

Lessons from over 70 years of regional alignment processes in Europe for international higher education

European
lessons for
higher
education

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Abstract

Purpose – This article provides an overview and analysis of 50 years of European policies, actions, and challenges to align its higher education and research, as well as lessons learned from this for similar initiatives elsewhere.

Design/methodology/approach – The study builds on a comprehensive overview and study of policy documents and scholarly literature to identify by decade the main policies and actions and the related challenges towards a European Higher Education and Research Area.

Findings – The findings make clear the key rationales, challenges, shifts and lessons to be learned from 50-year European policies for the alignment of higher education.

Originality/value – Its value lies in the historical overview and analysis of current initiatives, in particular the European Universities Initiative (EUI), to provide a historical and geographical context, which might give insight for similar initiatives elsewhere.

Keywords European higher education area, Bologna process, European research area, European universities initiative, Lessons for other regions

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Driven by rationales of enhancing competitiveness and regional identity, higher education in Europe has undergone continuous processes of collaboration and alignment spanning over 70 years. The most outstanding four key milestones are the Erasmus program in 1987, the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, The Bologna Process in 1999, and the European Universities Initiative (EUI) in 2018. The Erasmus program and similar programs for education and research set the tone for a policy of Europeanization of higher education. With the Maastricht Treaty, education was officially integrated into the European Union agenda, despite its limitations. In 1999, the Bologna Process provided momentum for harmonizing higher education structures and fostering academic cooperation and exchange. Two decades later, the EUI represents the most recent effort to enhance internal cooperation and global competitiveness in European higher education, building upon the experiences and setbacks of earlier initiatives dating back to the 1950s.

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Besides these three significant events, what are the key manifestations and challenges of 70 years of European higher education cooperation and alignment? What lessons can be learned from the European alignment and cooperation process for higher education elsewhere? This article explores the prominent aspects and challenges that have characterized 70 years of European higher education cooperation and alignment. It seeks to draw lessons from this extensive process to inform the broader landscape of higher education globally. This paper begins with a historical narrative outlining the Europeanization and internationalization of higher education in the region since the establishment of the European Community in 1955. This journey unfolds across seven time periods, with developments contextualized within the post-World War Two era, the Cold War, the rise of universal higher education and the concurrent expansion of research universities and universities of applied sciences. To enhance readability, we have structured the development chronologically and provided insights into key advancements within each period.

Beyond a comprehensive overview of European Union (EU) policy and program evolution, our analysis delves into the opportunities and challenges inherent in regional higher education alignment. Furthermore, we propose implications drawn from this rich tapestry of European experiences that hold relevance for higher education endeavors worldwide.

Historical development

1. The 1950s and 1960s: the first attempts towards a European University

The 1950s and 1960s are not regarded as a period of internationalization; priority in the European Community was given to rebuilding society and economy after the devastations of the Second World War. With respect to education, the dispute was on the role of the European Community. The political context was that the member states viewed education as their own competency and the educational system differences between nations prohibited the emergence of a regional and internationalization policy for higher education (De Wit, 2002).

Nevertheless, international student mobility was present, and international students, to a large extent, flew from former French and British colonies. In this aspect, international activity was limited and lacked a unified European internationalization of higher education policy. The academic world in the EU cooperated with the USA, primarily through outward mobility of students and faculty, as well as inward mobility of undergraduate study abroad programs and with the Third World by inward mobility of degree-seeking students and development cooperation and capacity building.

Notwithstanding, the attempt at a supranational university in Europe is as old as the European Community itself. The idea for such a university can be traced back to the first meeting discussing the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Atomic Energy Community in 1955 (Orr, Unangst, & de Wit, 2019). In June 1955, as the governments of Belgium, France, the Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands took the first steps to plan the EEC and the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom), the social policy to unite the region was brought up, though not in the final communiqué (Corbett, 2005). In March 1957, the Euratom Treaty, signed as the Treaty of Rome, and the Common Market Treaty both included articles that foreshadowed higher education and vocational training in the region.

German representatives were the first to present the idea for a European university, spurred by an interest in revitalizing post-war national universities and sciences. The goal was to establish a supranational European university functioning as a flagship for research and innovation, which can compete with United States institutions. It would serve a national purpose and further develop European culture and scholarship. After 1955, the European

university idea was taken up by French authorities to include it in the Euratom treaty, linking the university to a nuclear energy research and training center. In this way, the European university became untethered from the broader European Community (EC) and was instead linked primarily to innovation and development rather than European cultural integration.

“This tension, between a Europe united through culture and a Europe united in development, has followed the university project ever since”, noted by [Orr et al. \(2019, n.p.\)](#). According to them, the Euratom treaty settled nothing and negotiations over the European university continued. “Indeed, the fault lines set by German and French representatives shaped multiple exchanges among many actors; would there be a comprehensive university or a small and specialized institution? The French resisted not only the scope of the university but also its governance, reflecting broader concerns about EC control over higher education and culture” ([Orr et al., 2019, n.p.](#)).

The French position was driven by a desire for a center for the study of nuclear science to be integrated within a French institution and for a European institute (supported by EC subsidies) in France itself. Further, the promotion of the French language and France’s status was sought through these initiatives. While French authorities reverted to their original position, their outline facilitated the 1959 proposed institutional model of the European University as a postgraduate institution focused on the humanities and European area studies. It would enroll about 500 students from across the EC with limits on any one nationality. Further, the university would support all of Europe through exchanges and research. The university proposal also included a mechanism for national institutes to obtain EC funding and a framework for cooperation between other European universities.

The 1959 proposal for a European University encountered ongoing opposition, led by French representatives, for another decade. During this time, Italian authorities, long supporters of the university project, successfully advocated for the future university campus to be built in Italy. This also appeased the French view that states, rather than the EC, had purview over higher education. Finally, a humanities-focused doctoral institute located in Florence, the European University Institute, was authorized in 1971 and founded in 1972 [1].

2. 1970–1980: Stagnation followed by first attempts towards an education strategy

The financial crisis of 1971, the energy crisis of 1973 and the global economic crisis of the 1970s led to stagnated economic and political integration as nations focused on their national issues. While the 1970s saw the first steps in policies towards harmonization, Europeanization and globalization, they had limited and marginal impact ([De Wit, 2002](#)). On January 1, 1973, the EC expanded from six to nine members to include Denmark, Ireland and the UK. In the same year, to institutionalize education within the Commission structure, a Directorate for Education, Research and Science (DG XII) was created under the Commissioner for Science and Education. The Commission could now proactively develop education and research policies based on educational purposes instead of economic rationales ([De Wit, 2002](#)).

In June 1974, education ministers signed a resolution to establish a new Education Committee. The Education Committee, consisting of one national official and one academic from each member state, met in Brussels periodically every four weeks. They agreed to prioritize several higher education issues, including improving academic recognition of diplomas and study periods and encouraging the freedom of movement and mobility of teachers, students and researchers. The then Education Action Program included three measures for education: joint study programs, short study visits and one educational administrators’ program. In the mid-1970s, the social policy context channeled social action programs and social funds on two issues: training young people to transition from school to work and providing EC migrant workers’ children with host and home language lessons ([Corbett, 2005](#)).

On 9 February 1976, the ministers agreed to a package with inter-governmental and EC elements. In the package, higher education cooperation included joint study/research programs and study abroad programs, where institutions had the academic autonomy to set the rules. These came from examples of bottom-up, voluntary and decentralized institutional cooperation in the Community, for instance, in Germany and Sweden (De Wit, 2002). Importantly, they recognized the great importance of the “mobility” of students and teachers in nine different systems who were not included in the freedom of movement legislation, as well as problems with admission quotas and high tuition fees. These issues and obstacles remained for officials to solve even into the 1980s. De Wit (2002, pp. 47–48) speaks in that respect of “a period of stagnation” between 1972 and 1985, as the impact of the 1976 action plan was marginal, the scope limited and also because of the global economic crisis of the 1970s. Notwithstanding, the joint study programs led to some success and prepared the ground for the flagship program ERASMUS in 1987.

3. The 1980s: Great progress towards Europeanization and harmonization

The second half of the 1980s showed significant progress and changes in higher education internationalization and harmonization, with Europeanization, harmonization and globalization remaining the central objectives. The three main changes were: “the open door policy of mobility of individual international students into Europe, although primarily to the UK; the development of a research and development policy for the EU; and the stimulation of student mobility as an integrated part of the study” (De Wit, 2002, p. 48).

Integrating student mobility into study programs within the EU grew more prominent. By 1984, more than 500 universities and other higher education institutions had some form of joint study programs. It was an achievement that many political leaders became aware of. The Council had agreed that the Commission could now award institutional grants to support faculty mobility and a limited number of scholarships to support student mobility.

At this time, the EC leadership considered education and human resources essential contributors to a single market goal. It allowed the Commission to devise a new program based on the former Joint Study Programs Scheme and the technology transfer program: ERASMUS – the “European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of European Students.”

At the Milan European Council of June 1985, the White Paper proposed to complete the single market by 1992. An ad-hoc committee, The People’s Europe, called for a comprehensive program of European inter-university exchanges and studies, open to a significant section of the Community’s student population and proposed a European academic credit transfer scheme (the future ECTS), establishing bilateral or multilateral higher education partnerships to devise the credit transfer arrangements for their institutions on the basis of the ECTS model (European Commission, 1985, pt 5.8).

On January 3, 1986, the ERASMUS proposal asked for a budget of 175 million European Currency Unit (ECU) for the first phase (1987–1989) to provide financial support for 10% of the students in the Community for exchanges and university cooperation (Corbett, 2005). The academic recognition of diplomas, transferrable course credits and the joint development of curricula by different universities were central to this strategy.

On June 15, 1987, The Council of Ministers approved the ERASMUS Program and the budget was 85 million over three years. It was estimated that “29,000 students from the Community would benefit from ERASMUS scholarships during the first three years, and that there would be about 3,000 grants to universities to allow them to organise exchange programmes for students and teachers” (Corbett, 2005, p. 145). Between 1987 and 2003, more than a million students participated in the exchange program.

In 1986, COMETT was launched as a program for cooperation between higher education and industry, while the 1987 ERASMUS was a program for cooperation within higher education. They were created because the European Commission had the freedom to devise creative programs within a legal structure that was not so formal in higher education. Several other significant education programs, such as Lingua, have followed up since then.

Many consider it a historical moment as ERASMUS signifies Community-sponsored higher education cooperation. On the other hand, participation of UK institutions in the ERASMUS program was limited for two reasons. One is that full-cost fees for non-EER students were more attractive than ERASMUS students without paying tuition. Second, the UK was, for reasons of reputation and language, an attractive option for ERASMUS, while the continent was, for the same reasons, less attractive for UK students (De Wit, 2002).

The open-door policy of recruiting full-fee-paying international students in the UK illustrates the different positions of the UK concerning the Europeanization of higher education. Where charging full-cost fees to international students on the continent was still anathema, under Prime Minister Thatcher, such fees were introduced in 1980 to compensate the higher education sector for cuts in public funding. Most European countries twenty years later would move in a similar direction by introducing differential or full cost fees to non-EER students. ERASMUS became a successful flagship program in all other countries of the EU but the UK. As a result of the Brexit referendum of 2016, the UK stepped out of the ERASMUS program in 2020.

In research, the European Commission developed a set of research and development stimulation policies to increase international cooperation in science and research. Many programs, such as the “Framework Programs,” promoted public-private networks of research institutes with industry, so the European firms gained access to new technologies and moved towards innovation in “collective goods” (De Wit, 2006).

These programs started in the 1970s but were increased and brought together in 1984 in so-called Framework Programs, each for four years. The impact of these programs on the development and cooperation in research and innovation and their expansion in the past two decades cannot be underestimated, as illustrated by the UK’s position. While dropping out of the education program, in the more beneficial research framework programs, the interest was high to stay. However, only in September of 2023 did an agreement between the EU and the UK on the UK’s participation in Horizon have been reached.

That programs like ERASMUS were possible without an educational policy for the EC – based on the subsidiarity principle that it rules out its intervention when the issue can be dealt with effectively by the Member States themselves - is remarkable. The EC was justified in exercising its powers only when the Member States could not satisfactorily achieve the objectives of a proposed action, and the Community could provide added value. In this context, education did not fall under its mandate until the Maastricht Treaty of 1992. This implied that actions had to be taken under other mandates and outsourced (De Wit, 2002).

In the 1980s, the focus was firmly on Europeanization, with limited focus on the rest of the world. The [European Association for International Education \(1992\)](#) was one of the organizations which expressed concern about the Eurocentric view of internationalization. This would change in the next decade due to the end of the Cold War and a new era of globalization, demanding more competition and cooperation.

4. 1990–2000: Increased institutionalization and professionalization and closer global cooperation

The Maastricht Treaty, signed in 1992 and ratified in 1993, included education and started a more formal period of education policy by the EC. Education became an area where the now-called European Union and its European Commission could take action as a subsidiary focus.

From the 1990s on, numerous EU programs, the Bologna Process, and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), contributed to the harmonization or even homogenization of structures, principles, and purposes of higher education across the continent (De Wit, 2002; Voegetle *et al.*, 2011).

Both the education and research programs grew in budget and impact. They became more integrated with the institutional strategies of universities and, with some delay, within the universities of applied sciences. The different programs that had been developed in the 1980s (COMETT, EUROTECNET, PETRA, FORCE and part of LINGUA) were combined in a new program, LEONARDO DA VINCI for vocational training and others (ERASMUS and Comenius, together with new transversal measures) in a new program SOCRATES for the higher education area. SOCRATES created a stronger institutionalization and professionalization of cooperation and exchange, with risks of bureaucratization, but also a need to emphasize the coherence of goals and development and reinforcement of strategic thinking (Kehm, 2000).

A European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) as part of ERASMUS/SOCRATES, diploma recognitions and open space for cooperation in higher education were all measures towards harmonization, integration and Europeanization. The creation of ECTS to manage the transfer of credits for students from their host institution to their home institution was an important new element. It also laid the ground for the system of credits, continued as ECTS, in the two cycles resulting from the Bologna Process in the 2000s.

Where the 1980s focused on Europeanization, particularly collaboration within the European Union and competition with the rest of the world, in the 1990s, one can observe an opening up to the rest of Europe and beyond. Two factors influenced that process. The fall of the Iron Curtain and the related end of the Cold War, in particular, called for closer cooperation with and integration of Central and Eastern European countries and the increased globalization of economies and societies called for closer alignment with the rest of the world.

In 1990, the EU expanded to include Austria, Finland, Sweden and Cyprus. Other countries in the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) and European Economic Area (EEA), Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland, were allowed to participate in the research framework and the education programs. In 1991, countries in the European Free Trade Agreement (EFTA) could participate in the ERASMUS program. In 1998–1999, countries from Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltic States could join the SOCRATES program, even before officially joining the EU in 2004.

The main change occurred with the countries hidden behind the Iron Curtain: Albania, the three Baltic States, Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and the Czech Republic. For them, a program called PHARE, Assistance for Restructuring of the Economy, was established in 1989, including R&D and education. For education, this took place through the Trans European Mobility Program for University Studies (TEMPUS). These programs had to prepare the countries for future EU integration and participation in the research framework and education programs.

For states of the former Soviet Union, a separate program, called TEMPUS-TACIS, was established in 1991. Similar initiatives by member states and other Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries supported these programs. It prepared most of these countries (not Albania and not states from the former Soviet Union) to become members of the EU and participate as active partners in the research and education programs of the EU in the following decade. As Barblan and Teichler (2000) already observed at that time, this shift from aid to cooperation did not immediately result in participation on equal terms, which remained an issue two decades later.

As for the rest of the world, new cooperation programs have also formed. Prominent examples include ALFA for cooperation with Latin America in 1994, the EU-China Higher

Education Cooperation Program in 1996 and the EU-India Cross-Cultural Program of 1997. Similarly, since 1995, cooperation programs have started between the EU, the United States and Canada. As Haug (2000) predicted, this development would only be the start of more intensive cooperation schemes with the rest of the world in the following decades.

Special attention must be given to the EU policy concerning development aid programs. Stagnant or even receding in the 1980s, the European Commission in the 1990s became one of the key international funding organizations for development cooperation. It added to national programs for development cooperation by member states and stimulated cooperation of European partners in consortia instead of acting alone (De Wit, 2002).

In summary, the 1990s decade shows a formalization, institutionalization and collaboration. There was the strengthening of the R&D and education programs within the EU and an opening up to the rest of the world, away from an exclusive focus on Europeanization in the 1980s.

5. 2000–2010: the Bologna Process, towards a European Higher Education and Research Area

On May 25, 1998, in Paris, ministers of France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom signed the “Sorbonne Declaration,” which laid the groundwork for the “Bologna Declaration.” The Sorbonne Declaration, signed by four countries with very different higher education traditions, was a joint declaration on harmonizing the architecture of the European higher education system. It was well-received in the political and higher education community in the four countries and the rest of Europe, although sometimes it was criticized as a call for Americanization and adapting to the Anglo-Saxon higher education culture and structure.

The Sorbonne Declaration was inspired by the need for modernization and competitiveness of European higher education in the first three countries, which had been unable to do so due to strong opposition in the academic community and society towards reform. There was extreme complexity and diversity in Europe in curricular and degree structures, so it needed actions to foster desired convergence and transparency in European qualification structures (Haug & Tauch, 2001; Trends in European Learning Structures).

On June 19th, 1999, the ministers of education of 29 European countries gathered at Bologna, Italy and signed the Declaration on the “European Higher Education Area”. They were committed to implementing ten action lines, including promoting mobility, establishing a system of credits, creating a system of undergraduate and graduate cycles and promoting cooperation in quality assurance, as the first package of the Bologna Process. One important aspect of the Bologna process is that it “reconfirmed trends underway in Germany, Austria, and Denmark to introduce a bachelor’s and master’s degree structure... and stimulated similar movements in countries such as the Netherlands (De Wit, 2002, p. 64)”.

Another important element during this process was the emphasis on quality assurance (Corbett, 2005). The European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA) played an active role and the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA) by 13 accreditation organizations in eight countries all aimed to achieve mutual recognition of accreditation decisions.

Since then, the Bologna Process has been monitored every two years. In 2001, at the Prague summit in the Czech Republic, the second package recognized lifelong learning as a guiding principle and promoted the attraction of the European Higher Education Area. During this meeting, it was also recognized “that universities’ staff and students were a necessary part of the EHEA process, that universities were a public good and should remain a public responsibility (Corbett, 2005, p. 199)”.

At the Berlin, Germany Summit 2003, the third meeting took place with 40 signatory countries, including Russia. The Bologna process emphasized, in addition to the bachelor and

master cycle, doctoral studies and the synergies of the European Higher Education Area with the European Research Area:

- creating the European Higher Education Area and European Research Area—two pillars of the knowledge-based society, recognizing the close link between education and research, and including the doctoral level as the third cycle in the Bologna process; and
- stocktaking midway through the process (by a series of reports on the progress), in particular with respect to quality assurance, the two-cycle system and the recognition of degrees and periods of studies.

The Bologna Process did not only look inward to the EU but also to the rest of the world. As of the 2009 meeting in Louvain-La-Neuve, Belgium, an important dimension of the bi-annual meetings is the Bologna Policy Forum, created on the initiative of the working group on European Higher Education in a Global Setting. The rationales were described as follows,

An increasing number of countries around the world have shown their interest to be involved in a dialog with the countries participating in the Bologna Process on how worldwide cooperation in higher education can be enhanced. At the same time there is growing interest among European countries to develop closer links with higher education systems around the world. Therefore, for the first time, a Bologna Policy Forum was organized between Ministers of the 46 Bologna countries and colleagues from different parts of the world to facilitate global dialog ([Bologna Policy Forum, 2009](#)).

The Lisbon Strategy of the EU of 2000, aimed to increase the policy convergence of the many different national higher education systems, was more ambitious in the European Union's effort to become a competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in response to globalization ([De Wit, 2006](#)) than the Bologna Process, but had less direct impact on the development of the European Higher Education and Research Area.

6. 2010–2020: Tensions in EU cooperation: Brexit and other challenges

After the creative, innovative and expansive past decades, the 2010–2020 decade saw further extension, tensions and fatigue. [Bergan \(2015, p. 737\)](#) remarked that at the 2012 Bologna Ministerial Conference in Bucharest, more countries were represented at the senior official level than at the political level. One may wonder if, indeed, the interest is waning, not only for the process itself but also for the Bologna Policy Forum, in other words, the connection with the interest of the rest of the world.

There is a feeling that the EHEA has achieved all it was intended to achieve, because the initial goals are now seen as too ambitious and nobody wants to be associated with failure, because the EHEA is seen too lose focus and become everything to all people, because an increasing focus on implementation implies that the EHEA is now seen as an administrative – some would say bureaucratic – rather than as a political challenge, or simply because “Bologna” ceases to be new it is also perceived to cease to be innovative and politically interesting ([Bergan, 2015, p. 737](#)).

It has probably been a mixture of all these reasons. Bergan's reflection is based on the second edition of the Bologna Process Researchers Conference (BPRC). In 2011, The Future of Higher Education – Bologna Process Researchers Conference (FOHE-BPRC) took place for the first time in Bucharest, aiming to provide a forum for dialog between researchers, experts and policymakers in higher education. Organized by the Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding (UEFISCDI), this conference now takes

place before each ministerial conference, and its proceedings are published in two volumes as Springer Open Access publications.

In the 2018 edition, the editors [Curaj, Deca and Pricopie \(2018\)](#) confirmed the concerns expressed three years earlier by Bergan and provided some context of what they call accelerating challenges: the emerging digital revolution, growing inequalities in society and related crises, the rise in populist ideologies, the slow recovery of the economic recession and financial crisis of 2008–2012, a cultural backlash and regional tensions, in particular Brexit. They express concerns about attacking the traditional values underlying the EHEA: academic freedom, institutional autonomy, student participation in higher education governance and public responsibility for higher education. At the same time, they were optimistic about how the Bologna Process is surviving these challenges and continues to be a success story.

As for the EU programs in R&D and education, there was more positive news. ERASMUS/Socrates evolved in 2014 into ERASMUS+. This transformation brought all programs at all educational levels, including Youth and Sports, together in one program and also to the rest of the world. The R&D framework programs were expanded as the new Horizon 2020 program. As a result of Brexit, the UK left the ERASMUS + program, and it would take until 2023 to reach an agreement on the UK's participation in Horizon.

The contextual challenges described above and the related waning of enthusiasm for the EHEA and the Bologna Process defined this decade. At its end, the COVID-19 pandemic added an even darker cloud to its future, impacting higher education and research.

7. As of 2020: The EUIs, a new inspiration in a dark context

Although mobility and exchange came to an almost complete stop during the COVID-19 pandemic, in the EHEA, inspiration and innovation emerged at the end of the previous decade. Building on the Bologna Process and Lisbon Strategy, the EUI was launched to develop “unprecedented levels of institutionalized cooperation, making it systemic, structural, and sustainable ([European Commission, 2020](#), p. 131)”. The idea was first mentioned on September 26, 2017, by French President Emmanuel Macron in his Sorbonne speech “Initiative for Europe.”

I believe we should create European Universities – a network of universities across Europe with programmes that have all their students study abroad and take classes in at least two languages. These European Universities will also be drivers of educational innovation and the quest for excellence. We should set for ourselves the goal of creating at least 20 of them by 2024. <https://international.blogs.ouest-france.fr/archive/2017/09/29/macron-sorbonne-verbatim-europe-18583.html> ([Macron, 2017](#))

French President Macron's initiative attracted much attention. Where initiatives in previous decades were unsuccessful, this one came at the right moment, building on 70 years of slow but gradual evolution in the Europeanization of higher education. The EUIs are a mixture of “top-down” and “bottom-up” alliances of universities, with funding channeled through the ERASMUS + program and the EU's Horizon research program. The EUIs aim to enable students to obtain a degree through studying in different European countries and strengthen collaboration in teaching and research, thereby increasing the international competitiveness of European universities ([Gunn, 2020](#)).

The European Commission aspires that 60 EUIs would be formed to cover more than 500 universities in 2024. These transnational alliances are to embody the future of higher education in the EU with the ambitious objective of formalizing the existence of European Universities by 2025.

Three calls have been published, and in 2024, it is the plan to have a last call to complete the target number of 60 EUIs. In the first call of 2020, 24 alliances with a total of 165

institutions of higher education from 26 member states were selected. In the second call, in 2022, this number increased to 44 alliances with 340 institutions from 312 countries, and in the 2023 call, resulted in 50 alliances with 430 institutions from 34 countries, with existing alliances stimulated to add new members. Besides the EU member states, also institutions from Iceland, Norway, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey are included, as well as 30 universities from the Ukraine, making the EUI aligned with the Bologna Process (Brooks & Rensimer, 2023; European Commission, n.d.)

Lambrechts, Cavallaro, and Lepori (2024) found that alliance formation is characterized by a combination of three factors: pre-existing networks of institutions, similarities in institutional characteristics and complementarity in institutional characteristics. They argue that the development of the EUI alliances reflect still, to a large extent, the hierarchy in European higher education, with a dominant presence of PhD-granting institutions. At the same time they acknowledge that in the later calls other types of institutions (universities of applied sciences and specialized institutions) have become more present. This might reflect the fact that research universities were already actively involved in networks such as Coimbra, UNICA, LERU and the Guild and use those networks as their basis, while other institutions did not have such networks and, in essence, the EUI can be considered as a starting point for European networking for them.

Craciun, Kaiser, Kottman, and van der Meulen (2023) identified a similar pattern with the first group of networks important in the first EUI call and new types more often in the two later calls.

Stensaker, Maassen and Rosso (2023, pp. 10–11) added three observations: “the process of alliance construction was in many cases rather fragmented and de-centralized in that networks and ties of individual institutional members were as important as the networks and ties existing at alliance level. (. . .) European University alliance formation processes also represent a possible ‘breaking up’ of existing networks and ties. (. . .) In a number of alliances with new partners, there are observable changes taking place in the thematic profile of the alliance.”

Kaniannen and Peola (2023, p. 13) argued 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.” This is possible, but as Stensaker, Maassen and Rosso (2023), Nijboer and Girotti (2023) and other scholars and policy advisors stated, it is too early to tell if the obstacles can be overcome and if the alliances have a more transformative and comprehensive future than previous attempts to create a European university. The alliances are still in the process of finding a balance between top-down initiative and direction and more bottom-up actions.

As for its geographical scope, it is important to mention that in the first two rounds only the EU 27, plus Iceland, Norway, Serbia, Turkey and the UK were involved. The Commission then decided to open the EUI to higher education institutions in the wider EHEA, what implies that as of then institutions from all 49 countries in the Bologna Process could join as Associate members.

At the same time, the dark clouds of the post-pandemic crisis remain in reality. The invasion of Ukraine and the resulting isolation from Russia has withdrawn from the Bologna Process and academic freedom and returned to the old authoritarian Soviet Union style of higher education. The geopolitical tensions with China, anti-Europeanization and internationalization sentiments and actions within the European Union itself, in particular, but not exclusively in Hungary, as well as the urgent need to address the SDGs of the United Nations, create a dangerous environment for responsible transformation in European higher education.

Lessons from the evolution of Europeanization and HE cooperation and alignment

In this article, we have provided a historical account of the Europeanization of higher education over the past 70 years, its main developments and initiatives, its challenges and obstacles, its position in the global higher education space, and its foundation for the current EU.

In the first period, 1950–1960, there were already some efforts towards the creation of a European University. However, the lack of a clear European higher education space and different positions by the dominant European countries, in particular France and Germany, were key obstacles. The humanities-focused European University Institute of 1972 in Florence was its main result.

The period 1972–1985 was a period of stagnation, also because of the global economic crisis of the 1970s. Notwithstanding, it prepared the ground for the flagship program ERASMUS in 1987. That programs like ERASMUS were possible without an educational policy for the EC is remarkable. Education did not fall under its mandate until the Maastricht Treaty of 1992. This implied that actions had to be taken under other mandates and outsourced. It resulted in the expansion and strengthening of the European programs for education and research.

In the 1980s, the focus was firmly on Europeanization, with limited focus on the rest of the world. This would change in the next decade due to the end of the Cold War and a new era of globalization, demanding more competition and cooperation.

The Bologna Process, started in 1999, was a pivotal development in further European cooperation and exchange in the following decade, broader than the European Union, and with a serious impact in the rest of the world, especially Africa, Asia and Latin America. The first indications of fatigue and new challenges also emerged. In the following decade, they affected the emerging digital revolution, growing inequalities in society and related crises, the rise in populist ideologies, the slow recovery of the economic recession and financial crisis of 2008–2012, a cultural backlash and regional tensions, in particular Brexit. As mentioned, they express concerns about attacking the traditional values underlying the EHEA: academic freedom, institutional autonomy, student participation in higher education governance and public responsibility for higher education.

Although mobility and exchange came to an almost stopped during the COVID-19 pandemic, in the EHEA, inspiration and innovation emerged at the end of the decade. The EU is the most apparent manifestation of that optimism. Although it is still too early to predict its long-term sustainability and impact, obstacles and challenges are clear. The early years have seen a positive response and action from the higher education community, at first primarily from the PhD-granting universities but in the later calls also from universities of applied sciences and specialized institutions.

In the concluding section, we address the two main questions from our introduction. What are the key manifestations and challenges of 70 years of European higher education cooperation and alignment? What lessons can be learned from the European alignment and cooperation process for higher education elsewhere? We end with some recommendations for these regions on how to address the opportunities and challenges for further cooperation and alignment.

Key manifestations and challenges of 70 years European higher education cooperation and alignment

Academic cooperation and alignment in Europe have gone through an evolutionary process of over 70 years, delayed in specific periods due to political factors, for instance, not exclusively Thatcher's resistance to an active role of the EU in education and Brexit. Nevertheless, it was also sped up by other political actions and initiatives, for instance, the fall of the Iron Curtain, the Sorbonne declaration for the Bologna Process and Macron's Sorbonne Speech for the EU.

Economic factors have been decisive, such as the need for innovation in the global knowledge society and economic competition globally. Meanwhile, the emergence of European citizenship, culture and region has been driving the creation of the European Higher Education and Research Areas.

From the start of the Bologna Process in 2000, the success of Europe in the development of these areas has been the result of a mix of top-down and bottom-up policies, with the active involvement of a diversity of key stakeholders: universities and their associations, students and their associations, faculty, the private sector and the European Commission in particular.

On the other hand, in this evolution, national governments and their legislations have been more obstacles and challenges than drivers. [Nijboer and Girotti \(2023, p. 348\)](#) stated, “The EU was calling on European universities to implement all the internationalisation actions – previously fragmented in small short-term projects – in one single, long-term Alliance.” However, the aims and objectives of the European programs have changed in that evolutionary process from an emphasis on exchange and cooperation in the 1970s and 1980s towards transforming and shaping the EHEA and ERA in the past two decades, with the EU as the culmination of its Europeanization and internationalization strategy.

At the same time, the focus of the UK on marketization and competitiveness in higher education has, over the past decades, also become an important factor on the European continent, challenging its traditional values of cooperation and exchange. Some key takeaways from the evolutionary process of the EHEA and Era are.

- (1) The education policy emerged as part of the social and cultural policy to facilitate one united identity. The strive toward a European identity and the value of European civilization were the foundations for its development. They have been necessary drivers in strengthening the image of Europe as a Europe of citizens and improving the knowledge of its cultures and languages. Europe’s diversity, multiculturalism and multilingualism have become more dominant than the desires for homogenization in its educational policies. In other words: “The belief that university education contains much more than just training for the practice of a profession. . . . After 30 years of Europe’s existence, the public thinks studying other peoples’ languages, culture, religion, and scientific achievements is relevant to every one of us and a necessary part of university education, of common interest to the peoples of Europe (Interview with Roger Dillemans, as cited in [Corbett, 2005, p. 137](#))”. That belief has resulted in an ongoing extension of the ERASMUS + program without opposition in the European Parliament and beyond and has also contributed to the support for the EU.
- (2) The Research Framework and Horizon programs have become a fundamental source for R&D and, like ERASMUS+, have expanded without opposition. The intense pressure from the academic community in the UK on its government to continue participation in Horizon, resulting after two years of negotiations in an agreement in 2023, illustrates its importance and relevance.
- (3) Competition and cooperation have been pivotal drivers for the R&D and education programs and the creation of the European Higher Education and Research Areas. They should not be seen as conflicting drivers but as strengthening each other. In the 1980s, cooperation focused on Europeanization became an integral part of the EU policy towards the outside world and was also a critical dimension of the Bologna Process. This balanced approach is a central feature of the European approach to R&D and education.

At the same time, the challenges of this approach cannot be ignored. Brexit did not result in a further decline in European integration, and COVID-19 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine even seemed to have strengthened the support for European integration. However, internal conflicts, such as between Hungary and Poland with the European Commission, are concerns, as are the discussions about widening the EU with countries like Albania, Georgia, Moldavia, Serbia and Ukraine.

These tensions also impact education and R&D, as manifested in the conflict between the EC and Hungary, resulting in a halt on participation from that country in its programs. Another challenge is the national regulations and schemes undermining the aspirations of the European Higher Education and Research Areas and the EUI.

As mentioned, there is still inequality in cooperation between the different regions of Europe –although the EC has created mechanisms for more even participation, such as in the EUI alliances –which only time can solve. Last but not least, increasing geopolitical tensions may challenge cooperation with other regions worldwide, particularly, but not exclusively, China and Russia.

Lessons to be learned from the European alignment and cooperation process for higher education elsewhere

Notwithstanding these challenges, over the past 70 years, substantive cooperation and alignment in European higher education and research has been accomplished and has inspired other regions in the world, most notably The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its [ASEAN University Network](#) and ASEAN+3 Universities Network, the first founded in 1995 as a vital mechanism for the build-up of an active ASEAN community in higher education. It includes 30 universities from the region, and the second adds 21 partner institutions from China, Japan, and Korea (<https://www.aunsec.org>). It also can be seen to some extent in the creation in 2017 of the [Asian Universities Alliance \(AUA\)](#), an alliance of 15 universities in 14 different countries, with its secretariat at Tsinghua University, Beijing, China (<http://www.asianuniversities.org/>). In Latin America, university alliances are mostly the initiative of institutions, with little support from national and/or regional entities and focus more on small numbers of exchanges of students and staff. Examples are the [Asociación de Universidades Grupo Montevideo \(AUGM\)](#), (<http://grupomontevideo.org/site/>) and the [Unión de Universidades de América Latina y el Caribe \(UDUALC\)](#), (<https://udualc.org/>). In Africa, similar subregional initiatives are merging, but like in Latin America, they are still in a limited and initial stage.

Simple copying of the European policies and approaches is not possible, as contexts differ, but learning from its opportunities and challenges is relevant for a similar process.

Some key lessons from the European process and related recommendations for other regions are.

- (1) It takes time to develop such a process, and a step-by-step approach is necessary to keep everybody on board and to move forward. This applies to the whole period of 70 years but also to each new action, including the calls for EUI alliances, which allowed for a learning experience for new alliance proposals.
- (2) It requires a combination of top-down and bottom-up approach. Top-down, as decisions have to be made to initiate and steer the process; bottom-up, as it requires commitment from stakeholders at all levels to succeed.
- (3) It requires subtle alignment between regional coordination and national interests.
- (4) It asks for the active involvement of all stakeholders: the regional authority, national governments, institutional representative bodies, academics, administrators, students, and external partners.

- (5) Financial support is critical to success, but keep the bureaucracy around such support to a minimum and be aware of long-term sustainability needs, beyond short-term support.
- (6) Learn from the challenges and opportunities of the European experience without simply copying and placing it in the specific context of your region and its higher education system and culture.
- (7) Create a balance between more excellence and more inclusion in higher education.
- (8) Create a common/shared identity, as this was an essential driver for creating alignment between the various stakeholders in pushing the agenda forward.
- (9) Set up practical goals to initiate the process and then move forward. Examples include aligning national curricula, recognizing credits and transfers, and facilitating international faculty and student exchanges. These steps have been necessary in forstering academic cooperation and hamonizing the higher education structure.

Note

1. For a detailed account of negotiations see Anne Corbett's 2005 book *Universities and the Europe of Knowledge*.

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