

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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The European Universities Initiative: Understandings of Policy Actors

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Research Domain: International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

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.

Paper: Introduction and methods

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. To date, 41 EUIs have been launched, involving 284 HEIs from 32 European countries.

This paper explores some of the ways in which the initiative has been understood by key policy actors. It is based 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. They comprise: official papers/position papers; press releases; news reports; information on webpages;

commissioned research; and funding guidance – produced by the organisations/individuals listed in Figure 1. Analysis was conducted using NVivo, employing deductive and inductive approaches. Several key themes were identified, four of which are discussed below.

Boundaries of the European HE space

A key debate amongst the policy actors has been which countries should be allowed to participate in EUIs. To date, only European Union (EU) member states, plus the UK, Iceland, Norway, Turkey and Serbia have been able to take part (because of the funding through Erasmus+). However, recently the European Commission has suggested that all countries involved with the Bologna Process could be allowed to join. Although some policy actors have been supportive of this shift (and some have called for international partners, wherever they are based, to be allowed to join), others have raised questions about this more expansive approach. Within these debates, there are clear differences in conceptualisations of the European HE space and views about whether the boundary (for this particular initiative at least) should be drawn in relation to the European Union, the continent of Europe, or much more widely.

An inclusive or elitist space?

There is also some degree of contestation about whether the space created by the EUIs should be an elitist or inclusive one. Indeed, many of the documents written when the EUIs were being set up outline significant reservations about what is held to be implicit elitism and exclusivity in the scheme. This is articulated in relation to geography (see above) – in terms of which countries are included and which are not – but also in terms of the type of HEI that can/will participate, the types of student that will be involved, and the impact of differential national funding on equality. This is a key theme of the documents produced by the European Students' Union (ESU), but various other stakeholders are also concerned that if only some national governments, rather than all, contribute financially to the EUIs, inequalities within and between alliances will follow, and may have the effect of reinforcing vertical stratification.

Desirable actors: who is responsible for the European HE space?

The initial impetus and funding for the EUIs has come from the European Commission and the EU Council. However, there is ongoing debate about the relationship between the wider group of stakeholders. This has included:

- Calls for greater involvement of national governments – particularly in terms of funding and the removal of education-related regulatory barriers – but also a fear, expressed by others, that national governments may use EUIs to push through their own goals, not those of European bodies;
- concerns – on the part of the ESU – that student representation has often been neglected in the setting up of EUIs; and
- significant disagreement about the desirability of involving private sector partners.

The importance of physical mobility

Physical mobility occupies an important place in many of the documents analysed, particularly those from the setting-up period. This emphasis is particularly striking in some of the documents from the

ESU, which argue explicitly that virtual mobility is not an adequate substitute for physical mobility. It makes this argument on equity grounds – concerned that students from disadvantaged backgrounds may be channelled into virtual mobility schemes. However, it is notable that the discussion of this changed quite markedly as a result of COVID-19. Blended learning and virtual mobility are both discussed more positively in documents written during the pandemic. Nevertheless, physical mobility remains an important aim – which can be seen as in tension with the increasing emphasis on sustainability in many of the later documents from a variety of actors.

The presentation will develop these four themes more fully, giving examples from the analysed data, and making connections to the extant literature on conceptualisations of the European higher education space.

References: Figure 1. List of organisations/individuals that produced the analysed documents:

EU Council; European Commission; European Students' Union (ESU); European University Association (EUA); Academic Co-operation Association (ACA); Accreditation Council for Entrepreneurial and Engaged Universities (ACEEU); European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE); European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA); Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities (Guild); League of European Research Universities (LERU); The Coimbra Group; European Campus of City Universities; President Macron (2017 speech).