

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

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Abstract:

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

Paper:

The 41 European University Initiatives (EUIs) currently in a pilot phase have been handed an impossible task of “being expected to demonstrate a transformational ten-year vision within a [five]-year test period.” (Valatka, cited in Gunn 2020, p. 26). The roadmap to achieving a “deep level integration” within each network involves aligning curricula and qualifications beyond Bologna, creating joint degree study programmes, joint research facilities, intra-EUI mobility mechanisms for students and staff (both physical and virtual), sociocultural integration activities, and civic engagements with local constituencies and non-academic partners (Gardner 2021). All of these developments are expected to take place on a tight baseline budget (£7 million) and even tighter timeframe. To achieve this, EUIs must play to their strengths and draw on their existing organisational alliances and partnership infrastructures (Gunn 2020). However, these strengths alone cannot possibly satisfy the broad template of transformations expected of all EUIs, including joined-up teaching, research, and civic engagement. Pressurising EUIs to deliver on unachievable remits runs a real risk of repackaging existing collaborations, and in this, replicating inequalities between HEIs (Claeys-Kulik, 2019).

What, then, does this tension look like from the perspective of an outside observer? How do EUIs manage their dual states, of becoming fully integrated supranational universities while also *being* operational, coherent networked universities for their current stakeholders? This paper extends from a broader examination of EUIs as a policy instrument forging the construction of a supranational European higher education space. It augments discussions of macro-level policy aims and challenges by examining the digital self-representations (specifically websites and social media) of three contrastive EUIs: (1) The Young Universities for the Future of Europe (YUFE), a student mobility and experience-focussed EUI stemming from an existing alliance; (2) European University for Smart Urban Coastal Sustainability (EU-CONEXUS), an interdisciplinary research and innovation-focussed initiative centred on a regional challenge; and (3) The European University of Social

Sciences (CIVICA), a partnership between eight of Europe's leading social sciences and policy institutions. As members of the 2019 EUI pilot cohort, each has been operating as a coherent network and further integrating their functions for 2.5 years. The aim of this paper is to examine how these supranational universities-in-information digitally represent themselves to broad stakeholder audiences; it specifically aims to analyse how the distances between their current and aspirational states are managed by performing, at least in digital form, as fully-fledged EUIs.

A visual turn in research on organisational identity and representation is emerging in higher education research, critically illuminating tensions between stakeholder audiences' impressions and experiences of universities (Blanco & Metcalfe, 2020; Lazetic 2019). This study draws from these works the concept of performance, as well as an interpretive analytical approach taken from visual document analysis (Bell, 2011). For this analysis I developed and applied a coding frame to 84 webpages and social media screengrabs collected in April 2021, to examine inter alia the functions and audiences of each item. Subsequent interviews with EUI coordinators are scheduled in order to confirm and extend findings of the document analysis.

Early stages of the analysis finds that case EUIs adopt similar approaches to self-representation despite their substantive differences. Each EUI has a polished website with nearly identical structures, with separate subpages addressing each stakeholder group (e.g. students and mobility, staff and research, alumni and external relations, local governments and civic applications). The contents of these pages draw on similarly generic and aspirational language reflecting European Commission priorities, purposing the page as little more than a placeholder for a developing EUI function. Some pages frame activities in such a way which obscures the boundary between operational and aspirational. Student mobility schemes, for example, contain images of student ambassadors or anecdotal accounts of their mobility experiences; in reality, however, these schemes are severely limited at present. YUFE has only run a pilot scheme with 100 students, and only four of CIVICA's eight universities participate in their integrated modules. In all cases, mobility has been exclusively virtual in light of Covid restrictions on physical movement. With the clear gulf between current provisions and their aspirational states, case EUIs' digital self-representations appear to lean heavily towards the latter.

This analysis suggests that their websites, while heavy on promises, do not provide a realistic indication of current activities or how far each has come in implementing their EUI proposals. This study is in early stages, and the EUI pilots continue to develop; however, there is little at present to dispel the criticism that EUIs are "old wine being poured into new bottles" (Claeys-Kulik, 2019).

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