be defined as an identity, a political project or a single market, the motto of *unity in diversity* is used to evoke the coexistence of the national and supranational within Europe. A similar idea can be expressed through

the concept of cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitanism allows to trace the tension between the local and the global, the normative and the pragmatic (Panzanesi, 2019). Cosmopolitanism sees the world as a political community extending beyond the community into which one is born or lives. Its view is linked with universalism through the recognition of the rights of the individual as opposed to the state, which in many contexts is labelled as a post-western term. Additionally, cosmopolitanism is a reality, as well as a moral and political interpretation, and can become an approach to the analysis of the social world (Delanty, 2019b). Cosmopolitanism as a tool for social analysis identifies transformative potentials within the present. In doing so, it also views reality as shaped by moral or political conditions. This means that the experience of cosmopolitanism may be measured as an empirical condition (Delanty, 2012).

The connection between cosmopolitanism and critical theory lies in a certain conception of culture and politics that engages with the perspective of the Other as opposed to rejecting it (Delanty, 2019b). Critical cosmopolitanism offers a development from classical cosmopolitanism in political thought to one that conceptualises the social world as an open horizon in which new cultural models take shape. The cosmopolitan situation unfolds in the encounter, in the exchanges and in dialogue and when, because of those encounters and dialogues, a shared normative culture emerges (Delanty, 2006). In this sense, it can explore the social contexts and incentives that the EUI presents to the development of normative cosmopolitan ideas and values in Europe.

When characterising the transformation across time that Europe has undergone, Delanty favours the term "Europeanisation" to that of "integration" (2009, p. 214). For the author, Europeanisation, or the creation of a European identity, happens in the emergence of public spaces of debate. It is here that cross-fertilisation of discourses leads to reshaping and transforming the national, rather than overcoming it. Reinforcing this idea, Radaelli (2003, p. 30) refers to processes of construction, diffusion and institutionalisation of formal and informal rules and ways of doing, and of "shared beliefs and norms" that are first consolidated in the making of EU public policy and politics, then incorporated into domestic discourse and identities.

According to Delanty and Harris, critical cosmopolitanism differs from other notions of cosmopolitanism precisely in its focus for "moments of self-transformation in contexts in which there is an expansion in reflexive capacities and ultimately in those situations in which something undergoes a normative transformation from the encounter with the Other"[2] (2019, p. 99). When defining Europe, Delanty points out that "Europeans became reflexively conscious of themselves as the inhabitants of Europe as distinct from other parts of the world, Asia, Africa, the Americas, the definitions of which changed over the centuries" (Delanty, 2019a, pp. lii-liii). The conceptualisation of the Other may be understood in two directions: first, whenever the Self and Other are mediated through the wider category of the World, and second, in relation to European identity as well as to Europe as a social space and a space of identities:

> If identity implies a relation to another, it may be the case that the Other of Europe's identity is in fact its own past and that what is needed more urgently

> today is the re-discovery of the diversity of traditions that constitute what we know as Europe.
>
> (Delanty, 2019a, p. 332)

This second conceptualisation may prove to be more useful for the purpose of this chapter. The re-discovery of diversity may very well happen within States' societies and communities, including traditions, diversity in social classes and levels of education.

Methodology

The method we have used is based on the application of Delanty's dynamics to a sample of texts related to the EUI, noted later in this section. The texts were selected because they serve as the main programmatic documents for the EUI as an initiative.

Four dynamics must be present to demonstrate the extent of a cosmopolitan orientation (Delanty, 2009). These relationships or dynamics include frames, socio-cognitive structures, cultural repertoires and discourses, and quasi-objective cultural phenomena (Delanty, 2012, p. 340). The relationships are the focus of analysis, not the social actors. The four relationships or dynamics include some type of reflexivity and show the condition of cosmopolitanism to be of a processual nature. They are the following:

The relationship for the relativisation of one's own culture or identity

This relationship typifies a condition in which a reinterpretation of culture occurs as a result of the encounter of one culture with another.

> The use of the Other[3] to reinterpret one's own culture has been a feature of many forms of everyday cosmopolitanism, . . ., but also includes "soft" kinds of cosmopolitanism around curiosity/appreciation of other cultures, and which are often found in educational programmes. In terms of dispositions, it is characterised by an orientation towards tolerance of diversity, recognition of interconnectedness and a general disposition of openness to others.
>
> (Delanty & Harris, 2019b, p. 97)

The relationship for the positive recognition of the Other[4]

This relationship personalises encounters between self and Other that take a stronger form, one that involves political and ethical commitments. Progress toward cosmopolitan citizenship occurs whereby universalistic meta-rules play a greater role. "It is a stronger reflexive relationship entailing the inclusion of the Other, not just awareness as in the previous type of relationship. Such types of relationship can be found in the so-called politics of recognition,

as in liberal multiculturalism, the awareness of vulnerability, ethical and political consciousness, and responsibility for others. One major expression of cosmopolitanism on this level is the internationalisation of law." (Delanty and Harris, 2019b, p. 97).

The relationship for mutual evaluation of cultures or identities

This relationship involves the mutual evaluation of cultures or identities, both one's own and that of the Other. "This is a self-reflexive mode of relationship that is based on cultural distance, scepticism and critique and makes it possible for people to mediate between cultures. Such kinds of relationships make possible the critique of cultures. Expressions of reflexivity can be found in varieties of post-nationalism and what are often referred to as rooted, or embedded forms of cosmopolitanism." (Delanty and Harris, 2019b, p. 97).

The relationship to create a shared normative culture

This fourth relationship entails a shared normative culture. Self and Other relations present a world consciousness. "This kind of cosmopolitanism entails the formation of a moral consciousness rooted in emotional responses to global issues, concern with global ethics based on shared values, putting the non-national interest before the national interest. One of the main expressions of such kinds of relationship is in new forms of civil society, such as global or cosmopolitan civil society. This, then, is a yet stronger expression of cosmopolitanism relating mostly to legal, institutional arrangements and major societal transformation whereby cosmopolitanism becomes constitutive of a new politics, global civil society etc." (Delanty and Harris, 2019b, pp. 97–98).

Taking these dynamics as a framework, the methodology consists of discourse analysis of the following sample of documents:

- Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture. The European Commission's contribution to the Leaders' meeting in Gothenburg (European Commission, 2017) (referred to as EC17)
- Council conclusions on moving towards a vision of a European Education Area (Council of the European Union, 2018) (referred to as CC18)
- European Universities Initiative First Call Press Release (European Commission, 2019) (referred to as FIRST)
- European Universities Initiative Second Call Press Release (European Commission, 2020) (referred to as SECOND)
- European Universities Initiative Third Call Press Release (European Commission, 2022) (referred to as THIRD)
- Conclusions on the European University Initiatives (Council of the European Union, 2021) (referred to as CC21)
- Call for Proposals. Partnerships for Excellence-European Universities (Erasmus+ Programme, 2021)

The sample covers the period from 2017 to 2021. It does not include two calls put forward by the European Commission under the Erasmus+ Programme in 2022 and in 2023 **(**Erasmus+ Programme, 2023). The authors recognise that the objectives of these last calls rely on the original main objectives of the initiative, that is, "to support higher education institutions in gradually achieving their long-term ambitious vision towards becoming a fully-fledged European University" (Erasmus+ Program, 2022, p. 5).

The discourse analysis was undertaken by looking in the texts for the definition and characteristics of each dynamic. The researchers looked at the texts separately, and then the results were triangulated.

The methodological challenge was to find the right categories or indicators since Delanty does not establish them specifically throughout his extensive work on Europe or critical cosmopolitanism. The researchers reviewed Delanty's work to try to find relationships between certain categories present in the in the texts under analysis and the four dynamics, under the assumption that it is precisely in these dynamics that the Europeanisation process – from the encounter with the Other to the creation of a shared normative culture – is shown.

Results

The results are organised to exhibit whether the programmatic EUI documents in the sample show the dynamics established by Delanty's critical cosmopolitanism as part of the desired Europeanisation process, and, if so, to what extent.

The first dynamic, defined as the capacity to relativise one's own culture or identity, was explored by looking at discourse elements that may produce cultural encounters or indicate the possibility of mobility, or the need for language learning. These elements are present in all texts in the sample. The stress is on how education remains essential to strengthen European identity, an aim that remains important when we face the future of the Union.

In EC17 it is stated that

> education and culture play a pivotal role for people to (i) know better each other across borders and (ii) experience and be aware of what it means to be European. Understanding and preserving our cultural heritage and diversity are pre-requisites to maintain our cultural community, our common values and identity.
>
> (European Commission, 2017, p. 3)

The cultural encounter occurs in the possibility that the EUI allows for the creation of a European Education Area "based on trust, mutual recognition, cooperation and exchange of best practices, mobility and growth" (Council of the European Union, 2018, p. 2). Another example of how cultural encounters may occur within the EUI appears in the first call in 2019: "European Universities are transnational alliances of higher education institutions from across the EU that share a long-term strategy and promote European values and identity" (European Commission, 2019, p. 1).

Cultural encounters may result in exchanges and interaction among institutions within the European Union. These new European Universities show the possibility of becoming spaces for cultural encounters in that "they will deepen cooperation between their institutions, their students and staff and pool online and physical resources, courses, expertise, data and infrastructure" (European Commission, 2020).

Geographically speaking, there is a widening of the space for this cultural encounter to happen from the first call to the second and third calls. The second call widens the scope to "higher education institutions from all Member States and beyond, located not only in capital cities but also in more remote European regions" (European Commission, 2020). The third call includes all Bologna countries, thereby extending beyond the EU Member States and their overseas countries and territories (OCTs).

One key element that is identified in the analysis is the stress on multilingualism to initiate the Europeanisation process. EC17 recognised that "the European integration process calls for acquiring good language competences. Multilingualism represents one of the greatest assets in terms of cultural diversity in Europe and, at the same time, one of the most substantial challenges" (European Commission, 2017, p. 7). The notion that multilingualism is a strength is further developed in subsequent Council meetings in 2018 and 2021, recognising "that languages play a key role in fostering understanding and diversity, as well as promoting European values, and are essential for personal development, mobility and participation in society and employability" (Council of the European Union, 2018, p. 10).

Mobility is one of the key concepts in this category. The Alliances have the possibility of enhancing student and staff mobility and fostering co-operation. CC18 states that European Universities should be "geographically and socially inclusive and work seamlessly across borders" (Council of the European Union, 2018, p. 6). These institutions can contribute "to empower new generations of European citizens and to strengthen the international competitiveness of higher education in Europe" (Council of the European Union, 2018, p. 6). They suggest the possibility of creating a voluntary European Student Card which should contribute to improved learning mobility.

The importance of physical mobility is highlighted in 2021 Council of the European Union conclusions on the European Universities Initiative. It declares its support for the initiative

> in reaching the ambitious target of 50% mobile students, focusing on balanced physical, virtual or blended mobility schemes and brain circulation, acknowledging that physical mobility is a priority and cannot be replaced by other forms of mobility, which have complementary roles.
>
> (Council of the European Union, 2021, p. 19)

It is interesting to note that only one document, EC17, mentions the need to integrate a culturally diverse migrant population (European Commission, 2017) as an element that may help face the increasing challenges, such a steadily aging workforce or other demographic trends.

No meaningful results were found on the second and third dynamics. It is worth noting that in fact, the only examples found highlight the difficulties students could encounter when returning to their home country's education system after periods abroad in cases of insufficient communication between the national educational systems. Therefore, the analysis shows that the second dynamic, the positive recognition of the Other, may or may not occur. The third dynamic, the capacity for mutual evaluation of cultures or identities, is not present in the texts. This may be because at the time of the publication of these texts, and of conducting this research, the COVID-19 pandemic required avoiding physical and cross-national mobility. This circumstance delayed the implementation of most of the initiatives of the EUI, particularly those related to opportunities for cultural encounter and mobility. We anticipate that a more current assessment might yield different results, given the increasing interest in post-pandemic Europe in opportunities for physical encounter and exchange.

The fourth dynamic addresses the ability to create a shared normative culture, in particular the "reshaping of identities around the normative concepts of justice and rights" (Delanty, 2009, p. 226). Delanty lists the main "defining European values of a European social contract" as citizenship, anti-corruption, sustainable development and stakeholder capitalism (2009, p. 356).

The analysis shows that the construction of a shared normative culture resulting from the implementation of the EUI and the social dimension of education (Council of the European Union, 2021) is explicitly stated as a key objective in all the texts; THIRD refers to it as the "co-envisioned long-term strategy focused on sustainability, excellence and European values" (European Commission, 2022). The different documents mention the development of a European way of tackling current social issues, particularly those stemming from the green and digital revolutions. They also stress the need to bridge inequalities, assumed in the motto "excellence and inclusiveness," expressions that appear often in the documents.

It is precisely the concept of inclusiveness that stands out throughout all the documents. It is understood as "reinforcing equal opportunities." (Council of the European Union, 2018, p. 3) for different European actors, particularly those from "underrepresented regions and groups, first time applicants and organisations with smaller capacity" (Council of the European Union, 2018, p. 3). CC18 cites the first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights as a stepping-stone: "everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that allow full participation in society and successful transitions in the labour market" (Council of the European Union, 2018, p. 2). This definition is enlarged from CC21 onwards as a result of COVID-19 to reinforce the inclusion of groups with less developed capabilities in and access to digital technologies: "the pandemic has also revealed weaknesses regarding equitable access and support for students, staff, and researchers, in particular those with fewer opportunities and lower digital competences, as well as mobile early career researchers" (European Commission, 2022). It is relevant to mention that while Delanty specifies the need to address the inclusion of women, immigrants and ethnic minorities, the EUI

subsumes these categories under the larger concepts of inter-geographical and socio-economic collaboration with the exception of "the children of workers who relocate to another Member State for shorter or longer periods" (Council of the European Union, 2018, p. 3).

Several texts refer to universities as places of confluence of and interaction between a broad range of agents, such as college students, professors, researchers, staff, local administrations, training providers and corporations:

> European Universities will also contribute to the sustainable economic development of the regions where they are located, as their students will work closely with companies, municipal authorities, academics and researchers to find solutions to the challenges their regions are facing.
>
> (European Commission, 2019)

or, as CC21 states, "working in partnership and building European knowledge-creating, transdisciplinary and transnational teams of students and academics, together with researchers, and those from the business, innovation and wider communities" (Council of the European Union, 2021, p. 12). They do not mention what specific initiatives or activities are to be developed but instead declare that it will depend on each alliance to define their programmes, goals and strategies.

The analysis shows that the shared norms and culture envisioned in the EUI documents are structured around the notion of sustainability, insisting on the goal of systemic, structural and sustainable impact. This impact is targeted at local communities and ecosystems, with the aim to increase the overall competitiveness of Europe and Europeans in the international markets.

Sustainability is conceived in a broad sense, addressed in its social, economic and political dimensions. It mostly focuses on providing education for all, job creation, developing competitiveness for local companies, and building resilience to crisis. When referring to the political, it delves around the concept of reinforcing a form of European citizenship. All these objectives are expected to be attained through education:

> It is therefore in the shared interest of all Member States to harness the full potential of education and culture as drivers for jobs, social fairness, active citizenship as well as a means to experience European identity in all its diversity.
>
> (European Commission, 2017, p. 2)

Lastly, it is important to note that most of the texts mention the structural network needed to support this shared normative culture. They allude to the need to allocate a specific budget, to develop certain legal provisions to enable collaboration between different countries despite the principle of subsidiarity, or the need for recognition of diplomas from all educational levels within the European space.

Conclusion

The aim of the study was to explore whether Delanty's "critical cosmopolitanism," as a theoretical and methodological framework, made sense to approach the EUI as an initiative that may foster Europeanisation as a process and back the development of European identity. The research allows us to advance that it is a useful framework.

As to the potential of the EUI to contribute to fostering a European identity and to the Europeanisation process, the EUI documents present the clear aim of creating a shared normative culture. The texts suggest a progression between the opportunity that the alliances create to bring together actors across European borders and cultures and the aspiration of fostering a European identity and a European way of tackling societal challenges as one.

As seen in the results section, when looking at how the four dynamics established by Delanty are present in the texts, we see that most of the findings fall in the first and fourth dynamics, and almost none in the second and third. This shows the intentions to display the initial mechanics of a process (first dynamic), that is, to create opportunities of cross-border mobility, and the final objective of Europeanisation (fourth dynamic), defined as a shared identity and normative culture structured around the idea of the systemic and sustainable European way of doing things.

The two dynamics that the texts miss refer to the steps that enable Europeanisation through the encounter of people of diverse backgrounds, and the exchange and reflection that this encounter triggers. This reflective process affects one's own identity, developing understanding and empathy for the Other, and the rise of the shared European supra-national identity. The EUI explicitly mentions that the forms of these encounters are not defined so that each alliance can define their own mechanisms, but this strategy runs the risk that these spaces of reflection and European identity building do not come into being. In other words, that there is mobility but no reflexive encounter. Furthermore, the programmatic texts in the EUI display almost no reference to the non-European Other, that is, to students or staff coming from outside the European geographical zone.

Another relevant element that stems from our results is the tension between being European in a socio-cultural sense, on the one hand, and in an economic sense, on the other. As stated in the documents, the EUI assumes that education, exchange and multilingualism lead to cultural and economic integration but these two goals do not necessarily happen simultaneously and as a result of one another.

Based on the findings, the Europeanisation process appears to be put into motion, but it seems as if it has been "filed" or come to a halt, due first to the COVID-19 pandemic and specifically to the geopolitical situation in Europe. We can assert that the general vision of a shared European education formulated in the first call has found more detailed developments in subsequent calls (*cf.* Chapter 11, this volume).

Lastly, it would be interesting, for further research, to study the path that the alliances have followed in areas such as mobility for different categories of staff and students, joint educational offers or the promotion of cross-institutional research.

Notes

1 The only EU programme supporting culture is Creative Europe (COM(2018) 366 final). However, the programme provides an "open-ended" (sic) definition for the term culture (https://culture.ec.europa.eu/policies/eu-competences-in-the-field-of-culture), and this open-ended definition permeates the EUI documents. Consequently, the term culture in this chapter covers several types of culture, including national ones, but also, organizational or professional ones.
2 In upper case in the original.
3 In lower case in the original.
4 Idem.

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why?), the suggested ways of meeting the objectives (the how?), the level at which the policy solutions will be found (the where?) and the role of different actors in meeting the objectives (the who?). Since discourse delimits our possibilities for action, it is interesting to analyse how discourse at the European level may affect the collective vision of the future for European Universities and frame policy and institutional developments in European higher education.

The EU is certainly not a single actor in this policy process and the policy vision behind the European Universities Initiative may not be uniform. Indeed, different policy actors may have different perspectives about higher education in Europe, especially when it comes to its geographical borders, its level of inclusiveness versus its level of excellence, its role as a vehicle for further Europeanisation as well as the role of nation states within it (Brooks & Rensimer, 2023, p. 5). However, the co-creation process among a broad group of stakeholders that led to the adoption of policies on the EUI, depicted in Nijboer and Girotti's work (2023), has meant that the discourse around European Universities is not unidirectionally imposed from top to bottom but rather continuously co-created in a reiterative process together with national and institutional actors. It is also permanently in dialogue with policy ideas from other ideational entrepreneurs and other policy fields. The ideas related to European University Alliances that European institutions, and in particular the European Commission and the Council of the European Union, communicate in the political and public arenas are symptomatic of the vision of an "ideal" European higher education space that is the outcome of consultations, deliberations and negotiations among a broad set of actors.

As Musselin and Maassen (2009) state, "EU interactions and rules move forward through the coproduction of norms, procedures and decisions rather than domination of some actors over others." As the efficacy of soft law relies heavily on the perception of trustworthiness and competence of the decision-maker and the ability of policymakers to convince the beneficiaries of the desirability and necessity of policy goals (Levi et al., 2009), focusing on the power of the discourse in the case of EU's higher education policy can be revealing. This is especially interesting in an area of policy where soft power is the only type of power that governing institutions have recourse to, as in the case of the multi-level governance of higher education in the EU (Dakowska, 2019) and where broadly shared understandings, norms and values are needed as a legitimisation device for European Union politics (Bunea & Thomson, 2015).

Therefore, this chapter looks at the discourse stemming from the official policy documents of the EU institutions on this topic, which are listed in the appendix. The bulk of the analysis is concerned with the ideas represented in that discourse and how they jointly form a vision for European higher education.

The evolution of ideas behind European higher education policy

An analysis of the policy ideas behind the European Universities Initiative needs to be placed in the context of six decades of European-level cooperation on higher education development among Member States and, in particular, the acceleration

of European soft governance in higher education since the 2000s. The process of European cooperation in higher education has neither been linear nor singular. On the contrary, multiple streams of policy work (involving a variety of policy ideas, policy actors and institutions) have run either in parallel or in sequence, often intertwining and sometimes overlapping with each other. These streams and the interactions between policy ideas and policy actors have been documented and critically examined within the field of (higher) education research and political science research (Alexiadou & Rambla, 2022; Cino Pagliarello, 2022; Keeling, 2006; Corbett, 2003). There are many interesting facets of this history of cooperation depending on what we take as a unit of analysis and the lens through which we observe it, but one way to distinguish different policy streams is to zoom in on the evolution of policy ideas underpinning EU policy on education.

In this endeavour, it is important to bear in mind that higher education policy of the EU is not isolated from the dynamics of science and research policies at national or European level (Gornitzka et al., 2007; Keeling, 2006) nor from the influence of macroeconomic, competition, employment, welfare, social justice and increasingly, migration and environmental policies. So naturally, elements of all these policies find their way into EU's policy framework on (higher) education. For instance, Marques (2024) found that in the case of EU's research funding programmes (five cycles from Framework Programme 4 in 1994 to Horizon Europe in 2020), it is incremental ideational change of the guiding ideas which affected the direction of European science and how universities do research more than the regulatory features did (Marques, 2024). However, of primary interest for this chapter is the higher education policy addressing universities as the main target and advanced by the European Commission's Directorate-General of Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC).

The period between 2000 and 2020 is characterised by the tone set by the top-level Lisbon Strategy and later Europe 2020 strategy that discursively situated education policy within the EU's ambition to become the most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world. The agenda of modernisation of Europe's education systems was therefore discursively linked to knowledge-driven economic growth, competitiveness on the market and jobs. As Dakowska (2019) notes, "The Lisbon Strategy and the subsequent Europe 2020 strategy highlighted the economic framing of HE policies, through the catchwords of 'knowledge economy,' 'market relevance,' and 'employability,' designed to lend credibility to the Commission's calls for HE 'modernization'" (p. 2). Correspondingly, instruments to monitor progress involved targets, indicators, benchmarks and reporting mechanisms that formed part of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) in education (Gornitzka, 2005, 2018).

At the exact same time, the intergovernmental process of the Bologna Declaration signatories (1999) strived to achieve a European higher education area to promote citizens' mobility and employability via better comparability and compatibility of national higher education systems. While developing concurrently with the European OMC, the Bologna process has by no means been an analytically separate process and Keeling (2006) demonstrated that, while it lacks overall

coherence, the EU policy framework for action in higher education successfully interweaves policy goals of the Lisbon research agenda and the Bologna process. She claims that the European Commission's presentation of higher education "as purposeful, progressive, successful, economically beneficial, collaborative and international – parallels closely its construction of the wider European project . . . . Higher education is thus depicted as quintessentially European" (Keeling, 2006, p. 211). In turn, this also legitimises the European Commission's role in the construction and development of higher education.

Moving to the post-2020 period, Alexiadou and Rambla (2022) analyse the evolution of policy goals behind the European Education Area policy of the EU (2021) from the perspective of the coordinative and communicative discourse of actors such as the European Commission and the Council of European Ministers. They conclude that post-2020, the EU exhibited a lot of continuity in terms of policy goals with the previous phases, "consolidating the goals of skills and employability within the new priorities around the green and digital traditions" (Alexiadou & Rambla, 2022, p. 860). However, Cino Pagliarello (2022) finds that

> the framing of education reflected this time a set of multiple crises to be addressed through the reinforcement of a common European identity to be achieved through education . . . (opening) up a discourse more fine-tuned to the importance of the 'cultural' element of education policy, in parallel with the economic one that had been predominant until then.
>
> (Cino Pagliarello, 2022, p. 177)

Therefore, while there is a continuation and extension of the employability and competitiveness discourse, there is also the fostering of a sense of active citizenship and European identity, as a response to the current climate of multiple crises.

Most recently, looking specifically at the underlying policy ideas in the latest policy on European University Alliances, Angouri (2023) identifies a foregrounding of what she terms "transnational educational collaboration" in the discourse of national and international policymakers (Angouri, 2023). By analysing the discourse across all the EU policy documents pertaining to European University Alliances between 2017 and 2022, Angouri (2023) is able to show that the stated purpose of transnational education cooperation is identified in "macro" terms with little focus on the concrete mechanisms through which these would be achieved. The benefits are that it "increases global competitiveness; contributes/creates a European dimension of higher education; strengthens European identity, democracy, and belonging; helps to tackle global challenges, especially green and digital transitions; transforms higher education through capabilities and capacity building; and nurtures equality" (Angouri, 2023, p. 11). A clear discursive link is made between transnational education collaboration and achieving the stated macro goals.

Béland (2009) proposes three main ways in which ideational processes (as one among other factors) impact policy change. First, such processes help to construct the problems and issues that enter the policy agenda. Second, ideational processes

shape the assumptions that affect the content of reform proposals. Third, these processes can become discursive "weapons" that participate in the construction of reform imperatives. Following Béland (2009), what is of interest to this particular research is to unpick the ideas in the discourse around EUI that construct the policy problems, shape the reform proposals and feed into the reform narrative directed at the European higher education sector.

Conceptual framework

I use the framework of discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2008, 2010, 2011) to try to systematise the discourse on European University Alliances and distinguish between different levels of discourse in the EU policy documents on EUAs. Dakowska (2019) identifies three main explanations of European higher education reform effectiveness – the power of instruments, standards and performance indicators; the power of the purse, which pertains to the materiality of the process and the financial means of the Commission; and the power of agency, which emphasises governing by expertise and networks. I advance a fourth dimension, which lies in the power of ideas and discourse, as elaborated by discursive institutionalist scholars (Béland, 2009; Blyth et al., 2016; Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016).

Schmidt reveals that "in discursive institutionalism, there is always the recognition that ideas and discourse can also provide power, as actors gain power from their ideas at the same time that they give power to their ideas" (Schmidt, 2011, p. 120). Carstensen and Schmidt speak of the "ideational power" as a fourth source of political power alongside coercive, structural and institutional ones (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016). In the EU's higher education policy setting, the EU is constrained with its limited competences to control the higher education systems through coercive, structural or institutional power. As a consequence, ideational power, defined as the "capacity of agents (whether individual or collective) to influence other actors' normative and cognitive beliefs through the use of ideational elements" (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016, p. 320), is relevant for the case of the European Universities Initiative. Authors also distinguish between power through ideas, power over ideas and power in ideas. Particularly interesting in the case of European University Alliances is the EU institutions' power in ideas. According to this notion, ideas enjoy authority in structuring other actors' thoughts. These ideas recede into the background as knowledge systems that actors are unaware of (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016).

The starting point of discursive institutionalism (DI) is that ideas and discourses among actors in an institutional setting affect actors' preferences, strategies and normative orientations and are therefore a dominant variable in explaining endogenous political change in an institutional context. Ideas are generated, deliberated and legitimated by public actors and they exist at different levels of generality from philosophies to programmes or policies. They are viewed as dynamic and malleable rather than structurally determined and engrained. Discourse is understood in DI as an all-encompassing term that entails an interactive exchange of ideas, the meaning of which depends on the content of those ideas, the actors involved in the interactive process and the context of the exchange. In DI, agents engage in

"coordinative discourse" in shaping ideas in the political fora and in "communicative discourse" when those ideas are brought to the public for deliberation and legitimation (Schmidt, 2010). Concrete examples of venues where such discourses take place are provided in Table 7.1.

The framework used by discursive institutionalists differentiates between three levels at which ideas are formulated and exchanged: (1) the level of public philosophy or worldview, (2) the programmatic level and (3) the level of policies (Schmidt, 2008). To operationalise this framework for the purpose of this study and to facilitate the identification of these levels in the discourse analysis, a definition of how the levels translate to the case of EUI and a set of corresponding guiding questions are provided for each of the levels and outlined in Table 7.2. An abbreviated version of the dominant ideas appearing in the discourse analysis for each of the levels is also added to Table 7.2 for the sake of completeness.

Table 7.1 Examples of policy and political spheres where ideas are exchanged in coordinative and communicative discourse

The policy sphere: examples of "coordinative discourse" applied to EUI	*Ad hoc* stakeholder consultation meetings convened by the European Commission (in the run up to European University Initiative calls for funding of alliances, on the European Strategy for Universities, on the European Degree package); meetings of the Erasmus+ committee responsible for the budget of the initiative; official consultations; meetings of the Education committee of the Council of the European Union, the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council meetings; meetings of the EDUC committee of the European Parliament; public statements of stakeholder organisations; meetings of the FOREU 1 and FOREU 2 informal groups of alliances; Training and Cooperation Activities (TCAs) of Erasmus+ agencies, policy experimentation project meetings; meetings of the Directors General for Higher Education and others.
The political sphere: examples of "communicative discourse" applied to EUI	Public events organised by the European Commission (e.g. Education and Innovation Summit, Final event of the European degree and statute policy experimentation projects); Council Presidency-run summits on Alliances, multiplier events organised by Alliances; websites and social media pages of European University Alliances; events organised by various embassies on the topic of alliances; public communication and events by national Erasmus+ agencies; media and press releases of European Commission, ministries and alliances.

Source: adapted from Schmidt (2010)

Table 7.2 Examples of three levels of ideas found in the EUI discourse ⏎

Level	*Definition and application in the case of EUI*	*Guiding questions*	*Dominant discourse*
The level of public philosophy or worldview	Norms and values about the ultimate purpose of higher education	What is the key contribution of higher education to the EU, key indicators of success of higher education, values that higher education should uphold, what is the ideal relationship between teaching and research, etc.?	Universities solving the "grand societal challenges" and contributing to the green and digital transitions
Programmatic level	Ways of achieving the desired goal of higher education and norms, methods, and instruments to be applied	Which level of government is best placed to regulate higher education, who should fund higher education, which reforms of governance and organisational models are needed, etc.?	Transnational collaboration, incl. joint educational provision, mobility of students and staff, microcredentials, community engagement
The level of policies	Concrete policy measures to meet the goals for the higher education sector	Which policy measures are perceived as concretely contributing to the programmatic goals?	European degree, European statute, Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, Framework for academic careers, inter-university campuses

Source: adapted from Schmidt (2008)

Research protocol

The sample for this discourse analysis is formed of all the policy documents (Commission Communications, Council Conclusions and Council Recommendations) of the European Commission, Council of the European Union and the European Council that directly refer to the European Universities Initiative and where European University Alliances have a high salience. The reports of the European Parliament and the European Economic and Social Committee, while interesting, are excluded from this study due to the minor role of these institutions in the policy-making process in this field of supporting EU competence. Equally, the legislative documents that only briefly mention the EUI or EUAs, for instance, the Commission Communication on "A new ERA for Research and Innovation" which makes passing mention of the role of the European Universities Initiative in research and innovation ecosystems, are not included in the sample.

The final sample are nine documents spanning the period between 2017 and 2024, of which five are Commission-issued policy documents and four are Council-issued policy documents. While acknowledging that there may be differences in the discourse propagated by the different EU institutions (Alexiadou & Rambla, 2022), the policy documents were treated equally in this analysis, regardless of the issuing institution. This is because this research treats EU discourse holistically as one entity, in the sense of Fairclough (1995), who treats discourse as

> a way of speaking which gives meaning to experiences from a particular perspective. In this sense, the concept refers to any discourse that can be distinguished from other discourses such as, for example, a feminist discourse, a neoliberal discourse, a Marxist discourse, a consumer discourse, or an environmentalist discourse.
>
> (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002, pp. 66–67)

A bird's eye view of all the policy papers provides a complete picture of the themes in the overall EU discourse.

The coding was guided by a set of three questions, outlined in Table 7.3, corresponding to the three levels of ideas previously outlined. Each of the questions had three codes assigned to it, which were identified based on the expectations in the literature. The codes were analysed based on their frequency of appearance, with the most frequently mentioned themes considered most salient or most important.

The challenge of the coding process was that the codes are necessarily reductive, especially when it comes to cross-cutting themes such as sustainability or innovation, which could be coded as reflecting both an economic rationale and a social one or even a political one. In this particular case, the choice was made to include sustainability and innovation under the economic argument.

Table 7.3 Guiding questions and codes for the discourse analysis ⏎

Guiding questions	*Codes*
What is the ultimate rationale and purpose of higher education?	1. Economic growth and competitiveness (including sustainability and innovation) 2. Social cohesion, inclusion, welfare 3. Democracy, identity, culture
What method shall be used to achieve the goals in higher education?	1. Internationalisation of universities 2. Integration of the European (higher) education space 3. Alternative methods
What concrete policy measures should be employed?	1. Policy measures at EU level 2. Policy measures at national level 3. Policy measures at institutional level

Analysis

At the level of the public philosophy or worldview, we find the norms and values about the ultimate purpose of higher education. The dominant normative idea around the purpose of higher education in the surveyed documents is that universities have the responsibility to help solve "big societal challenges." Three explicit goals of the higher education sector are intertwined in the policy documents at similar levels of importance – the economic goals, the social goals and the political goals. In all three cases, universities and their missions are seen as a means to an end, and that end is a more sustainable economy, a more political union and a more resilient society.

When it comes to the economic goals, European Universities are characterised as vehicles driving the green and digital transitions with their production and circulation of knowledge and skills and are therefore placed at the core of Union's highest-level economic and development strategy. They are expected to "secure Europe's capacity to boost technology-driven competitiveness" (European Commission, 2022b, p. 8) and support "lifelong learning and contribute to professional reskilling and upskilling to meet new and emerging needs in society and labour market." Their role in regional development is also recognised as well as the expectation that they "contribute to the vitality of their regions and communities, helping to overcome disadvantage and geographic disparities." In most recent policy documents, the role of universities in ensuring Europe's "open strategic autonomy" in key areas is emphasised (European Commission, 2024a, p. 2).

In relation to the political goals, European Universities are instrumentalised for internal cohesion and external geopolitical purposes. In terms of contribution to the European Union internally, they are depicted as "a condition and foundation for open, democratic, fair and sustainable societies" (European Commission, 2022a, p. 1) and as "lighthouses of our European way of life" (European Commission, 2022a, p. 4), preserving democratic practices, fundamental rights, academic values and freedom of scientific research. In addition, their contribution to fostering a sense of a common European identity and a stronger European sense of belonging is also emphasised (European Commission, 2024a, p. 2), as well as their task in promoting "active citizenship, tolerance, equality and diversity, openness and critical thinking for more social cohesion and social trust" (European Commission, 2022a, p. 10). Externally, universities need to serve the role of preservers and promoters of "a European model in line with EU's interests and values: rule of law, human rights and international norms and standards" (European Commission, 2022a, p. 1). They are to attract and retain talented students and staff from abroad in order to "maximise Europe's global influence when it comes to values, education, research, industry and societal impact" (European Commission, 2022a, p. 3).

In relation to social goals, which are overall less visible in the EU policy documents, universities are expected to experiment with innovative student-centred teaching formats that cater to the needs of a more diverse group of learners, in

order to address the inequalities and disparities in the student body and more widely in the society. They are to play a role in implementing the "European Pillar of Social Rights," the EU's strategy for a fairer and more social European labour market and welfare system, and to provide "fair access to high-quality education, training and research" (European Commission, 2022b, p. 8). Universities are made responsible for rendering international mobility of students more accessible to underrepresented groups by offering flexible, virtual and blended learning opportunities and embedding them into educational programmes. They are also made responsible for addressing the gender gap in their midst, for instance, in leadership positions and in certain fields of studies (European Commission, 2022a, p. 2).

At the programmatic level, the discourse gives clues about the most promising ways of arriving at the desired goals of higher education and the policy paradigms and ideals that will eventually guide the more immediate policy solutions. In the policy documents analysed, there is a very dominant programmatic idea, which is that internationalisation and transnational cooperation of universities are the strategy through which universities can individually and collectively achieve the higher education vision outlined earlier. The European Universities Initiative is seen as "a powerful enabler for the deep transformation towards excellent, inclusive, competitive, sustainable and attractive higher education institutions accounting for all their missions" (European Commission, 2022b, p. 10). The logic is that internationalisation of universities not only leads to internal institutional reforms of universities but also at the same time empowers universities in their service to society, in particular the European society. In addition, universities participating in the EUI are to "act as role models for European higher education transformation" and act as multipliers, sharing "their good practice and experiences with all higher education institutions across Europe, ensuring that the reforms, outputs and innovations triggered by the 'European Universities' are fully accessible for those that do not participate in these alliances" (Council of the European Union, 2021).

Furthermore, there are some implicit and some explicit ideas expressed in the programmatic discourse. First, the universities are portrayed as progressive, agile, innovative, ambitious entities willing to transform further, were it not for the external forces such as lack of sufficient funding and regulatory barriers that are stalling their progress. They need to be "strengthened," "supported," "empowered" and "reinforced" (European Commission, 2024a, p. 4). There is also an implicit understanding that international cooperation of universities primarily occurs among countries of the European Union, and while there are references to the Bologna process and to cooperation with non-EU countries, the primary ties that should be strengthened are those with other EU-based universities. More explicit in this programmatic discourse is the idea that the internationalisation of universities is the concern of both the national and the EU authorities as enablers and facilitators of international mobility, transnational cooperation and integration of universities across borders. The role of the European Commission is therefore to "support the development of 'European Universities' as

'testbeds' for interoperability and promotion of cooperation between Member States regarding European research, teaching and staff career development practices" (Council of the European Union, 2021).

At the level of policies, the focus is on specific policies or "policy solutions" proposed by policymakers (Schmidt, 2008), embedded in the value system of the programmatic level of discourse, which as outlined earlier, values internationalisation above other potential focus areas (alternatives could be service to society, civic engagement, scientific output or contribution to regional ecosystems, or others). The policy ideas are almost exclusively framed as solutions to the policy problem of universities being too constrained by national, legal and administrative "barriers" and are therefore mostly policies that need to be facilitated by the EU and implemented in a coordinated fashion by all EU Member States. This in turn requires coordination mechanisms at EU level and some degree of harmonisation of policies among EU Member States. Absent from the policies are internal policy measures that need to be taken by higher education institutions as well as prescriptions of how and when the national policies should follow the EU policies. Nevertheless, concrete policy measures are proposed, repeated and reiterated across different policy documents, including virtual inter-university campuses, the joint European degree (label), European legal statute for European Universities, the Framework for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, a European framework for attractive and sustainable academic careers, the European Student Card, the roll out of micro-credentials and others.

Conclusion

The analysis of EUI policy documents reveals that the EU discourse operates at three different levels. These broadly correspond to the three indicators that Walkenhorst (2008) assumes to be significant for EU higher education policy change: (a) a declaration (and justification) of new policy objectives; (b) a modified policy reference frame; and (c) a visible turn in the underlying philosophical or ideational paradigms.

The vision for European higher education in the discourse in the policy documents of the European Union since 2019 advances a worldview that values universities which are focused on skills development, innovative and flexible, interdisciplinary, inclusive, excellent in either research or applied research, regionally connected, civically engaged, which uphold European values, and contribute to European identity and a sense of belonging. This corresponds to a justification of the policy objective of universities working towards "solving the grand challenges" of the 21st century and accompanying Europe on its green and digital transitions.

At the programmatic level, how universities will achieve this is through transnational collaboration, which acts as a policy reference frame (Walkenhorst, 2008). Angouri (2023) explains that "transnational collaboration" appears in the EUI discourse as

> a) a way for universities to produce the knowledge necessary to address society's wicked problems, b) to create infrastructural capability and capacity

> for the future and c) diversify the pedagogic offering which is associated with quality and personal growth, societal development and competitiveness.
>
> (Angouri, 2023, p. 5)

Another angle which this chapter takes is that the transnational collaboration of universities is framed as a programme through which the worldview will be achieved, justifying the introduction of a number of EU-level policy measures to foster and facilitate internationalisation.

Overall, the discourse analysis of EUI policy documents revealed that while the current discourse does not fully move away from the previously predominant goals of economic prosperity and global competitiveness, it engulfs economic concerns with concerns of a more social and political nature. The emphasis on the "grand societal challenges of the 21st century" in the EUI policy documents, such as digitalisation, climate change, threat to democracy, declining European sense of belonging, aging populations and others, evokes the need for universities to pool their resources, play on each other's strengths and work jointly across borders. Transnational collaboration is therefore imposed by the European policymakers as a natural way forward and as a way to further other policy goals. At the same time, the discourse also legitimises the role of the EU in enabling transnational collaboration and ultimately furthering "Europeanisation" of national policies in higher education (*cf.* Chapter 1, this volume).

As the policies surrounding the EUI advance, further research into the dynamic elements of EU discourse on EUAs and how it is constituted among actors as they coordinate and communicate ideas may unearth mechanisms through which discourse can lend ideational power to certain actors and not only shape policies but also bring about institutional change.

Appendix I

Policy documents for the empirical analysis

Key policy area	*Title of policy document*	*Date of publication*	*Corresponding bibliographic entry*
Establishing European Universities	European Council Conclusions – Education and Culture	14.12.2017	(European Council, 2017)
European Universities Initiative	Council conclusions on the European Universities initiative – Bridging higher education, research, innovation and society: Paving the way for a new dimension in European higher education 2021/C 221/03	10.06.2021	(Council of the European Union, 2021)
European Strategy for Universities	Strategy for European Universities	18.1.2022	(European Commission, 2022a)
	Council Conclusions on a European strategy empowering higher education institutions for the future 2022/C 167/03	5.4.2022	(Council of the European Union, 2022a)
Building bridges in higher education	Commission proposal for a Council Recommendation on building bridges for European higher education cooperation	18.1.2022	(European Commission, 2022b)
	Council Recommendation on building bridges for European higher education cooperation	5.4.2022	(Council of the European Union, 2022b)
European degree	Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: A blueprint for a European degree	27.3.2024	(European Commission, 2024a)
	Commission proposal for a Council recommendation on a European quality assurance and recognition system in higher education	27.3.2024	(European Commission, 2024b)
	Commission proposal for a Council recommendation on attractive and sustainable careers in higher education	27.3.2024	(European Commission, 2024c)

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