



# Between harmonization and unification in the European higher education area: scenarios for the European university initiative

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## Abstract

This article explores future scenarios regarding the integration of European higher education (HE) in light of the European Universities Initiative which has been unfolding since 2017. Its aim is to understand potential development paths in light of the established intergovernmental Bologna Process, which has been diversified through international and supranational practices since its launch at the end of the 1990s. By way of European integration theories, we approach potential integration scenarios – a hitherto underutilized framework in HE studies. Our heuristic analysis of HE integration is based on secondary data; subsequently we construct and discuss four scenarios. Finally, we explore the implications of the scenarios from the perspective of the evaluation of the integration process of European HE.

**Keywords** Bologna process · European integration · Higher education · University

## Introduction

Over the last three decades, European higher education (HE) has been characterized by increasing international cooperation, negotiation, and the creation of the intergovernmental European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The Bologna Process, launched at the end of the 1990s, has brought national interests closer together and eventually led to the definition of common HE-related goals and agreements in Europe. Harmonization has been instantiated through instruments such as the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System and the European Qualifications Framework, to name but a few. More recently, there has been intense discussion around the future of the EHEA amidst deepening institutional and system levels of integration. However, the role and legal status of higher education institutions (HEIs) as part of their respective national HE system have remained strong. Consequently,

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most integration activities fall under the autonomy of HEIs in national systems and European HE (e.g., curricula, exchanges, transfers, and collaboration). HEIs are autonomous organizations and have played an active role in the development of practical integration, for example, in forming alliances and mergers (Aarrevaara & Dobson, 2016; Pinheiro et al., 2016).

Ultimately, the ideas behind a proposal on establishing European universities advanced by the French President Emmanuel Macron, which eventually led to an official European Commission (EC) initiative, are the motivation for our paper and its scenarios. In 2018, the EC – under the Erasmus+ programme – launched the European Universities Initiative funding tool and funded 17 university alliances, with funding up to €5 million per project and up to €2 million from the Horizon 2020 Programme. The second round of applications for new alliances occurred in June 2020, leading to the introduction of 24 new alliances and pushing up the total number to 41. Despite the lack of clarity regarding what this implies, the promise of a new “European university identity” has garnered momentum among HEIs and their alliances in Europe. The initiative was supranational in nature as its aim was to create something “new”, a new institutional structure, regardless of the fact that universities were under member states’ jurisdiction.

Therefore, we need to reconsider scenarios of the development of the integration of European HE and its future as an intergovernmental or supranational process. The following overarching themes are common for all university alliances that participate in the so-called European Universities Initiative. Its goal are: establishing a European university (the main goal of the university alliances); cooperation in HE (e.g., European joint degrees, life-long learning); micro-credentials and micro-modules and cooperation in research, student and staff mobility and innovation.

The European Universities Initiative partly bypasses states’ interests by funding university alliances directly and influencing universities’ goals related to internationalization- and Europeanization. Thus, university alliances participating in the European Universities Initiative are mainly actors of change alongside the EC. A new type of market coordination was established by the European Universities Initiative as the university alliances were seen as competing with each other. This left states and ministries assuming the role of follower, albeit ultimately it is the governments deciding on the status of higher education institutions and degrees.

According to the EC, the new initiative brings ‘collaborative’ ambition, seriousness, and depth to different levels of institutional framework and enables the creation of new partnerships based on existing ones, thereby taking European HE forward and inventing new forms of cooperation (EC, 2021d, 2021e, 2021f). Similarly, the European Universities Association (EUA, 2021) recently recognized HEIs as the main actors in the integration of European HE. “Serious and depth” can be seen as a shift towards implementation of European agenda from system to institutional level.

The EC (2021b) recently proposed a concrete initiative to

“[E]xplore the feasibility of a legal statute for alliances of universities such as the European Universities – and actions to facilitate such deeper and sustainable cooperation between education institutions”.

Such actions potentially include

solutions for cross-border cooperation linked to financing, accreditation, quality assurance, student and employment relations, and infrastructure management.

Based on incremental convergence and the possibility of creating a new “European university”, we ask the following questions:

1. What kinds of scenarios can possibly be identified based on process and instrumental views on the integration of European HE in the context of (major) contemporary European integration theories (Its), such as liberal intergovernmentalism?
2. How can the success of implementation of the “European university” be defined under different scenarios?

The article is structured as follows. First, we describe the current landscape of European HE policies aimed at the integration of HEIs. We present two alternative approaches to the story of European HE integration: First, European HE integration as a (a) process and (b) policy implementation instrument. Second, we describe our analytical perspective namely two schools of thought in the integration theory (Schimmelfennig & Rittberger, 2006), that are neofunctionalism and liberal intergovernmentalism. Third, we present our heuristic method – the prospective process of future scenarios and scenario-building (De Jouvenel, 2000). Fourth, we construct our analytical framework based on process and instrumental approach on HE integration and ITs. We analyse the trends of European integration in order to define its qualitative factors and propose the scenarios. Finally, we discuss the implications of different scenarios to grasp the potential future of European integration in higher education.

## **The context of European higher education integration (institutions)**

In this section, we provide two alternatives approaching the process of European HE integration. These point of views of recent developments are based on an overall idea of instrumental and process-based accounts of policy development. This idea, according to Colebatch (2018, p. 372), is,

an instrumental account focused on interventions to secure outcomes, which describes it in terms of expert advice followed by specific choice leading to exact implementation, and a process-based account which sees it in terms of “collective puzzling”, stakeholder involvement, interaction, “satisficing” and ambiguity.

In essence, we analyse alternative accounts of recent European HE developments around policy internationalization (King, 2010), where policymakers have become more aware of other countries’ policies, where policy similarities have been increasing (Hsieh & Huisman, 2017) and where new initiatives and mechanisms are on the rise, especially from the perspective of the actions of supranational actors and HEIs. According to Keeling (2006), EC initiatives relating to HE have altered the discourse around HE policies, resulting in a European policy domain involving the mixing of supranational policies (e.g., EU research policy) and the intergovernmental policy of the Bologna Process, of which the EC has been a full member since 1999.

In the following sections, we contextualise this development from the perspective of intergovernmental integration process and from the perspective of HE integration as a European policy instrument.

## European higher education integration as an intergovernmental policy process

The Bologna Process, triggered by the Bologna Declaration of 1999, mainly involves voluntary European-level processes implemented in 48 states aiming towards an establishment of European Higher Education Area (EHEA) (EC, 20213). The Bologna Process and EHEA are institutionalized forms and are mostly studied as processes of cooperation in intergovernmental European HE. Before the Bologna Process, European HE was perceived as rich in diversity, emphasizing the cultural role of HE (Westerheijden, 2007). Since its initiation, the following areas have been agreed upon by the participating governments (including non-EU governments): introduction of a three-cycle HE system consisting of bachelor, master's and doctoral studies; ensuring the mutual recognition of qualifications and learning periods abroad completed at other universities; implementing a system of quality assurance and strengthening the quality and relevance of learning and teaching (EC, 2021c).

The Bologna Process promotes policy guidelines and support for HE development. Importantly, even when there are common policy goals, the implementation results vary within member countries, as the Bologna Process is also used as a signet for national policies and policy development. HE and the Bologna Process are held as examples for soft law in the framing of integration within the EU (Berndtson, 2014; Veiga, 2015).

Veiga et al. (2015) studied the Bologna Process as a policy enactment towards the establishment of the EHEA from the perspective of differentiated integration. Drawing from Knill and Lehmkuhl (1999), they argue that it has indirectly affected or framed domestic arrangements by altering the beliefs and expectations of domestic actors. Dobbins and Knill (2014) studied four countries in Europe and found evidence for the integration and standardization of HEIs during the Bologna Process up to the early 2010s, although HEIs in different countries were affected in different ways. Thus, from another perspective, the voluntary process ran by the member countries' ministers of education has now become permanent or institutionalized – an organization consisting of 48 countries and the EC as members (Berndtson, 2014, pp. 285–287).

Neave and Maassen (2007) described the unique aspects of the Bologna Process, such as ambitious timeline for establishing the EHEA and implementing it at the institutional level of HEIs as well as the absence of a special budget or consultation with the university world. They argued that the Bologna Process is interconnected with numerous ongoing European developments and reform projects. For example, the Bologna Process has been described as ideologically promoting the administrative trends and global (neoliberal) values of new public management (Berndtson, 2014). Further, it has been connected to more general EU policies, such as the Lisbon Strategy, deriving ideas from the European knowledge-based neoliberal framework (Shahjahan, 2012, p. 379). Similarly, according to Veiga et al. (2015), the EHEA is a project of differentiated integration allowing the states and higher education institutions future engage and deepen the integration of higher education.

As one of the instrument of this international development on achieving European Educational Area the EC (2021b) provided “a European approach” to micro-credentials. Additionally, the goal of European or joint degrees is considered a relatively new trend on the European agenda, seen here as a continuation of the pre-existing double degrees between HEIs. The European Strategy for Universities emphasise the agency of HEIs and partly bypasses national policymakers and follows the policy rationale of cohesion in integrating non-national actors into the European policy process. According to the EC (2022, p. 1),

**Universities have a unique position at the crossroads of education, research, innovation, serving society and economy:** they play a critical role in achieving the European Education Area (EEA) and the European Research Area (ERA), in synergy with the European Higher Education Area. Through strong partnerships in the EU and across the globe and building on the cumulative asset of education systems and research networks, they are key actors to promote the European model in line with EU’s interests and values: rule of law, human rights and international norms and standards [bold in original].

As a part framework for achieving its aim Commission Communication on a European strategy for universities the communication mentions the new legal statute for university alliances that could provide joint degrees delivered on national level. (EC 2022)

## European higher education integration as an instrument for the implementation of policy actions

The process of Europeanization, the push for “European excellence” and thrive for the European good of HE and HEIs is not new. In the Bologna Declaration of 1999, “a whole new dynamic overtook developments” (Westerheijden, 2007, p. 77), even if the corresponding tools and goals have been variously used for different purposes in different nations. One of the results of the prior European integration of HE is the Erasmus+ programme, which has been an incremental policy process that builds on its previous forms and successes. The EC’s current Erasmus+ programme “is a key component supporting the objectives of the European Education Area, the Digital Education Action Plan 2021–2027, the European Youth Strategy and the European Union Workplan for Sport” (EC, 2021a, part A). The newest programme period (2021–2027) has been described as comprising numerous aspects of European identity (EC, 2021a) and, thus, a new European agenda for European HE. From this perspective, integration can be seen as an instrument used by the EC to promote its agendas related to Europeanization and policy implementation.

According to the EC’s HE policy of 2017, the renewed EU agenda for HE identified four key goals for European cooperation in HE: future skills, promoting excellence in skills development; building connected inclusive and connected HE systems; Ensuring higher education institutions to contributing innovation; and supporting effective and efficient HE systems (EC, 2021b). The EC has taken several initiatives, bringing major changes to HE practices, including integrated curricula and mobility goals that foster quality, excellence, and innovation. A council recommendation on the automatic mutual recognition of HE and diplomas is being planned to help remove barriers to student mobility within Europe, and

the European Student Card initiative secures student information exchange. Both initiatives exemplify the emerging European Education Area (EC, 2021b) and the new educational policy models presented by the EC, amongst others, for example, the Erasmus+ programme's Teacher Academy (EC, 2021a).

the ambitious goals of European Universities Initiative include a European university and European degrees. Depending on the approach, the main actors are national governments (the Bologna Process as an international convention), the EC (the EHEA as a soft law policy area), and the HEIs operating in the environment of EU policies and international conventions jointly (e.g., through the EUA) and individually. According to the EC (2022),

Europe needs thriving universities to contribute implementing **the European Union political agenda**, as they cut across many different key initiatives taken recently for recovery and resilience. **The European Union and Member States have a shared interest in supporting the higher education sector** by joining their forces around a joint vision for the higher education sector, building on the richness of its diversity [bold in original].

Albeit, based on its treaties “in accordance with the subsidiarity principle, higher education policies are decided at the level of the individual Member States. The role of the EU is therefore mainly a supporting and coordinating one.” (EU, 2023). From this perspective, HE integration is a tool for European policy implementation. HE policy is a form of European policy intervention to secure outcomes for the European project and, one could argue, to “creep competence” (c.f. Corbett, 2009).

## **Making sense of the process and instrumental aims: Integration theory as a frame to scenario-building**

Regardless of the weak competence of the European Union, as described above, the integration of European higher education can be seen, even based on same documents, as an instrumental European policy implementation or as an integration process between European states. This leads us to analyse the current European higher education policy as an integration process. European integration theory (IT) is a scholarly field that explain the scope and dynamics of European integration allow us to formulate expectations of how the integration process will unfold (Schimmelfennig & Rittberger, 2006). There is a plethora of European integration theories which provide distinct frameworks for analysing actors, agenda-setting, policy formulation, legislation, interest intermediation and policy implementation (Rosmond, 2000) in loosely institutionalized environments such as the European HE policy context. Although European integration theories often are empirically grounded, some – such as early functionalism – also expose a normative nature. They provide tools for understanding the processes underlying detailed and complex empirical realities and help in predicting processes, outcomes, and political feasibility (Wiener & Diez, 2009). Thus, they can be used to analyse current realities, “pasts of future”, as a tool for building scenarios for future integration policies around European HE.

Notwithstanding the diversity of the theoretical discussions around European integration, we follow the argument of Schimmelfennig and Rittberger (2006) that these theories can be

grouped as two major schools of thought: intergovernmentalism and supranationalism. The intergovernmental school privileges liberal intergovernmental theory (LIG), while neofunctionalist theory is commonly applied by the supranational school. LIG emphasizes the role of member states and their statesmanship in the integration process, while functional theory emphasizes the role of street-level actors, such as HEIs, academics and HE professionals. LIG assumes that integration takes place through active political bargaining and decision-making, that it is a product of negotiations between governments steered by the interests of member states. Moravcsik (1993) asserted that LIG is based on the liberal theory of political behaviour and the classics of negotiation analysis (see Harsanyi, 1977; Raiffa, 1982). It is built on the assumption of rational individual behaviour (for an evaluation of rational theories, see Harsanyi, 1977, pp. 16–18; for limitations, see Raiffa, 1982, pp. 2–4, 21).

In contrast, functional theory is based on the idea that integration is fuelled by professional practices and the interests of collaborating stakeholder groups, such as industries or educational actors. It is based on a spillover mechanism, defined by Haas (1958, p. 287) as the “progressive convergence of expectations”. According to Haas (p. 289), “*those with positive expectations look on supranationalism to achieve their goals, having decided that the national is not up to the task*”. Thus, the spillover is reducible to the behaviour of independent elite members. The deepening collaboration and formation of new loyalties tend to spill over into other realms of action. A spillover can be described as functional, political, or cultivated (Nugent & Paterson, 2010). Functional spillovers cross from the economic or social sectors to other sectors; political spillovers involve the formation of new political institutions; and cultivated spillovers involve the formation of a new elite group with an interest in further emphasizing the importance of cooperation. The functional approach brings in the institutional actors and provides explanation on non-intergovernmental integration process without a strong competence of the European Union.

Based on these basic premises of major ITs, Rosamond (2000) created a simple two-dimensional IT model. We were inspired by this typology and employed the same dimensions to analyse the integration of European HEIs. In the typology, the first axis describes the integration mechanism (political decision-making versus spillover), while the other axis is reserved for the aim of the integration process. In ITs, integration is assumed to be aimed at federative structures (new entity) or confederation (new ways of agreeing on the joint behaviour of member states). We utilized his typology to formulate the future scenarios of the integration of European HE (Fig. 1).

## Scenario building: prospective process approach

The term scenario here implies an internally consistent hypothesis of how the future might unfold and alternative logics of current developments and connections to the potential future (cf. Neumann & Øverland, 2004, p. 259). De Jouvenel (2000) described this prospective process as an approach to analyse future scenarios and scenario-building and separated it from the mere forecasting of events. Following Neumann and Øverland’s (2004) thinking on perspectivist scenario-building, we saw the usefulness of scenario-building in creating an illusion of the future and simultaneously accepting its flaws. Similar to Neumann and Øverland (2004, p. 266), we separated scenarios from traditional scenario planning, which included the use of scenarios in actual policy planning. We used scenario-building to meth-

odologically create a conceptual approach to the integration of European HE and formation of European university. Our scenarios are explorative and answer for questions what can happen. Based on Börjeson et al. (2006) typology our scenarios are so called external scenarios that can be used by higher education actors, such as university alliances, to reflect strategy development. In addition, the external explorative scenarios are also discussed from predictive perspective, and thus, the question what will happen is also discussed with reference to each explorative scenario (Börjeson et al., 2006).

The prospective process includes five procedural stages: problem definition and goal setting, constructing the system and identifying key factors, collecting data, and drafting hypotheses, exploring possible futures, and outlining strategic choices (De Jouvenel, 2000). We applied this procedure by identifying key qualitative factors and their interrelations and selecting two dimensions of integration that finally led to the exploration of four future scenarios through the selected dimensions. These factors are explained in detail below. Key qualitative factors can be identified from the contextual explanations of the integration process namely the intergovernmental process and instrumental projection of the recent past. The Europeanization of HE is the first key factor of integration. It includes a European or pan-European agenda for HE and the goals of European degrees and degree structures, a European university or a European HEI, deepening European mobility, especially within and between university alliances, and European research. An important aspect of this key factor is the value of HE integration for Europe and the idea of Europeanization. This key factor is found in the development of the European Universities Initiative and, for example, in the latest proposals and explorations of possible forms of a European university, including the idea of a new legal statute for it. Regarding the chosen dimensions of integration, the Europeanization of HE presents a new design of HE rather than merely promoting current developments in the Bologna Process and the re-arrangement of national settings to fit them. As a process, Europeanization demands political decision-making but is likely also based on incremental and practical actions by HEIs and the EC.

The second key factor is the internationalization of HEIs and contracts between HEIs, which emphasizes internationalization as an intrinsic value. Unlike Europeanization, internationalization does not prioritize European universities as partners and co-actors of integration but focuses on beneficial cooperation with HEIs from any country. Internationalization does not necessarily require leaps of action or new integration designs; it takes place within current legislation.

The third key factor observed from the latest developments within the EHEA is more practically oriented: commonly shared practices of HEIs and governments, including in quality assurance, accreditation, joint support services and technical platforms. Many Bologna Process goals and practices fall into this category of integration, often with no need for new designs and with a focus on redesigning and incremental developments.

The fourth key factor observed is the trend of mergers in the HE field, which implies a development towards united, merged HEIs rather than separate HEIs working together. This has implications for European universities and European HE integration. Within national settings, mergers require mostly redesigns and perhaps moderate legal changes, but when this factor is combined with Europeanization and internationalization, new designs and leaps of action are required to form new settings for merging HEIs and perhaps new cross-border legal entities.



The four future scenarios exist in two projected dimensions: designing anew, as opposed to redesigning existing institutions, and incremental processes and practical action-orientation as opposed to political events and decision-making leading to “leaps of action” in HE. The four key qualitative factors of integration are set within two dimensions of integration, which, based on our heuristic typology of ITs, are presented in Fig. 1.

In Fig. 1, the up-down dimension of integration is reflected as a possible future projection of the redesigning of current international HE integration and cooperation activities (upwards projection), and the opposing projection is reflected as the new design of HE (downwards projection). The upwards future projection (re-design) refers to new arrangements within the current legal and political framework of the EHEA and the countries of the partaking HEIs in the European Universities Initiative. This projection of possible activities includes the Bologna Process framework and its goals and new forms and areas of deepening cooperation, such as the European University Alliances’ current development work. The downwards projection (new design) points to new actors and a new kind of agency in the EHEA, that is, supranational European institutions or legislation creating completely new regulation.

The left–right dimension in Fig. 1 represents the process of integration and development of HE. Towards the left-side projection (blue colour), integration takes “leaps of action”, with new initiatives and ideas as significant political decisions at the European and state levels. The right-side projection (red colour) points to an incremental process of practical, action-orientation and different types of sophisticated integration and cooperation activities, which are already possible or could be possible with incremental changes within the current legislative, institutional, and political contexts of the EHEA.

### Scenarios for the integration of European higher education

The four main future scenarios for “establishing [a] new European university” – “European University International”, “International European higher education”, “European University” and “Designing new European higher education” – are set in the above-mentioned dimensions and presented in the next sections. We consider integration scenarios as exploratory (De Jouvenel, 2000) in alluding to what could happen in the future when factors are

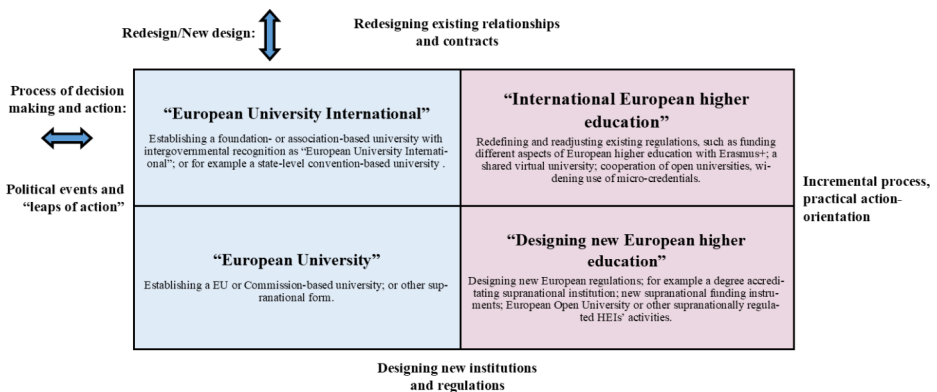


Fig. 1 Integration of European higher education. (Source: own compilation)

set within the dimensions of integration. For each scenario, the main actors and key factors are described. The resulting scenarios answer our first research question about what kinds of scenarios can be identified based on instrumental and process-based accounts on the integration of European HE in the context of ITs.

### **Scenario 1: European university international**

The first of the four scenarios in Fig. 1 (top-left corner), “European University International”, is the result of redesigning existing structures and activities of integration and “leaps of action” in the political setting of the EHEA. There are indications of the key factors in the different accounts on the integration of European HE; for example, according to the European Universities Initiative’s goal of a European university, an international form of a European HEI would be a probable future scenario for European HE. Regarding the IT concepts, this future scenario points to intergovernmentalism and negotiations between HEIs and/or states, with the main actors being university alliances, foundations, and consortiums, in addition to the traditionally strong role of states.

An example of this type of future scenario already exists in the European University Institute EUI (EUI 2021), which can be said to be failed supranational university (Corbett, 2009), organised as a state convention-based university with master’s and doctoral-level degree education and research. Within the current political and legal framework of the EHEA, the “European University International” could be established as a state convention, foundation, association or limited company, albeit with limitations regarding its country of legal establishment or the states participating in its convention.

The European University Alliances work within the pathway of this future scenario, evident in their goal of establishing a European university. In the “European University International” future scenario, European universities would be established within the current European and national frameworks (i.e. legislation, directives and structures). The key factors here include a European or pan-European agenda for HE, including degrees and degree structures, a European university or HEI, the internationalization processes and goals of HEIs and contracts between HEIs.

### **Scenario 2: international European higher education**

In the top-right corner of Fig. 1, the future scenario “International European higher education” points to functionalism, a redesign or reinterpretation of current regulations and spillover of a more incremental process of integration and cooperation of HEIs and states. The spillover involves sophisticated forms of integration and redesigns in the current institutional setting of the EHEA, including new regulations or interpretations within the soft law steering of European HE. Most of the goals and shared policies of the Bologna Process fall under “International European higher education”, including a future of redesigned cooperation and collaboration activities and integration models. The main actors in this scenario are HEIs, with less anticipated roles for other actors and little or no change in the “hard law” of European HE.

Examples of “International European higher education” include cooperation among open universities, the expanding use of micro-credentials and micro-modules, creating new technical platforms for mobility and student data-sharing, new types of funding within the

framework of the Erasmus+ programme and perhaps the use of a shared virtual university by two or more HEIs. Many of these examples already exist, thereby supporting the probability of this future path, but are not limited to this scenario.

The key factors in this future scenario of a redesigned and incremental process of integration and cooperation are the European or pan-European agenda for HE, including European mobility in HE, the internationalization of HEIs and contracts between HEIs, common shared practices of HEIs and states, such as in quality assurance, accreditation, joint support services and technical platforms, as well as possible mergers of HEIs based on contracts within current regulations.

### **Scenario 3: European university**

The third future scenario, “European University”, depicts a situation where political consensus moves towards creating the institutional settings, legislation, regulation, and funding models for the establishment of a supranational European university. This scenario is the result of increased political consensus around the “big idea” of the European agenda, combining several parts of HE into a new supranational legal entity, either in the EC or based on a completely new legal framework. The likelihood of this scenario is arguable; as the case of European University Alliances shows, the country of origin of every participating HEI would need to find political consensus to create a new legal entity and identify the basis for recognizing a new supranational HEI. In addition, multiple technical and regulatory challenges exist, for example, in arranging the public funding of such a supranational entity and alter the treaties. The main actors in this scenario are the EC and HEIs and perhaps the to-be-established European university or HEI.

The “European University” scenario is strongly affected by the key factors of the European or pan-European agenda for HE, including degrees and degree structures, the European university or HEI, European mobility in HE and its goals and European research.

### **Scenario 4: Designing new European higher education**

The fourth scenario, “Designing new European higher education”, involves a sophisticated spillover of new forms of cooperation as a result of incremental international and supranational decision-making. In this scenario, cooperation among HEIs and states, together with the EC, lead to the incremental creation of completely new designs of the European agenda. This includes new supranational regulations or agreements of, for example, the recognition of different parts and activities of European HE in various organizational and legal forms, European degrees, micro-credential systems, European open universities and supranational quality assurance and accreditation.

In terms of ITs, this scenario emphasizes European identity and combines functionalism and new designs of regulation and institutional settings. It differs from the “European University” in creating regulations incrementally in order to support the integration of sophisticated and needs-based forms of HE as opposed to making “a political leap” towards establishing a completely new legal entity. Thus, current national and international HE integration would lead to new areas of HE, partially and incrementally recognized by the EC and the wider European community as “new European higher education”. The main actors here are HEIs, states and supranational agencies.

A historical example of this future scenario is the institutionalized Bologna Process and corresponding processes (e.g., EC instruments and especially European actors such as ‘The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education’, ENQA). This future scenario includes ideas for designing “new European higher education” and is based on the qualitative factors of a European or pan-European agenda for HE, including degrees and degree structures, European mobility in HE and its goals, European research agendas, the internationalization of and contracts among HEIs and common shared practices of HEIs and states (e.g., quality assurance, accreditation, joint support services and technical platforms). Additionally, different forms of HEI mergers in European countries, such as merged open universities, are possible pathways to new forms of European HE.

## Successful Integration of European higher education and new European higher education institutions

So far, we have presented four different scenarios for “Establishing new European university”, all of which can be traced back and have their historical counterparts. The establishment of a new supranational university has even been on the agenda already at the times of the European Coal and Steel Community (Corbett, 2009). Our second research question asked, how the success of implementation of the European university can be defined under different scenarios. We assume that independent of the implemented scenario the European University Initiative will be framed as successful instrument and at least the University Consortiums will report success in the reaching the aim of the financial instrument. The European Universities Initiative has an ambitious target:

*“[to] explore the feasibility of a legal statute for alliances of universities such as the European Universities – and actions to facilitate such deeper and sustainable cooperation between education institutions”*. Such facilitated actions could include *“solutions for cross-border cooperation linked to financing, accreditation, quality assurance, student and employment relations, and infrastructure management”*. (EC, 2021b)

The success of the initiative will depend mostly on the direction of the integration of HE. Table 1 presents the four scenarios and a hypothetical evaluation of the EUI under this alternative future. We considered the implications from four perspectives: first, each scenario is analysed based on its target of evaluation, including actors and level of analysis; second, the user of the evaluation knowledge and information; third, what the judgement of the evaluation is based on and, fourth, what would be an ideal “successful integration”. Depending on the scenario and level of analysis, the targeted actors must be determined. The integration futures also have an implication regarding who performs the evaluation work and who are the potential users of the knowledge. Depending on the integration scenario, it is also important to determine the criteria for (e)valuating successful integration changes and the ideal form or “success” in integrative processes, which will have a major impact on the shared understanding of the future of European HEIs.

**Table 1** Implications for the evaluation of integration under different scenarios

Scenario	Target of evaluation (actors, level of analysis)	User of evaluation knowledge	Judgement basis	“Successful integration”
<b>“European University International”</b>	Alliances, foundations and/or consortia and states Activities of European University International	Constituting members (states)	Constituting agreements and strategic objectives of the European Universities Initiative	That goals set for integration are achieved Functional European HEI
<b>“International European Higher Education”</b>	HEIs Harmonized educational practices	HEIs and users	Functioning EHEA Satisfaction of students, professionals and working life	Formed European identity and shared culture Harmonization through shared “best practices”
<b>“European University”</b>	European HEI and its activities “European agenda of excellence”	European HEIs, management Supranational actors	Functioning supranational framework, legislation and regulations	World-class European Universities
<b>“Designing new European higher education”</b>	HEIs, supranational agencies Joint practices based on agreements and standards	Quality assurance agencies and users of joint frameworks Supranational actors	European standards and regulation on HE processes and content	Harmonization through new structures and process; “transferability”

Source: Own compilation

## Conclusion

Like Veiga et al. (2015, p. 98), we agree that the EHEA has multiple, multilayered and interwoven features and implies a need to review the models or re-conceptualize the Bologna Process as an EU instrument of political integration. Different aspects of the Bologna Process and the integration of European HE towards different future scenarios, such as a European university or redesigning existing structures, must be evaluated separately as the landscape of European HE is difficult to grasp within a single conceptual approach. We argue that the institutional setting of the EHEA entered a new phase following the introduction of the European Universities Initiative, revealing possible future paths that did not seem as realistic before its introduction and implementation.

The “international” evaluation of HE in the European context must focus on the increasing role of supranational interests and the European agenda. Furthermore, and as a practical implication, we challenge the scholars of HE integration to question their own agenda, to see the higher education as a policy sector not only as a unique field of higher learning and peculiar organizations, and consequently analyse the political aims and process of the integration of European HEIs. There is a tendency to ignore the basic premises of this integration and lean towards European standards and policies and, consequently, function as agents of HE policies led by the EC and ignore the needs and aims of national actors, HEIs and others who depend on European HE.

The future scenarios of international and supranational integration call for a redefinition of the evaluation framework for international collaboration among HEIs by questioning basic assumptions on the centrality of national benefits and agency in European HE and supranational actors. After the introduction of the European Universities Initiative and the

collaboration efforts of the university alliances, HEIs partaking in the initiative seem to have diverted more of their traditionally national and international goal towards Europeanizing HE – a European agenda. For future studies, we propose that the reports of the EUI consortiums could be analysed over time with the projected construction of “new European university” to be studied at its core.

To conclude, first, the process of European integration may take several development paths and will look different if its aim is a European university (as a legal entity) or European HE as a harmonized process. Second, the development of European HE will also take a different course if it is based on ideas and actions of statements and conventions or is an outcome of academic collaboration. It will also be evaluated differently if the main beneficiary of the evaluation information is a member state, the EU or an institution. The success of integration will also be framed differently if it is evaluated through other policy aims such as learning, mobility or employability. Third, it remains to be seen whether we are witnessing the strengthening of European HE agencies and quality assurance institutions in moving towards the era of European universities, or European universities established by member states, or continuing the path of the current harmonizing Bologna Process.

Finally, we conclude that the European Universities Initiative certainly is a new phase in European Higher Education integration. It is pushing the agenda from intergovernmental policy process towards institutional spillover. However, it remains to be seen whether consortiums find and create a new space for new types of institutional arrangement to establish new type of supranational European higher education institutions, that has not happened in intergovernmental process (Corbett, 2009). For this, the institutions even with a strong support from EC, need the support of member state.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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