The European Universities Initiative: reconfiguring the European HE space? (0151)

Contributors: Rachel Brooks, Lee Rensimer, Antonin Charret

Chair: Rachel Brooks[1]

Discussant:

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Rationale Text: There is now a sizable literature on the influence of supranational actors within European higher education. Much of the research in this area has focussed specifically on the Bologna Process and the creation of a European Higher Education Area, and shown how various supranational groups - such as the European Students' Union, the European Universities Association, and the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education – have fed into and helped shaped such initiatives (e.g. Vukasovic, 2017). In this symposium, we build on this body of scholarship to examine one of the most recent developments in European higher education: the emergence of the 'European Universities Initiative' (EUI). This is currently considered to be the European Commission's flagship programme with respect to higher education. Rolled out from 2019 onwards, the initiative has sought to develop 'bottom-up' networks of universities across the European Union (EU), with the aim of enabling students to obtain a degree by combining studies in several countries, and contributing to the international competitiveness of European universities by strengthening inter-institutional collaboration in both teaching and research. The EUIs are funded through the Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020 schemes - with each EUI currently receiving € 5 million from the former and € 2 million from the latter. To date, 41 EUIs have been launched, involving 284 higher education institutions from 32 European countries, with an average of seven institutions in each alliance. In this symposium, we will draw on new empirical research that is being conducted on this nascent policy area, to answer the following six research questions: What are the stated objectives of the EUIs? Are these consistent across all actors? What messages about the European higher education space are conveyed either explicitly or implicitly through this initiative – by policy actors and the individual higher education institutions involved? Who are the various social actors involved in the initiative? What governance structures enable and constrain the development of the EUIs? What is the range of institutional interests served through participation? What flows of money, ideas and people are facilitated by this initiative? In addition, we will engage with broader conceptual ideas, including the nature of the European higher education space and the extent to which this is being reconfigured through the European Universities Initiative.

Linked Submissions:

Mon 14:45-15:00

| Mon 15:00-15:15

The European Universities Initiative: Understandings of Policy Actors (0167)

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Research Domain: International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Paper Abstract: The ‘European Universities Initiative’ (EUI) is considered to be the European Commission’s flagship programme with respect to higher education. It has sought to develop ‘bottom-up’ networks of universities with the aim of enabling students to obtain a degree by combining studies in several European countries, and contributing to the international competitiveness of European universities by strengthening collaboration in both teaching and research. This paper explores some of the ways in which the initiative has been understood by key policy actors, drawing on an analysis of publicly-available documents relating to EUIs, published by relevant stakeholders between 2017 (when the idea of EUIs was first broached) and June 2021. In particular, it explores (i) the assumed boundaries and nature of the European HE space, within which the EUIs are situated; (ii) debates about who are desirable social actors in this policy initiative, and (iii) the changing importance attributed to physical mobility.

(0199)

Research Domain:

Paper Abstract:

| Mon 15:15-15:35

European Universities: Building the Future of Higher Education in the European Union Through University Alliances (0236)

Antonin Charret[1], Maia Chankseliani[1], Alis Oancea[1]

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Research Domain: International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Paper Abstract: <p style="text-align:justify">The conference paper presents the design and emerging findings from an ongoing doctoral research project focusing on the European Universities Initiative (EUI). This study investigates the formation of forty-one university alliances by mapping their histories, objectives, and modes of operation. We explore how multi-characteristic governance structures enable and constrain the development of these collaborative partnerships, and how these transnational partnerships support the formation of a regional higher education space in the European Union. The conference paper includes some emerging findings from a thematic analysis of a corpus of published documents representing three levels of the EUI: European (EU institutions), transnational (the alliances), and local (higher education institutions). This is the first stage of the data collection and analysis which will subsequently expand to include elite semi-structured interviews and qualitative network analysis.

| Mon 15:35-15:55

Between Being and Becoming European Universities: Tensions and Challenges at the Midway Point (0277)

Lee Rensimer[1]

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Research Domain: International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Paper Abstract: The European Universities Initiative (EUIs) is exactly halfway through its five-year pilot phase running through 2024. As a policy development which aims to fundamentally transform higher education in Europe, EUIs are saddled with high expectations to deliver on broad and expanding remits in teaching, research and civic engagement across sites and scales. Given the distance between their current and proposed provisions, how do these nascent supranational organisations represent both their operational and aspirational states of being? What tensions become apparent in communicating the multifaceted aims of EUIs to their multiple stakeholders through singular platforms like their websites? This paper complements discussions of broader EUI policy aims by critically examining the digital self-representations of EUIs. It presents the findings from a case study of three contrastive EUIs, drawing on a visual documentary analysis of EUI web pages, social media and other organisational documents.

(0401)

Research Domain:

Paper Abstract: