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The European Universities Initiative and European spatial imaginaries

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ABSTRACT

The European Universities Initiative (EUI), launched in 2019, fosters the development of networks of universities across Europe with the aim of enabling students to obtain a degree by combining studies in several countries and strengthening collaboration in both teaching and research, and by extension, the international competitiveness of European universities. As well as constituting one of the European Commission's most significant policies with respect to higher education, over recent years, the initiative also provides a useful lens to explore how European higher education is understood by a range of social actors. Indeed, drawing on relevant policy documents and interviews with key policy actors, this article examines what broader messages about the European higher education space (actual and ideal) are conveyed by public discussions about EUI networks. The analysis reveals significantly different perspectives about: the geographical boundaries of the European higher education space; the extent to which European higher education should be inclusive and/or aim to promote excellence; whether higher education constitutes a vehicle for further Europeanisation; and the role of nation-states in a changing Europe.

Introduction

The European Universities Initiative (EUI) is considered to be one of the European Commission's flagship programmes with respect to higher education (HE). It has sought to develop 'bottom-up' alliances of universities with the aim of enabling students to obtain a degree by combining studies in several European countries, and contributing to the international competitiveness of European universities by strengthening collaboration in both teaching and research (Gunn 2020). The idea was first mooted in a speech by the French president, Emmanuel Macron, in 2017 (Macron 2017) and, to date, 44 EUI alliances (commonly referred to as EUIs) have been launched, involving 340 higher education institutions (HEIs) from 31 European countries. Because of the funding – through the Erasmus + mobility scheme as well as the European Union's (EU) Horizon research programme – participating institutions have had to be part of the Erasmus + programme (at the time of the first two calls for EUIs, this was the 27 EU countries plus Iceland, Norway, Serbia, Turkey and the UK). This changed in the call for EUIs issued in November 2021 when the scheme was opened up to HEIs located in any of the 49 countries of the European Higher Education Area[1] (EHEA) –

although non-EU HEIs are not be able to receive any funding from the European Commission. The EUIs form a key part of the recently-published *European Strategy for Universities* (European Commission 2022). Indeed, the European Commission hopes that, by the middle of 2024, there will be at least 60 such alliances, covering more than 500 universities. In the strategy, to facilitate the work of the EUIs, member states have been encouraged to develop a 'European degree' and introduce appropriate legal statutes (ibid.).

The EUIs are clearly an important policy initiative in their own right, which may shape the future of higher education on the continent. They also, however, provide a useful lens to explore how European higher education is understood by a range of social actors. It is this latter point that informs this article; our aim is to examine what broader messages about the European higher education space (actual and ideal) are conveyed by public discussions about EUIs.

The article proceeds as follows: we first give a necessarily brief summary of some key developments in European higher education over recent decades – considering the extent to which they have led to the convergence of previously-distinct national systems of higher education – and introduce the concept of 'spatial imaginaries', which provides the theoretical framework for our analysis. We then outline the research methods we used, before going on to outline four key dimensions of the spatial imaginaries deployed by policy actors – over which there was considerable contestation. We then consider the implications of these findings for European higher education policy and understandings of the European higher education space more generally.

Background

The emergence of a European higher education system?

In some ways, the European Universities Initiative is intimately related to earlier initiatives that have sought to bring European higher education systems closer together, not least the Bologna Process, which began with the signing of the Paris Declaration in 1999. Signatories agreed to: adopt a system of easily readable and comparable degrees (based on two main degree cycles); implement a system of European learning credits; support the mobility of students and staff; promote European co-operation in quality assurance; and encourage a European dimension in higher education (through curriculum development and inter-institutional co-operation) (Soltys 2015). Various scholars have argued that the Bologna reforms, and those associated with the European Higher Education Area (announced in 2010 by those involved in the Bologna Process), have led to a significant degree of homogenisation – of structures, principles and broader understandings of the purpose of higher education – across the continent, through the substantive reforms themselves, and also the values that underpin them (Voegtle, Knill, and Dobbins 2011). Indeed, some scholars have argued that the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area constitute the rolling out of an 'Anglo-American' model of higher education across Europe. Writing over a decade ago, Slaughter and Cantwell (2012) argued that the European Union has been pursuing a project of embedding competition within national higher education initiatives, and moving quickly towards 'academic capitalism'. They maintained that although there remain some key differences between European higher education and that in the US – not least that relatively few European nations have introduced high tuition fees, and there is little salary differential by academic field – the 'moves to the market' in Europe have still been substantial, and have served to increase the homogeneity of national higher education systems. More recently, other scholars have pointed, not only to the increasing convergence of national higher education systems as a result of the Bologna Process but also to a shift in values. Kwiek (2018), for example, has contended that students in Poland, as in many other 'high participation' HE systems, are increasingly viewed by the state (and the private sector) as 'clients' and 'consumers'. Similarly, various critical scholars have asserted that the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area have directly undermined a key tenet of European higher education, that of academic autonomy – through both the shift to

transnational policymaking led by the European Commission and the institution of corporate management within higher education institutions across Europe (e.g., Moutsios 2013; Teelken 2012). Such scholars cite, for example, the emphasis in the Bologna Process on introducing 'employability' within the curriculum, standardisation of degree length, as well as more top-down managerial practices within institutions. In this way, they suggest, significant differences between both nations and universities are being eroded.

An alternative perspective is, however, advanced by other researchers. For example, focussing on understandings of 'employability' specifically, Sin and Neave (2016) maintain that, while the concept is central to the Bologna reforms, it is interpreted differently by different stakeholders – particularly with respect to whether it is viewed as the responsibility of individuals (as an Americanised model of HE might suggest), or of states and higher education institutions. As part of their analysis, they show how the European Students Union (ESU), in particular, contested what it perceived to be the individualisation of the term.

Moreover, while not disputing the quite significant changes wrought by the Bologna Process in, for example, the structure of degree programmes across Europe and the increasing emphasis on developing skills for the workplace (Moutsios 2013; Sin and Neave 2016), others have shown that considerable national variation endures (Capano and Piattoni 2011). Indeed, in their analysis of central and eastern Europe, Dakowska and Harmsen (2015) argue that the Bologna reforms have been mediated by a variety of domestic factors within individual nation-states – pointing to the significant influence of structures (i.e., national policy-making processes), norms (such as the particular university model that has been dominant, historically, within nation-states) and actors (including both individual policy entrepreneurs and international organisations). Furthermore, implementation has been hindered within post-socialist nations, Soltys (2015) suggests, because of the relatively weak power of civic actors and statist legacies. In other cases, nations have been keen to champion parts of the Bologna Process that articulated well with domestic priorities, but much more reticent in introducing others (Dakowska 2015; Musselin 2009).

Spatial imaginaries

In this article, we draw on the concept of 'spatial imaginaries' to explore the perspectives of the various actors involved in both policymaking and policy implementation with respect to EUIs. It provides a useful tool to illuminate both specific perspectives on EUIs and broader understandings of the European higher education space. Spatial imaginaries are socially held stories that constitute particular ways of talking about places and spaces (Watkins 2015) or, in Wetzstein's (2013, 71–72) terms, 'powerful semiotic systems that guide collective imagination and calculation about the world'. Such imaginaries can operate at a variety of scales (from the local to the regional, national, supranational and global) and are typically collective in nature – i.e., shared by groups rather than just held by individuals (Watkins 2015). Spatial imaginaries are underpinned by a relational understanding of place (Massey 1994), in which places are understood not as fixed and finished but as constantly being performed, being made and remade on a daily basis (Cresswell 2004). Thus, such imaginaries are not reflections of fixed geographical entities but specific 'inter-relations of different cultural, economic, social and political processes' (Donnelly, Gamsu, and Whewell 2020, 92). Spatial imaginaries have various material effects. Indeed, in his seminal work on the role of imagination, Appadurai (1996) has shown how imaginaries often provide the basis for human action and the resources for identity formation.

These ideas have been applied to various studies of Europe, recognising that we cannot assume that 'Europe' has a pre-existent identity (Morgan 2008). Delany and Rumford (2005) have drawn our attention to the impact of political change on spatial imaginaries, noting that in a Europe where governance no longer coincides with national borders, and people are no longer constrained by territory, space can no longer be taken for granted. Scholars have shown how understandings of Europe are continually made and remade through myriad practices and narratives, similar to those

involved in nation-building and nationalism (e.g., Kohlrausch and Trischler 2014; Lacroix and Nicolaïdis 2010). Moreover, they have brought into sharp relief differences in spatial perspective, noting that the European Union is only one way of conceptualising Europe, with the borders between different conceptualisations often fuzzy (Ruppert and Scheel 2021).

Spatial imaginaries have also provided an important conceptual frame for those examining educational processes. For example, Ozga's (2012) work on what she calls the 'European education policy space' is attentive to the ways in which policy actors shape imaginaries of Europe through 'the redesign of institutions, the organisation of networks and the flow of comparative knowledge and data', having the effect, she maintains, of taking 'the European into the national and vice versa' (440). With respect to *higher* education, scholars have shown how spatial imaginaries have animated international student mobility, particularly. Indeed, Ginnerskow-Dahlberg (2021) argues that students from Eastern Europe were attracted to Denmark, at least in part, because of the way they imagined the nation as a place of abundant opportunities. Moreover, she contends that a binary was evident within their spatial imaginaries, suggesting that 'they grew up with a profound sense of living in countries with a peripheral status vis-à-vis Western Europe and that a powerful narrative of the West, as the epicentre of progress, civilisation and culture, was important in leading them to Denmark' (10).

The current research builds on this body of work by examining the spatial imaginaries held by *supranational* policy actors – i.e., regional policy-making bodies, such as the European Commission, and organisations that represent particular stakeholders across Europe, such as the European Students Union and associations of particular types of HEIs. We also include a small number of actors who represent individual higher education institutions within EUIs. Understanding these perspectives is important, not only for academic debates about the nature of the European higher education space and broader processes of Europeanisation[2], but also because historically, European policy-making with respect to higher education has tended to be sensitive to the views of a relatively broad group of stakeholders (Batory and Lindstrom 2011; Vukasovic 2017).

Methods

The paper draws on an analysis of relevant policy documents and a series of interviews with various policy actors involved in the EUIs in some capacity.[3] First, with respect to the document analysis, a search was conducted of all organisations that had published publicly-available policies, position papers, press releases or other relevant documents on the EUIs from 2017 (when the idea was first raised) until June 2021. A total of 47 such documents were identified, published by the organisations and individuals listed in Table 1. (A full list of all the documents is provided in the Supplemental Material. As is evident from Table 1, the organisations included key policy-making bodies, such as the European Commission and Council of the European Union; influential

Table 1. List of organisations and individuals that published the analysed documents.

Academic Co-operation Association
Accreditation Council for Entrepreneurial and Engaged Universities
Council of the European Union
European Association of Institutions in Higher Education
European Campus of City Universities
European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education
European Commission
European Students Union
European University Association
Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities (The Guild)
League of European Research Universities
President Macron
The Coimbra Group

representative organisations, such as the European Students Union and the European University Association (EUA), as well as networks of European universities (that existed prior to the EUIs), such as The Coimbra Group and the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE). A position paper from one EUI, the European Campus of City Universities, was also included.

In the second stage of data collection, 12 policy actors were identified for interview. Eight of these were representatives of individual EUIs (that we have chosen not to name to preserve anonymity), although this group included one person who was also a key figure in one of the European university networks that preceded the EUIs (The Coimbra Group). Four of these interviewees were located in universities in France, and one in each of Germany, the Netherlands, Spain and the UK. The additional four interviewees were from representative organisations: the EUA (representing universities in general), the ESU (representing students), The Guild (representing research intensive universities) and EURASHE (representing universities of applied sciences and university colleges). We approached the European Commission but no relevant employees were available to speak to us. Nevertheless, some interviewees reported conversations and other interactions that they had had with the European Commission, which reveal something of its views; we draw on such data, where relevant, in the discussion below. All interviews were conducted in English by the two authors over Microsoft Teams, recorded, and automatic transcripts generated. They lasted about an hour on average; interviewees were asked a variety of questions about their experience of and views about EUIs to date, and their perspectives on European higher education more generally. In addition, those from representative organisations were asked about the extent to which they had been involved in the policy-making process through, for example, feeding into consultations, and the degree to which they felt their voices had been heard.

Documents and interview transcripts were uploaded to NVivo (qualitative data software) for analysis. Both sources were analysed using deductive and inductive approaches. A thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2021) was undertaken, comprised of data familiarisation (through reading the transcripts); code generation (based on extant literature, the project's research questions and previously unanticipated issues arising from the data); identification and review of potential themes; definition and specification of themes; and writing up of the themes, with reference to relevant data. The various themes that we discuss below – relating to different aspects of spatial imaginaries – were informed by both the documents and interviews. Nevertheless, we tend to draw more frequently on data from the interviews to illustrate our arguments because relevant points were often made more explicitly and clearly in the interviews than in the documents.

Understandings of the European higher education space

EUIs were considered by our interviewees, and in the various policy documents, as an important initiative in their own right – typically discussed as the European Commission's 'flagship' policy with respect to higher education. Indeed, the ESU representative commented: 'It's very important because it gave momentum to the whole discussion about higher education relevance in today's society'. As noted above, the EUIs also provide a useful lens through which to examine how European higher education is understood in more general terms, and to assess the nature of the 'spatial imaginaries' held by key policy actors. In this section, we explore some of these understandings and imaginaries, noting that, although there was general enthusiasm for the EUIs, there was also a relatively high level of contestation about their purpose, nature and reach. These reveal, we suggest, a range of broader perspectives about higher education in Europe, which differ quite significantly by policy actor in relation to: the geographical boundaries of the European higher education space; the extent to which European higher education should be inclusive and/or aim to promote excellence; whether higher education constitutes a vehicle for further Europeanisation; and the role of nation-states in a changing Europe.

Geographical boundaries of the European higher education space

Many of the documents engage either implicitly or explicitly with ideas about where the boundaries of the European higher education space should be drawn – this can be seen as constituting a key difference in the spatial imaginaries of policy actors. As we noted above, initially, the EUIs were open to only those countries involved in the Erasmus + programme. The first two rounds of EUIs thus included only the EU 27, plus Iceland, Norway, Serbia, Turkey and the UK. However, over the course of our period of data collection, there was considerable discussion about whether these geographical boundaries should be revised, following the European Commission's suggestion that all countries involved in the Bologna Process could be allowed to join. The third call for EUIs (published in November 2021) allowed HEIs located in any of the 49 EHEA countries to apply to be part of an EUI as an associated partner (although they would not receive any funding). However, the discussion that preceded the third EUI call, involving many stakeholders, remains instructive because of what it reveals about wider views about where boundaries should be drawn, and how these articulate with broader political positions.

First, there was some debate about the principle of expansion in general. It was noted by several of our interviewees (and in several of the policy documents) that the European Commission was keen to expand the scheme so that more European nations could be involved. An interviewee from a representative organisation, who had been closely involved in consultations about the EUIs, believed that this was driven by explicitly political motivations, with the Commission assuming that if more smaller EU nations were involved, any opposition to the policy from EU member states would be minimised. The UK-based interviewee who was closely involved in the running of one of the EUIs made similar comments. He noted various different national positions in relation to the question of expansion and increasing the involvement of small EU nations – asserting that the enthusiasm for expansion on the part of France and Germany contrasted quite markedly with the perspectives of colleagues from the UK and the Netherlands:

> [German HEI in this particular EUI] and [French HEI] are very keen on expansion come what may because they see this as the direction that the Commission is going and they're fully bought into all aspects of this, whereas certainly [Dutch HEI] and ourselves are, we should only do this if it makes sense for this alliance and not just because the Commission wants to expand the proportion of European universities involved from 5 per cent to 10 per cent without spending any more money, you know … . There is a tension there. That's not a bad [thing]. That's a legitimate tension to have. It's just that I'm not sure we know how to resolve that tension.

Such perspectives appear to mirror broader perspectives on the European project as a whole, which we return to below.

Second, a group of policy actors called for possible EUI membership to be extended to all 49 countries involved in the EHEA (often referred to as the 'Bologna' countries) including Russia in the east and Turkey in the south. This was emphasised particularly by the ESU and the EUA. The following quotations are illustrative:

> We strongly believe in a need of accessible cooperation of all EHEA countries, therefore any successful initiative in HE must be open to all country members of the EHEA. (ESU 2018, para. 8)

> Of course, we are in favour of giving the possibility to those that would wish [to join an EUI], and that's why we have said from the start, it would be good to be able to open it to Bologna countries. (EUA interviewee)

In such accounts, the EUI is seen as useful mechanism for helping to reinforce many of the principles of the Bologna Process, such as the mutual recognition of qualifications and promotion of student mobility. Moreover, expanding the geographical reach, beyond European Union nations, to the larger group of Bologna signatories, is seen as a means of avoiding what some interviewees viewed as a potential 'two-tier' higher education space within the EHEA. Implicit in such accounts is that the key geographical boundary, with respect to European higher education, is that which has been established through the Bologna reforms, which is clearly significantly larger than the European Union.

From this perspective, EUIs are most useful if they help to reinforce this boundary, and potentially problematic if they introduce greater division and diversity within this particular space.

A third group of policy actors believed that EUIs should be open to all universities, wherever they are located in the world. This was evident in the policy documents from the Academic Cooperation Association (ACA) (n.d.) – which called for participation by 'students from all over the world' (2) and the European Campus of City Universities (2021) – which argued that the roll-out of the European Universities Initiative should be 'open and accessible to international partners beyond Erasmus + Programme countries' ('Global leadership' section). It was also articulated particularly clearly by the interviewee from The Guild, representing research intensive universities in Europe. She commented, 'our members were very keen … . that the quality should be more important than the geographic focus of these networks'. Implicit in this quotation is the view that there is nothing inherently valuable in a European higher education space *per se*. Instead, its value lies in its ability to create critical mass and effective partnerships, and promote excellence. If this can be done better by involving universities from other parts of the world, then this should be the direction policy takes. From this perspective, geographical boundaries are determined in terms of where excellence can be found (see also section below), or are largely unnecessary if the aim is to forge alliances with the best institutions in the world.

The inclusivity of the European higher education space

To some extent, the discussion above about the boundaries of the European higher education space are influenced by views about whether this should be a space devoted primarily to fostering excellence in teaching and research, or whether other priorities should take precedence. Such debates were addressed explicitly in some of the interviews and policy documents. Indeed, two broad positions can be identified: one that holds that inclusivity (in terms of including institutions with different profiles and students from different backgrounds) is an important principle that should underpin European higher education, and a second that asserts that a commitment to achieving excellence is more important and that it is this that should drive policy developments, even if it means adopting more expansive geographical boundaries (as discussed above). Again, these point to quite considerable differences in the spatial imaginaries of policy actors.

The first position was advocated explicitly by three significant representative organisations – the ESU, EUA and EURASHE – and also the Accreditation Council for Entrepreneurial and Engaged Universities (ACEEU) (e.g., ACEEU n.d.; ESU 2018; EURASHE 2019). Concerns were expressed about the EUIs potentially reinforcing inequalities between both institutions and groups of students. This is made clear in the documents produced by EURASHE, which represents universities of applied science and institutes of higher education (e.g., EURASHE 2019). Such misgivings were also communicated clearly in the interview with a representative of this organisation. He explained that many of its members had found it hard to establish connections with 'more prestigious' universities, to enable them to apply to become EUIs – because of what he claimed were assumptions that the institutions he represented would not be able to make very significant contributions to alliances. To some extent he believed this was down to prejudice but he also noted that there were various practical impediments, too – such as the fact that some EURASHE members do not run full undergraduate or postgraduate degrees, which makes it harder for them to participate in student mobility programmes. Moreover, many members did not have the time, money or pre-existing networks of universities to facilitate putting together an application to become an EUI. He went on to explain that, to help address some of these problems, EURASHE had organised 'matchmaking' workshops, which aimed to help member institutions find suitable partners. Although he believed this had had a significant impact and had helped member institutions achieve considerable success in the second round of EUIs, he noted that many were still sceptical about the initiative and were keen to wait until they saw how the programme was working out in practice before they made any commitment to join.

Other actors were also concerned, to some extent, that EUIs may reinforce institutional differentiation within Europe, promoting the 'two-tier' system mentioned above, even within the EU. This was articulated clearly by the EUA interviewee:

> So there is also this notion of creating some type of a two-tier system … . And that is much more problematic because there is not necessarily … I mean we think as well that through collaboration you … can enhance your mission and improve your activities. But it doesn't mean that only those that are in these alliances are the top of the Ivy League or something and the others are not. And that is where we are a little bit at the moment. This is a difficult discussion …

Concerns about inclusivity with respect to students, as well as institutions, were raised by the ESU. This is a key focus of the various position papers it published in the early stage of the initiative, in 2018–19 (e.g., ESU 2018). In these, it calls for widening participation and the social dimension of higher education to be foregrounded within the EUIs, and expresses concern that higher education institutions serving more deprived student communities will find it harder to be involved in EUIs because of the expected prominence of physical mobility. Although some interviewees from these organisations remarked that the composition of the EUIs from the first two rounds was notably more diverse than they had anticipated, a key theme that underpinned their narratives was the importance of inclusivity as a principle that should underpin European higher education.

The second, and contrasting, position was taken by, amongst others, The Guild. The interviewee from this organisation questioned explicitly whether the EUIs were about promoting excellence or inclusivity – indicating that she saw the two as in tension:

> It [EUI] really has the capacity to build the excellence of European universities as a whole, and I think that was kind of the most tricky part because there was a big discussion – there is still discussion I would say – about this kind of inclusiveness versus excellence. Can we have it both? And what does it mean for the initiative?

For her (and presumably the universities The Guild represents), the initiative should be about excellence. Indeed, this belief underpinned The Guild's position on various questions about the future of the EUI programme. It was, for example, in favour of geographical expansion, as discussed above, as this would – in its view – enable its members to collaborate more fully with key partners outside Europe, to strengthen their research profile in particular. In addition, The Guild was opposed to the expansion of the number of constituent members of each EUI (which was being discussed by the European Commission at the time of the interview, and which was subsequently promoted in the November 2021 call) on the grounds that this would be likely to compromise the quality of work each EUI was doing. She asserted that each EUI had chosen their members carefully, and that to force them to take on new partners would disrupt the progress they were making (similar concerns are outlined in a policy paper from the League of European Research Universities (LERU), which notes that: 'Getting to know and start working with new partners at this stage, risks to make redundant all, or a large part of the effort put in by the alliances and their partner universities so far' (2021, 'Funding' section)). As argued above, implicit in the narratives of The Guild is the view that there is nothing particularly distinctive about the European higher education space *per se*, and that European higher education initiatives should prioritise promoting excellence rather than inclusion. Again, we see here very different European spatial imaginaries being played out.

Higher education as vehicle for Europeanisation and European integration

Contestation – with respect to the nature of spatial imaginaries – is also evident in the extent to which the policy documents and our interviewees viewed the EUIs as a vehicle for bringing about further Europeanisation and a deeper form of European integration. While this appeared to be a key focus for some, others were much less willing to embrace this agenda and foregrounded other aims instead.

Various policy documents place significant emphasis on the EUIs as a means of promoting 'European values' and a 'European identity'. For example, the policy paper from the European

Campus of City Universities states: 'With their … key European values of academic freedom, openness and scientific integrity, European Universities are in a perfect position to drive sustainable impact on the Higher Education sector at large in Europe and the world' (2021, 'Global leadership' section). One of the clearest articulations of the perceived role of the EUIs in furthering the 'European political project' was given by the ESU interviewee. He claimed that one of their key strengths was helping to advance processes of European integration, in practical terms, as well as reinstating integration as a key topic of discussion across Europe:

> The initiative will also contribute to more integration … . So we see it as a kind of a next step [after the Bologna Process] and an initiative that also is strengthening this bigger picture of integrating the European higher education area.

Specifically, he believed that the EUIs were bringing about much closer integration than had ever been achieved before in European higher education, through the amalgamation of high-level management functions across participating universities. This contrasted, he contended, with previous internationalisation initiatives, that had affected only lower levels of higher education institutions. Moreover, he asserted that the structure of the EUIs had enabled students' unions from different European countries to talk to one another and collaborate in new ways; previously, their main means of interaction had been through the ESU itself: 'it's one of the first occasions for the students' unions from the different universities to actually network with their peers abroad'. It is interesting to note, however, that his geographical frame of reference is the European Higher Education Area rather than the EU – evident in his view that the EUIs provide an important means of continuing the work that was started by the Bologna Process:

> We are aiming to use the initiative [the EUIs] as a breakthrough mechanism to overcome the barriers [faced by the] Bologna [Process]. The Bologna commitments would be strengthened … .

Somewhat similar comments were made by the interviewee from the Coimbra Group, who was also involved in the running of an EUI. He argued that the policy initiative provided an important opportunity to think through not only what universities of the future should look like, but also the future direction of higher education policy in Europe – including whether further integration should be pursued. Like the ESU interviewee, he believed that the EUI model had facilitated a closer type of integration between universities than had occurred in the past – largely because of the higher level of trust between institutions that had been engendered through such a collaborative means of working.

However, a rather different perspective was given by other interviewees. A representative of another EUI, based in the UK, spoke of how different national partners, even within the same EUI, had contrasting visions of the purpose of the initiative and where it will lead to.

> Because it's a much bigger thing in Germany and France than virtually any other European [country]. They're the two most engaged countries, I think … . Frankly, I have been surprised by this. I suspected the French universities were going to take it very seriously because they attribute it to Macron. I've been slightly surprised how seriously the German universities have taken it. And given that the German system is pretty well resourced and they've got their excellence initiatives and all that sort of stuff, and [the EUI grant] is a pot of resource allocated is not quite peanuts but it's not a huge amount of money, but the German universities really … the German sector has taken it really seriously. … . I'm spending quite a bit of my time on it, but I suppose the typical UK or English scepticism about these things, particularly some of the more high-flown visionary stuff means that we take a much more, if not cautious then pragmatic approach to it. Similarly, [with] the Dutch.

This interviewee claimed that while some partners believed that the EUI would lead to further European integration, this was not a view that he – nor some of his counterparts from other nations – necessarily shared. This difference in perspective was also noted by the Coimbra Group representative, with respect to discussions about accreditation of qualifications. He explained that while the French minister of education was willing to support what was being called the 'European approach' – i.e., that the qualifications of EUI students would need to be accredited only by a

designated lead partner in each HEI – ministries of education in other nations had been opposed to this because of fear of losing their own competence in higher education matters.

The role of nation-states within European higher education

A final theme that emerges strongly from the documents and interviews – and which characterises the various spatial imaginaries – is the role of the nation-state in European higher education initiatives. Here, however, there is more agreement between interviewees and across the policy documents, alongside a recognition that those outside this specific policy community – and particularly leaders of nation-states themselves – may have differing views. In general, there is a call for greater involvement in EUIs by national governments with respect to the removal of national-level regulations and the funding of the initiative. In relation to the former, several interviewees identified the different regulatory frameworks operating across Europe as a significant obstacle to achieving the type of student mobility envisaged as a key part of the EUI programme – in which students are able to study for constituent parts of their degree in different universities within the same EUI. The following quotations are illustrative:

> The national regulations, I think that was really something that they became conscious of very quickly, that they will not be able to deliver on some of their objectives if they don't try to resolve some of the barriers and I think there's been a lot of pressure from the Commission on the Member States to really do something because otherwise it's very difficult for the alliances to achieve anything. (The Guild interviewee)

> A crucial role for Member States to play in the success story of the European University Initiative is the removal of barriers that hamper cross-border collaboration, joint degrees and the setup of legal entities. LERU advocates that Member States use the decision on the full rollout to pro-actively engage with their universities and the European Commission, to identify and break down these barriers. If Member States do not play their part, the European Commission should take legal action, aiming at eliminating national obstacles. (LERU 2021, 'Barriers' section)

With respect to funding, many of the documents – published after the first round of EUIs had started work (and thus when participants had become aware of the actual costs they were likely to incur) – call for national contributions, alongside the grants from the European Commission, to ensure the sustainability of the initiative. This excerpt is typical:

> … increased financial support is absolutely needed to reinforce the existing alliances. This funding should not only come from the European Commission but also from all Member States. Currently, the alliances are very much underfunded and the participating universities that do not get any additional national funding, are even more so, creating an imbalance between partners in one alliance. (LERU 2021, 'Funding' section)

Similar sentiments were articulated in the interviews with the representative of the Coimbra Group and the ESU.

Significant differences in the involvement of national governments were also remarked on frequently in the interviews. The Coimbra Group interviewee, for example, contrasted the approach of France and Germany, that had provided substantial funding to their HEIs involved in EUIs, with many other countries, that had not. He believed that this could lead to significant inequalities within individual EUIs. Interviewees held that differences in both the funding offered by nation-states and levels of interest in the programme were affected by a range of factors including the country's commitment to the 'European political project' (see above) and also more prosaic issues such as whether a high proportion of their students and/or institutions were involved in an EUI. The ESU interviewee, for example, noted that Malta was particularly enthusiastic about the scheme because its sole university (and thus all its students) were involved. This interviewee also believed that some governments were reluctant to offer any financial support to the EUIs because they saw them as a means of the European Commission over-stretching its remit, and interfering too much in what should be a domestic competence.

Only one policy actor expressed any concern themselves at national governments becoming more involved in EUIs: the ACEEU speculated on '[The] use of EUIs for national reforms', suggesting that nation-states may use the EUIs to push through their own goals, rather than those of European bodies (ACEEU n.d.). Although this view reflects a key argument in the literature, discussed above (e.g., Dakowska and Harmsen 2015), it was not widely reflected in our dataset.

Conclusions

Integration and homogenisation?

In some respects, the data we have reported above offer support to those scholars who have argued that the distinctiveness of national systems of higher education are being lost as a result of action taken by European bodies (e.g., Moutsios 2013; Slaughter and Cantwell 2012). There was, for example, a high degree of support for EUIs – and thus the closer integration of higher education institutions – across our sample of policy documents and interviewees. While the organisations involved in our research cannot, of course, be viewed as representative of the broader higher education community within Europe, the absence of any opposition to the principle of EUIs – across a variety of stakeholder groups – is nevertheless notable. Even when some serious concerns were articulated (for example, by the ESU with respect to widening participation and the inclusion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds), these did not prevent a wider embrace of the policy initiative. And, in most cases, such concerns were assuaged over time. At a general level, then, there seemed strong support for increasing the convergence of HE systems, through the EUIs' emphasis on facilitating a high degree of student mobility during a degree programme, deepening research collaborations, and integrating some administrative functions of HEIs. Indeed, as we have argued above, several interviewees saw the EUIs as a means of furthering the convergence that had been started through the Bologna Process and the creation of the European Higher Education Area.

Nevertheless, our data indicate that this movement towards greater convergence is not necessarily supported or indeed understood in the same way across Europe. This is most marked in relation to the variation in the reported national support for the initiative and, in particular, the additional funding offered by national governments. As we have evidenced in the preceding discussion, several of our interviewees described very different levels of commitment. While France and Germany had provided significant extra funding to their HEIs involved in EUIs, this was not replicated much more widely across the continent – with implications for practices within individual EUIs. They were also reported to be keener than other nations to support the European Commission's position with respect to increasing the number of HEIs in existing EUIs. In many ways, this reflects the national differences evidenced in relation to the Bologna Process – whereby different nation-states interpreted key concepts differently (Sin and Neave 2016) and their implementation of Bologna policies has been shaped by national structures, norms and actors (Dakowska and Harmsen 2015).

European spatial imaginaries

Alongside these national differences in the support for EUIs and desire to expand the membership of existing EUIs are other important differences – by stakeholder group, not only nation-state – in the future vision for EUIs. While these are interesting in their own right, for helping us understand perspectives with respect to this particular initiative, they also shed light on conceptualisations of the European higher education space more broadly – or what we can call 'European spatial imaginaries' (drawing on Watkins 2015). Despite the general support for EUIs in principle, mentioned above, the data indicate that in many key respects there was quite significant disagreement about the nature of the (ideal) European higher education space or even whether this was a meaningful space at all.

First, we have shown how contestations about the geographical boundaries of the European higher education space were brought into sharp relief by debates about which countries should

be able to participate in EUIs. While the European Commission effectively foregrounded the European Union in the first two EUI calls (with the scheme open to only the EU27 plus the five additional nations that were participating in the Erasmus + programme at the time), some policy actors believed that the key boundary should instead be determined by the (much larger) European Higher Education Area, with EUIs helping to reinforce reforms introduced through the Bologna Process. In contrast to both these perspectives, other stakeholders (namely those representing prestigious and research-intensive universities) implicitly questioned the idea of a discrete European HE space in their call for HEIs across the world to be able to join the initiative. Here, there are strong parallels with research that has pointed to the different 'zones' of Europe, some of which 'extend beyond what is typically understood as Europe' (Ruppert and Scheel 2021, 7).

Second, we have evidenced contestation with respect to the *nature* of the European higher education space (wherever its boundaries may be drawn). While some stakeholders emphasised the importance of inclusivity – with respect to both institutions and students – others felt that it was *excellence* that should be aimed for, and that this may preclude an emphasis on inclusion. Similar degrees of difference were also played out in relation to the role of nation-states – and the degree of integration that was desirable – in this space. Many interviewees contrasted the high level of support provided by France and Germany with the position taken by other nations. These different positions were evaluated differently, however, with some interviewees commending those that had engaged more actively, and others being puzzled at such involvement.

In many ways, these various spatial imaginaries are related to broader political orientations. Some of these relate to European politics specifically – with France and Germany, for example, being much more invested in the 'European project' and further European integration than some other nations (e.g., Kundnani 2014). Moreover, the European Commission's desire to involve smaller EU nations more fully in the EUIs can be read, as it was by one of our interviewees, as a political manoeuvre to secure support across the European Union for the policy. Here, there are strong parallels with previous work that has shown how the spatial imaginaries of policy actors at the national level within Europe are often informed by their nation's position with respect to European politics (Brooks 2021). However, politics also infuses perspectives in other ways, too. The stakeholders' positions with respect to whether they imagined the European higher education space as foregrounding inclusion or excellence were typically related to the interests of the groups they represented. Those speaking on behalf of students and applied institutions tended to emphasise the former, and those representing research intensive universities, the latter. Here, European politics is less relevant than the power and positioning of individual higher education stakeholders.

Taken together, the arguments advanced in this article underline the importance of understanding Europe as 'multiple' rather than 'singular' (Ruppert and Scheel 2021). Moreover, the data from the policy documents and interviews demonstrate that this multiplicity is evident even in a single policy domain (higher education) and amongst a community whose members are in regular dialogue with one another. What is less clear, however, is the performative aspect of these imaginaries – what impact these various perspectives may have on the future of EUIs. Research on the implementation of the Bologna Process, discussed previously, may suggest that different actors may choose to interpret and/or implement the policy in different ways, in line with their particular spatial imaginary. However, it is likely that the nature of the EUI programme will make this type of selective interpretation more difficult. It is, for example, clearly much less wide-ranging than the Bologna reforms, thus offering countries and institutions considerably less scope for incorporating only part of its policy agenda. Instead, it seems more likely that some spatial imaginaries will become dominant over time. As the policy actor contributing most, financially, it is probable that the perspectives of the European Commission will have a significant influence (see also Batory and Lindstrom 2011). Nevertheless, as we have indicated above, the Commission's own position has changed over the course of the three EUI calls – as it has come to adopt more expansive geographical boundaries. Moreover, as the coverage of the initiative will inevitably be partial (it does not aim to include all HEIs in Europe), and it is likely to become increasingly dependent on national support (both

financial and regulatory), alternative views of the European higher education space may well be articulated through non-engagement. Tracking how the different spatial imaginaries documented in this article play out within the EUI programme over the next few years, as the policy matures, constitutes an important focus for research.

Notes

1. The European Higher Education Area is a group of 49 countries (plus the European Commission) that cooperate to achieve comparable and compatible higher education systems. It was brought into being through the Bologna Process.
2. Europeanisation typically refers to the process whereby the politics and policy-making within member states of the European Union become reshaped through the actions of the European Commission (and other EU actors).
3. Ethical approval was granted, prior to the commencement of the research, from University College London (data protection reference Z6364106/2020/11/31).

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