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European Higher Education Area 2030: Bridging Realities for Tomorrow's Higher Education

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Editors

Sjur Bergan · Romiţă Iucu · Elspeth Jones ·
Maria Kelo · Liviu Matei · Jamil Salmi ·
Hans de Wit
Co-Editors

European Higher Education Area 2030: Bridging Realities for Tomorrow's Higher Education

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Editors and Co-Editors

About the Editors

Adrian Curaj is a former Minister of Education, Science and Innovation. He is the Head of the UNESCO Chair on Science and Innovation Policies at the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration. He had been working as a consultant for the World Bank, UNESCO, UNIDO, ETF, and EC for studies in Tertiary Education, Science and Innovation and Foresight. Also, Adrian CURAJ is a Fellow of the World Academy of Art and Science (WAAS). He has been at the forefront of theory and practice of Smart Specialization and Open Science in Romania since the beginning of its development. Adrian Curaj is Conference Co-Chair for all editions of the Future of Higher Education—Bologna Process Researchers' Conference (2011, 2014, 2017, 2020, and 2024).

Cezar Mihai Hâj holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA) in Bucharest. His experience as a policy expert includes coordinating a number of studies on internationalization, equity, university management, internal quality assurance, and data collection. He has written articles in Springer and Central European University publications and co-authored the "Study on the impact of admission systems on higher education outcomes" commissioned by the DG-EAC. He is a member of the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) and Co-Chair of the Fundamental Values WG. He is currently the digital expert for the World Bank and the European Digital Education Hub.

Remus Pricopie is a Professor and Rector of the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA), Bucharest, since March 2012. Mr. Pricopie served as the Minister of Education and Research from December 2012 to December 2014. His activity within the Romanian Ministry began in 1996 and includes positions such as Spokesperson, Director, Secretary-General, and Deputy Minister for Higher Education, International Relations and Teacher Training. Also, he has extensively collaborated with UNESCO, UNICEF, EU, OECD, World Bank, United Nations University—and ministries of education and research from more than 100 countries. Professor Pricopie holds a Ph.D. in Political Science at SNSPA and he is a Fulbright New Century Scholar alumnus and member of the World Academy of Art and Science, the Romanian Chapter of the Club of Rome, and the Atlantis Group. Dr. Pricopie has been the Chair of the Task Force on Fostering and Building Human Capital of the Regional Cooperation Council and President of the Board of Directors of the Romanian-US Fulbright Commission. He held the positions of Vice-President of the International Association of Universities (2012–2022) and President of the EU-Latin America and Caribbean Permanent Academic Forum (2018–2022). Since 2021, he has been the President of the World University Consortium. Dr. Pricopie's activity encompasses trans-disciplinary research in the areas of higher education management, internationalization of higher education, public communication, public participation, and collaborative public management.

About the Co-Editors

Sjur Bergan was the Head of the Council of Europe's Education Department until February 1, 2022. Sjur represented the Council of Europe in the Bologna Follow-Up Group and Board between 2000 and April 2022 and chaired working groups on structural reforms in 2007–2015. He remains a member of the EHEA working group on the fundamental values of higher education and the group overseeing the Roadmap accompanying San Marino's accession to the EHEA. He is also a member of the Task Force established to review the rules and regulations of the EHEA and explore options for a more permanent Bologna Secretariat. Sjur led the Council of Europe projects on Competences for Democratic Culture and the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees. He was a member of the editorial group for the Council's White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue and a main author of the Lisbon Recognition Convention as well as of recommendations on the public responsibility for higher education; academic freedom and institutional autonomy; and ensuring quality education. Sjur was the Series Editor of the Council of Europe Higher Education Series. He is the Author of Qualifications: Introduction to a Concept and Not by Bread Alone as well as of numerous book chapters and articles on education and higher education policy. Sjur was also one of the editors of the Raabe Handbook on Leadership and Governance in Higher Education (2009–2015) and one of the session coordinators at the Bologna Process Researchers' Conferences in 2015, 2018, and 2020. He is the recipient of the 2019 European Association for International Education Award for Vision and Leadership. In June 2022, Dublin City University awarded Sjur the degree of Doctor of Philosophy Honoris Causa.

Romiţă Iucu, Ph.D. is the President of the Board of Trustees of the University of Bucharest and a Professor of higher education at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Department of Educational Sciences. With an important experience in international cooperation in the field of education, Professor Iucu is the

Coordinator of UNICA EduLAB Group and of the European Degree subgroup of FOR EU European Universities group, and a member of the European University Association (EUA) Learning & Teaching (L&T) Steering Committee. Professor Iucu held several university-management positions (former Acting Rector of the University of Bucharest, and Vice-Rector for Academical Affairs for more than 16 years), with an important role on designing, managing, and validating higher education and adult education policies at international and national level. He is a former President of ENTEP (European Network on Teacher Education Policies) and was Romania's national representative in the BFUG (Bologna Follow-up Group). Professor Iucu had worked for many years at the European Network of Country Experts in Education (ENCEE), and as a member of Cluster "Teachers & Trainers" and of the Expert Group on Improving the Education of Teachers & Trainers. As a recognition of his professional activity, Professor Iucu was inducted as a member of the International Adult and Continuing Education (IACE) Hall of Fame at the University of Oklahoma Center for Continuing Education (OCCE). Professor Iucu also worked for the European Commission, Eurydice, World Bank, and UNICEF in several educational programs. Professor Iucu is member of several editorial boards, such as: *REPORT DIE—Zeitschrift für Weiterbildungsforschung 37. Jahrgang—International-vergleichende Forschung in der Erwachsenenbildung*, *EDUCAR—Spanish Review of Education*, *Romanian Scientometric Review*, *Quality Assurance Review, and Studia Doctoralia—Psychology and Educational Sciences*. His main fields of scientific interest are higher education educational policies, higher education pedagogy, trends for the future of education, teacher training policies, and educational group management.

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Hans de Wit is Professor Emeritus, Distinguished Fellow, and former Director of the "Center for International Higher Education" (CIHE) at Boston College, USA. Before, he was the Director of the "Centre for Higher Education Internationalisation" (CHEI) at the Università Cattolica Sacro Cuore in Milan, Professor of Internationalization of Higher Education at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, and Vice-President for International Affairs of the University of Amsterdam. He is a Senior Fellow of the International Association of Universities (IAU), founding member and past President of the European Association for International Education (EAIE), founding editor of the *Journal of Studies in International Education* (SAGE), consulting Editor of the *journal Policy Reviews in Higher Education* and Co-Editor of *International Higher Education.* He is the Author of books, articles, and essays on internationalization of higher education and is actively involved in consultancy for organizations like the European Commission and Parliament, UNESCO, World Bank, IAU.

Twenty-Five Years of Bologna Process. The Coexistence of Different Frameworks and the Challenges for the European Higher Education Area

Adrian Curaj, Cezar Mihai Hâj, and Remus Pricopie

Abstract This chapter reflects on the 25-year legacy of the Bologna Process and its impact on shaping the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). It examines the achievements in creating more compatible and comparable education systems, promoting mobility, and enhancing degree quality. The discussion highlights the transformative influence of global challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of artificial intelligence, on higher education. Key thematic areas explored include internationalization, access and inclusion, fundamental values, digitalization, and innovative teaching and learning. The interplay between the EHEA, the European Education Area (EEA), and the European Research Area (ERA) is analyzed, emphasizing opportunities for synergy and the need for coherence. Emerging challenges—ranging from ethical AI integration, governance restructuring, and demographic shifts to maintaining academic values—are addressed. The chapter underlines the importance of collaborative policymaking and robust frameworks to uphold equity, inclusivity, and quality in education. Insights from the Future of Higher Education—Bologna Process Researchers' Conference (FOHE-BPRC5) are presented, offering strategies to navigate the complexities of modern higher education while reinforcing its role as a pillar of societal advancement.

Keywords European Higher Education Area (EHEA) · Bologna Process · Internationalization · Digitalization · Fundamental values

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1 A Quarter of a Century of Reforms From the Researchers' Perspective

Twenty-five years of Bologna Process marks a significant milestone, inviting reflection on its achievements and challenges within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Since its inception, the Bologna Process has led to more compatible and comparable higher education systems across Europe, enhancing the quality and compatibility of degrees and promoting student mobility. As we celebrate this anniversary, it is essential to acknowledge the dynamic higher education sector influenced by unprecedented global events (such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the war in Ukraine) and disruptive technologies (the rise of Artificial Intelligence). The question here might be, how much and how deep was it affected?

The post-COVID-19 era has profoundly impacted internationalisation in higher education. The pandemic has redefined the possibilities and practices of global academic collaboration, pushing institutions to embrace new approaches such as virtual exchanges or collaborative online international learning. These developments offer new opportunities for inclusivity and diversity but also present challenges in maintaining the quality of intercultural experiences traditionally offered through physical mobility. The need for equitable higher education systems has become more pressing, urging institutions to support underrepresented groups and address persistent barriers to access and success.

The fundamental values at the core of the EHEA—*academic freedom, academic integrity, institutional autonomy, staff and student participation in higher education governance, public responsibility for and of higher education*—are facing reinterpretation and scrutiny challenges in several member countries. Thus, the EHEA is in need of a renewed commitment to safeguarding these principles through robust policy frameworks and ongoing dialogue among stakeholders. Simultaneously, the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming educational practices, offering innovative tools for teaching and learning while raising ethical concerns regarding data privacy and bias.

The emergence of the European Education Area (EEA) alongside the EHEA and the European Research Area (ERA) presents a complex yet promising "dance in three". This triadic interaction offers higher education institutions in Europe unprecedented opportunities for synergy and collaboration. However, it also raises questions about how these frameworks will coexist and complement each other to achieve their shared goals of quality education, research excellence, and societal impact, keeping the core focus on values.

In this context, the Future of Higher Education—Bologna Process Researchers' Conference (FOHE-BPRC) serves as a forum for discussion and reflection on the complexity of issues currently faced by EHEA. By bringing together researchers, policymakers, and practitioners, the Conference provides a collaborative environment to explore solutions and strategies for furthering the European higher education landscape. As we navigate the interplay between the EEA, EHEA, and ERA, the insights and recommendations generated at the fifth edition of the event can significantly contribute to realigning higher education in Europe.

The fifth edition of the Future of Higher Education—Bologna Process Researchers' Conference (FOHE-BPRC5) took place in Bucharest on 25–26 March 2024. Since its inception, the FOHE-BPRCs have been strategically aligned with the Ministerial Conferences of the Bologna Process, ensuring that the perspectives and research findings of the academic community can be shared with policy and decision-makers. Ever since 2011, the time of the first BPRC, all the Conferences have been strategically aligned with the core idea that "researchers' voice does matter"; this voice was conveyed plenary at most of the next BPRCs.

FOHE-BPRC5 focused on five critical thematic areas: *internationalisation*, *access and inclusion*, *fundamental values*, *digitalisation*, and *innovative teaching and learning*. These themes were carefully chosen to reflect the ongoing and emerging issues within the EHEA, providing a comprehensive framework for discussions and debates.

2 Key Challenges for the Bologna Process

The thematic session on internationalisation of higher education addressed the profound transformations experienced in this area, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants discussed the accelerated adoption of digital technologies, which has facilitated virtual exchanges and collaborative online international learning. Maintaining quality standards without compromising the depth of personal experience in multicultural contexts is the main emerging challenge for physical mobility. In addition, the process of internationalisation in higher education institutions will increasingly integrate a digital experience that needs to be balanced with the benefits of a traditional learning experience.

Additionally, the session highlighted the impact of current geopolitical tensions and rising nationalism on international academic cooperation. Participants underscored the challenges posed by these factors, which often place research collaborations under strain and require a delicate balance between developing international partnerships and addressing national security concerns. The session also explored strategies for integrating inclusivity and European values into internationalisation efforts, noting the importance of capacity building at institutional levels. The findings from the latest EAIE Barometer were presented, offering insights into the decentralised and integrated nature of contemporary internationalisation initiatives and underscoring the need for continuous support and development in this area.

The thematic session dedicated to access, inclusion, completion, and employability focused on the ongoing efforts to promote equity in higher education and the persistent barriers that many students still face. Discussions highlighted the significant progress made in widening access to higher education over the past two decades while also acknowledging that access does not always ensure successful completion of studies or employability. Participants emphasised the importance of comprehensive policies addressing both financial and non-monetary barriers to student success, with a particular focus on improving data collection and analysis to better understand the needs of underrepresented groups.

The transition from higher education to the labour market emerged as a critical issue, with many students from disadvantaged backgrounds facing challenges due to a lack of social capital and adequate training. The session underscored the need for higher education institutions to align educational outcomes with labour market demands, making better use of available tools and mechanisms such as tailored support programs, internships, and mentorship schemes. These initiatives can bridge the gap between education and employment, particularly for first-generation and low-income students. Furthermore, when it comes to the role of quality assurance agencies, participants advocated for inclusion of equity-related criteria in their frameworks to ensure that institutions prioritise the diverse needs of their student populations. Recommendations for ongoing policy development and institutional practices to support equitable access and success in higher education were also put forward in the session.

The thematic session on fundamental values of higher education examined how the concepts of academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and social responsibility evolved within the European Higher Education Area. Participants engaged in discussions about the challenges and threats to these core values, particularly considering recent political and social changes in various member countries.

The development of a new policy framework to safeguard these values was a key issue of the session, with emphasis placed on the importance of continuous dialogue and peer learning among EHEA members in this area.

Presentations and debates highlighted the need for robust mechanisms to monitor and promote the implementation of fundamental values across diverse national contexts. The NewFAV Erasmus+ project was showcased as a significant initiative providing a methodology and tools to support this effort.

It further discussed how research can contribute to understanding and addressing existing challenges, suggesting the need for additional research to refine theoretical models and practical approaches.

The session concluded with a call for the adoption of the proposals put forward by the BFUG Working Group on Fundamental Values at the upcoming Tirana Ministerial Conference, stressing the importance of these values not only as rights and freedoms but also as duties and obligations for public authorities and higher education institutions.

The thematic session on digitalisation and its implications for higher education reflected on the transformative impact of digital technologies and AI on educational practices. Participants explored the fast-paced developments in these areas, noting the significant opportunities and challenges they present. The discussions emphasised the need for a proactive approach to responsibly and ethically using digital tools to enhance access and quality in higher education.

Researchers highlighted the necessity for harmonised regulations and standards to ensure consistent and responsible use of digital technologies across institutions and countries. The session also covered the potential of digital hubs, MOOCs, and flexible learning opportunities for fair access to cutting-edge educational resources. Participants advocated for strengthening partnerships between academia and industry to drive innovation and ensure that curricula remain aligned with technological advancements and labour market needs. The European Universities Initiative was discussed as a key framework for fostering collaboration and sharing best practices in digitalisation. Not least, the session underlined the importance of support structures to assist institutions in navigating the complexities of digital transformation, ultimately aiming to create a more equitable and competitive European higher education.

The thematic session on innovative teaching and learning focused on the promotion and implementation of student-centred learning (SCL) within the framework of the Bologna Process. Participants discussed how the Bologna Process has progressively integrated SCL into European higher education, starting with an emphasis on learning outcomes and evolving towards inclusive and flexible teaching methods. The session highlighted the significant strides made in this area, alongside the persistent challenges in measuring the effectiveness of SCL and ensuring comprehensive faculty development.

Key presentations showcased various innovative pedagogical approaches that place students at the centre of the learning process. These included the use of digital tools, interdisciplinary projects, and active learning techniques designed to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes. The discussions also emphasised the importance of creating supportive institutional cultures that foster inclusivity and collaboration among both students and educators. The role of mentoring and continuous professional development for teachers as critical components for sustaining high-quality, student-centred education was additionally noted in various interventions.

The session also explored the potential of new educational frameworks, such as micro-credentials and modular learning, to address the diverse needs of today's students. These flexible learning pathways were seen as crucial for accommodating both traditional and non-traditional learners, ensuring that higher education remains responsive to the changing demands of society and the labour market. The development of quality assurance indicators tailored to SCL to better monitor and promote innovative teaching practices was perceived as highly relevant by the participants. Recommendations for aligning national and institutional policies to support the adoption of student-centred learning, ultimately aiming to enhance the overall quality and effectiveness of higher education in Europe, were put forward as concluding remarks for the session.

3 The Future of the European Higher Education Area and Bologna Process Is Yet to Be Written

Ministerial Involvement and the Challenges to the EHEA

The decreasing participation of ministers, especially from European Union (EU) member states, in the 2024 EHEA ministerial conference in Tirana was cause for concern among conference participants. While this trend is not new, having been highlighted before at the 2018 conference, it challenges the strength and coherence of the EHEA—even more so with the rising importance of the European Education Area and the lack of policy synergy with the European Research Area (ERA), while both of them offer significant financial incentives. The Bologna Process has traditionally been an informal, consensus-driven initiative with varying levels of implementation across member states. However, the shift towards more structured and financially incentivised frameworks in the EEA and ERA could potentially marginalise the EHEA also in terms of geographical coverage and political commitment (e.g., non-EU countries).

Ensuring the continued involvement and commitment of education ministers is crucial for maintaining the momentum and relevance of the Bologna Process as a unique, values-driven transformation process. The informal nature of the EHEA should be perceived as a strength that allows for flexibility and adaptability, but this requires sustained high-level engagement to be effective. Conference participants urged for renewed efforts to engage ministers and align the goals of the EHEA with the financial and strategic priorities of the broader European education and research landscape.

A Delicate Balancing of National Policies and Ehea Overarching Goals

Each member state within the EHEA has its own unique educational traditions, priorities, and political settings, which can sometimes conflict with the compatibility and comparability efforts promoted by the Bologna Process. For example, differences in governance structures, funding models or language policies can create friction when attempting to implement standardised reforms without acknowledging the diverse national contexts. Additionally, political changes, such as shifts in government priorities or rising nationalist sentiments, can further complicate alignment with EHEA objectives. To address this, it is essential to foster a dialogue based on the principle of national sovereignty while encouraging collaborative approaches aligned with the broader EHEA educational goals. Flexible frameworks are required to adapt EHEA principles to fit national contexts, together with robust mechanisms for monitoring and supporting implementation.

Navigating Political and Economic Uncertainty

Navigating political and economic uncertainties such as Brexit, the war in Ukraine, rising populism and the impact of climate change, with increasingly shifting government priorities, can affect higher education policy and funding. Economic fluctuations, including financial crises and varying levels of public investment in education, further complicate the setting. Higher education institutions must be both resilient and adaptable, developing strategies to mitigate the risks associated with these uncertainties, such as diversifying funding sources, fostering strong relationships with industry and community partners, and advocating for the importance of higher education at both national and European levels.

Need for a More Structured Governance of the EHEA

As the EHEA continues to expand and "stack" commitments after each Ministerial Conference, the need for a more structured governance framework becomes increasingly evident. For example, the current practice of a rotating EHEA Secretariat presents significant challenges in ensuring continuity, maintaining an up-to-date EHEA website and archive, managing human resources effectively and, more broadly, fulfilling its main function—providing support to the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) and all its structures. These logistical impediments can have a very direct impact on the proper implementation and monitoring of EHEA commitments. Establishing a permanent Secretariat with clear rules of procedures could address these issues by providing consistent oversight and support. Such a structure would facilitate better coordination, institutional memory, and stability, ensuring that the EHEA can effectively respond to emerging challenges and uphold its commitments. This, too, is not a new idea, having been put forward in the 2020 edition of FOHE-BPRC and further explored in the last years within the BFUG itself, with a clear decision yet to be made. Furthermore, sensitive issues such as the suspension of Russia and Belarus highlight the need for clear rules of procedure to manage crises, maintain the integrity of the EHEA and ensure a rapid response when needed.

Fundamental Values and Monitoring as a Prerequisite for High-Quality and Inclusive Higher Education

Defining a common understanding within the EHEA members is a first important step to reaching its objective of having members uphold these values. The next step, as ministers in Tirana already committed, needs to be the adoption of a monitoring system. This is a critical aspect, discussed even during the conference, that needs to ensure that member states uphold the fundamental values of EHEA at the national level. These core fundamental values underpin the quality and inclusiveness of higher education and, without a reliable framework to monitor and enforce these values, the integrity of the EHEA is at risk. Such a monitoring system should include clear indicators and benchmarks, regular reporting, and mechanisms for peer review and accountability, facilitating the share of practice and mutual learning.

Ethical Integration of AI in Higher Education

The integration of AI into higher education is already happening. With a surge of research papers that contain specific AI keywords and the wide use of AI by students, a phenomenon underlined even within a paper presented at the BPRC, the challenge remains on the proper ethical integration of AI rather than the use of it. AI is not merely a new tool but represents a transformative force that can fundamentally alter how education is delivered and experienced. The responsible use of AI should enhance learning outcomes and administrative efficiencies without compromising ethical standards or equity. Responsible digital transformation brings together both turmoil of technology and ethical risks; and universities are just in the middle of this turmoil because of their complex roles. Bologna Process, as value driven one, carry the responsibility—self assumed—to inspire and accompany transformations in higher education, science, and innovation to facilitate the implementation of EEA and ERA.

Ensuring Consistent Quality Assurance Across the EHEA

Despite the establishment of quality assurance frameworks, their application and effectiveness can vary significantly between member states due to differences in resources, institutional capacities, and local governance structures. As the only formal Bologna Process structure, a strong European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) is essential in this context as it plays a key role in establishing trust and transparency among EHEA members. By ensuring that all member states consistently apply the periodically revised ESGs, the EHEA can uphold its commitment to delivering high-quality and equitable higher education, reinforcing trust and cooperation within the region.

Responding to the Shifts in Demography

Europe is experiencing significant demographic shifts, including an ageing population in some regions and increasing migration flows. Over the quarter of a century of Bologna Process, the student profile has changed significantly. These changes need adaptive strategies within higher education institutions to respond to a changing student population, including catering to older, non-traditional students and providing lifelong learning opportunities and flexible learning pathways to support career transitions and upskilling. Addressing these demographic trends also involves anticipating the needs of future students and aligning the educational offer to the labour market of the future.

The contributions within the BPRC publication, though academic in nature, are vital for understanding and navigating the future challenges and opportunities within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). But the essence of these ideas, including the ones from the current article, goes beyond academia. It is about envisioning a future where education and research serve as pillars of societal advancement and resilience within the members of EHEA. These deliberations on the future of the EHEA are, fundamentally, deliberations about the future of our European society. They emphasise the important role universities and governments play in fostering innovation, inclusivity, and societal well-being. By bridging the gap between research and policy, the aim is to contribute to the creation of a cohesive and dynamic EHEA that meets the aspirations and needs of all its members.

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Internationalization of Higher Education—Beyond 2020 EHEA Targets (Coordinated by Hans de Wit and Elspeth Jones)

Internationalisation and Europeanisation of Higher Education Beyond EHEA Targets: Inclusion, Transformation, and Social Responsibility

Elspeth Jones and Hans de Wit

Abstract Beginning with an overview of how the Bologna Process has evolved over the period encompassed by the five Researcher Conferences to date, this chapter highlights several key challenges in recent years for the development of internationalization and Europeanization. It goes on to summarise briefly the contributions in this section, using them to illustrate where change has been more positive. The chapter concludes with a number of observations and recommendations raised during the conference discussions as well as by the chapters in this section.

Keywords Internationalisation of higher education · Europeanisation · Bologna Process · Social responsibility · European Universities Initiative (EUI)

The four years between the fourth and fifth Bologna Process Researchers' Conference in Bucharest, 2020–2024, have marked a turbulent period for the world, with a global pandemic and increasing geopolitical, societal, and economic tensions. These unforeseen developments have had important impacts on international higher education, and in more dramatic ways than could have been predicted by de Wit and Deca (2020) when, based on the Bologna Process Researchers' Conference of that year, they wrote: "internationalization in higher education is an evolving process and changes in response to changes in the local, national, regional and global environment." (p. 109). Yet, their call for a wider conversation in the context of the European Higher Education Area as to how the Bologna Process can address some of the resulting challenges and opportunities continues to be valid. In particular, they asked, "what can European cooperation add to forward-looking, high quality, equitable higher education systems at national level?" (Ibid., p. 109).

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A number of chapters in this section of the volume, *Internationalisation and Europeanisation of higher education beyond EHEA targets,* speak to these concerns. In this overview chapter, we begin with some historical background before considering how internationalisation has progressed in the intervening years, with a number of positive developments in the face of challenging circumstances.

1 Evolution of the Bologna Process

The 1998 signing of the *Sorbonne Declaration,* inspired by the need for modernisation and competitiveness of European higher education, laid the groundwork for the *Bologna Declaration.* Complexity and diversity in European curricular and degree structures required action to foster convergence and transparency across European qualifications (Haug & Tauch, 2001), so in 1999, 29 countries gathered in Bologna, Italy and signed the Declaration on the *European Higher Education Area.*

From the beginning of the Bologna Process, success has resulted from a mixture of top-down and bottom-up policies, with the active involvement 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, over the years, national governments and their legislations have contributed more obstacles and challenges than drivers, undermining the aspirations of the European Higher Education and Research Areas and the European Universities Initiative.

Initially inspiring creativity, innovation, and expansiveness, the 2010–2020 decade saw the development of tensions and fatigue, with waning enthusiasm for the EHEA and the Bologna Process (Bergan, 2015). Curaj et al. (2018a, 2018b) later confirmed these concerns and provided some context of what they called 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, especially Brexit. They expressed concerns about attacks on the fundamental 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 could survive these challenges and continue to be a success story.

The challenges cannot be ignored. Internal conflicts, such as between Hungary and the European Commission, are concerns, as are the discussions about widening the EU to include countries like Albania, Georgia, Moldova, Serbia, and Ukraine. These tensions also impact education and research—the conflict between the EC and Hungary resulted in a halt in Hungary's participation in its programmes.

Internationalisation and Europeanisation are multifaceted and evolving processes, as is clearly illustrated by the five 2011–2024 Bologna Process Researchers' Conferences to date. Mobility was the main, if not exclusive, internationalisation theme of the first conference in 2011. As Scott (2012, p. 13) wrote: "promoting mobility among students and staff was among the earliest European initiatives in higher education—and still is among the most visible", and the Bologna Process played a key role in it. But he also added: "The tensions—or synergies—between the wider internationalisation strategies of European universities and their commitment to mobility and exchanges within Europe have not been sufficiently explored." The second conference in 2014 moved towards the widening of internationalisation strategies, with contributions on internationalisation at home, internationalisation as a lever of change, national policies, ethics, and institutional differentiation. In 2017, the third conference revealed concern about the shift from a collaborative approach towards a more competitive focus, and about the misconception of reducing internationalisation simply to study abroad. "There is a growing need for rethinking internationalisation in order to focus it on the internationalisation of the curriculum and learning outcomes to enhance the quality of education and research." (Curaj et al., 2018a, 2018b, p. 7). As noted above, the fourth conference took place just before the pandemic's impact on internationalisation in higher education—making concerns about its prospects even greater—but also offered hope of further enhancement of the EHEA, in particular through the EUI. Papers in the fifth conference illustrate both the range of challenges but also highlight the EUI once more among other positive developments.

2 Global Challenges for Internationalisation and Europeanisation

2.1 A Global Pandemic

The major challenge over the past four years was the COVID-19 pandemic. It added an even darker cloud to the contextual challenges described by Curaj et al. (2018a, 2018b), significantly affecting higher education and research. Its effects in general, and on international higher education in particular, were immediate in terms of delivery and support for students (Ammigan & Veerasamy, 2023; Knight et al., 2021). For example, many international students were unable to return home, in some cases for a long time. The scramble to deliver programmes online placed stress on staff and students alike, and there were longer-term consequences for the academic and social well-being of students and staff globally (Knight et al., 2021; Marinoni et al., 2020).

Huang et al. (2022) observed that the challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic had forced higher education systems and institutions to try new approaches to internationalisation that go beyond mobility. However, they also remarked that the pandemic had heightened inequalities between individuals, institutions, and systems.

2.2 Geopolitical Tensions

The second major, and continuing, challenge has been geopolitical, with changing tensions around the world. The rise and influence of China, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Hamas' attack on Israel and Israel's subsequent retaliation in Gaza have all resulted, one way or another, in isolation, attacks on academic freedom, and a decline in academic collaboration. Following the invasion, Russia withdrew from the Bologna Process and returned to the old authoritarian Soviet Union style of higher education. The geopolitical tensions with China, anti-Europeanisation and anti-internationalisation sentiments and actions within the European Union itself—in particular, but not exclusively, in Hungary—as well as the urgent need to address the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), all create a dangerous environment for responsible transformation in European higher education.

2.3 *The Growth of Nationalism and Populism*

The third phenomenon has been the rise of nationalism and populism in reaction to the globalisation of economies and societies, both in the Global South and the Global North. Just as with the geopolitical environment, this has negatively affected international exchange, collaboration, and academic freedom. At a time when academic collaboration is of the utmost importance to address the climate emergency, the SDGs and other global challenges, this inward-looking and xenophobic trend, creating division and knowledge isolation, is a major concern. Sustained and intentional effort is required by higher education institutions in response to these global challenges, focusing on new directions for internationalisation into the future.

Today, the world is more connected and interdependent but at the same time more disjointed and divided than ever before. Social, environmental, economic, political and cultural issues and inequalities on a global scale pose real and existential threats to individuals and communities. Higher education institutions cannot ensure national prosperity unless they also recognise a broader responsibility to contribute to the creation of dynamic and sustainable global communities. Simply 'having an international plan', 'doing international things' and/or 'doing sustainable things' is not enough. It requires planned and strategic actions across the three missions: education, research, and service.

Over the past decades institutions, as well as national governments and international organisations, have developed policy documents and mission statements that call for a more comprehensive approach, and pay lip service to socially responsible internationalisation. De Wit and Rumbley (2018) speak of *rhetoric* more than concrete action, and Leask et al. (2018) of *a struggle to move beyond good intentions and isolated examples of good practice.* Four years after de Wit and Deca (2020) called for forward-looking, high quality, equitable European and international higher education, this is even more urgent today.

3 Positive Indications

While these challenges cannot be ignored, there are clearly some positive indications. These include: the ongoing support for European programmes for education and research; initiatives for regional higher education collaboration in the ASEAN countries; and the value of international research collaboration which was manifested clearly in the successful creation of vaccines against COVID-19. We now turn to other positive developments in internationalisation and Europeanisation in recent years.

3.1 The European Universities Initiative

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 (see de Wit & Wang, 2024, for a comprehensive overview of this period). One of the most important has been the implementation and growth of Alliances developed through the European Universities Initiative (EUI), the latest of four key milestones to date in the European project: the Erasmus programme in 1987; the Maastricht Treaty in 1992; the Bologna Process in 1999, and the EUI in 2018.

The attempt at a supranational university in Europe is as old as the European Community itself, and the idea can be traced back to the first meeting discussing the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community in 1955 (Orr et al., 2019). But political debates, in particular between France and Germany, prohibited its realisation. Finally, only a humanities-focused doctoral institute located in Florence, *the European University Institute*, was founded in 1972. It took a long time between that first initiative and the creation of the EUI alliances in 2018. Building on the Bologna Process, the EUI was launched to develop "unprecedented levels of institutionalized cooperation, making it systemic, structural, and sustainable" (European Commission, 2020).

Nijboer and Girotti (2023) considered the transformational potential of the Alliances as a new form of multilateral cooperation, while Söderqvist et al. (2024) offered just one example of innovation at doctoral level, which has been facilitated as a result. Andrew Gunn, in his chapter in this section, *The European Universities Initiative (EUI): Accomplishments and Challenges,* outlines some of the progress to date, while noting the relative fragility of the Alliances. Not least is the question of future sustainability once EU funding is withdrawn. Recent developments, including the European Degree Label and the European Degree, can be considered the next steps in higher education internationalisation and transformation. Mattia Quinteri and Junaid Kajee, in their chapter, *Internationalisation or Europeanisation? Capturing Dynamic Concepts in Higher Education Institutions*, analyse the different aspects of this process: further internationalisation and/or Europeanisation.

3.2 Increasing Emphasis on Decolonisation and Epistemic and Social Justice

It is clear that recent years have seen increasing awareness of the mutual relationship between the internationalisation agenda and other societal concerns. The decolonisation of curriculum and research is a high priority in many disciplines and institutions both in the Global North and South (Adefila et al., 2022; Ahmed-Landeryou, 2023; Heleta & Chasi, 2023), in part resulting from the #BlackLivesMatter and #RhodesMustFall movements.

As Jones and de Wit (2020) observed, most scholarly and public attention with respect to internationalisation in higher education has focused on the Western world, and only recently has there been attention to the need "to emphasize that internationalization should no longer be considered in terms of a Westernized, largely Anglo-Saxon, and predominantly English-speaking paradigm" (p. 35).

Even though progress may be slow, scholars around the world are addressing epistemic and social justice in relation to decolonisation and internationalisation (Abba & Streck, 2019; Buckner & Stein, 2020; Bullen & Flavell, 2022; Stein et al., 2023). Recognising the opportunity of integrating these concerns with the internationalisation of curriculum is growing in importance (Jones et al., 2021; Leask, 2023) and has been a positive development in recent years.

3.3 Greater Focus on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

In parallel with questions of social justice, the focus on equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) has grown to become a significant element in institutional strategies across the globe. Its role in relation to internationalisation has frequently been discussed, including by Leask et al. (2018) and Jones and de Wit (2020). The Bologna agenda has taken these issues into account, but a revival of attention to solidarity with, and understanding of, the internationalisation policies and directions by the low- and middle-income countries and their higher education systems and institutions is essential.

EDI has been seen as one element in an approach sometimes referred to as 'Interculturalisation' (Jones, 2013, 2022), which considers the intercultural of even greater importance than the international when seeking to internationalise the curriculum at home (Beelen & Jones, 2015; Leask, 2015).

These efforts have been hampered by hostile migration environments related to an increase in nationalism and populism, particularly—but not only—across Europe. The result has been negative attitudes toward migrants, multiculturalism and 'wokery', with social and traditional media adding fuel to the fire. An important aim of internationalising the curriculum at home is to counter such negativity, but this is a long-term project. Aisling Tiernan analyses one consequence for universities of anti-immigration rhetoric in her chapter, *Higher Education Spaces as Immigration Sites: A Critical Examination.* She reflects on the additional legal, practical, and financial burden for UK institutions in managing the admission and attendance of international students to ensure visa compliance, with cautionary observations for the wider EHEA and beyond.

3.4 Recognition of Internationalisation's Role Within the Third Mission

The purpose of internationalisation is to enhance quality as well as make 'a meaningful contribution to society' (de Wit et al., 2015, p. 29). As Jones et al. (2021) note, there is an urgent need to align internationalisation and university social responsibility agendas: "Higher education institutions have a responsibility to contribute to the global common good and to support the development of sustainable communities at home." (p. 342). In this focus on socially responsible internationalisation, understanding and recognition of power dominance, exclusion, and inequality in the creation and execution of internationalised education programmes is of the essence. Simply expressing the need for more socially responsible internationalisation is insufficient; action is needed to shift the focus towards the third mission of higher education, service to society. There is some evidence that this is being recognised, and Flora Laszlo reflects on several developments in her chapter, *Bologna Process and internationalisation of the third mission of the university: completing the policy script.* She advocates for more attention to the role of higher education and service to society within the Bologna Process.

3.5 The Spread of Europeanisation of Higher Education

The fall of the Iron Curtain and the end of the Cold War resulted in closer cooperation with, and integration of, Central and Eastern European countries, while the increased globalisation of economies and societies called for closer alignment with the rest of the world. Countries previously behind the Iron Curtain joined the EHEA, enriching opportunities for partnerships, collaboration, and mobility. Programmes such as PHARE (Assistance for Restructuring of the Economy) and TEMPUS (Trans European Mobility Programme for University Studies) helped prepare them for future EU integration, and participation in the research framework and education programmes. In addition to capacity-building projects under Erasmus+, the impact of these programmes continues to be substantive. Their roles in curriculum development, the social dimension, and internationalisation strategies are reflected in the chapter by Lusine Fljyan, *The Role of Erasmus+ Capacity Building Projects in the Internationalization of Armenian Higher Education.* She discusses an approach which "ensures that internationalization efforts are systemic, sustainable, and impactful" and from which "other latecomers to the EHEA can benefit".

3.6 Caution and Better Understanding Regarding Mobility and International Student Recruitment

Although the transition to online learning during the global pandemic increased the interest in virtual exchange and Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), the hope that this would reduce the emphasis on mobility, particularly within the European area, was short-lived. In spite of concern about the effect of international travel on climate, questions of sustainability, and widespread disquiet about inequality of access, the focus soon returned to mobility, both for credit and full degrees. Nevertheless, heightened awareness of the climate crisis and the role that international education can play in working towards net zero led to the foundation in November 2021 of CANIE (Climate Action Network for International Education) to encourage institutions and associations to commit to taking action.[1] In addition, concerns about the recruitment practices of some international education agents have led to greater scrutiny of their work, with a view to more mindful use of their services to promote student mobility (Nikula et al., 2023).

Many countries have developed websites and other services to facilitate international student recruitment, and the case of Romania is discussed in two chapters in this section. Wesley Felipe da Silva Siqueira considers *Study-abroad Portals in the EHEA: A Case Study of the Study in Romania platform*, while Cristina-Ramona Fit and Cezar Mihai Haj examine *The role of language preparatory programmes in increasing the participation of international students in higher education in Romania.* Each chapter illuminates not only suggested developments for Romania in these key areas, but also potential direction for other countries seeking to increase international student numbers, which may be of particular value to non-Anglophone countries (de Wit et al., 2022).

3.7 Greater Engagement with the Experience of International Students

The benefits of experiencing life and education in other countries have long been recognised, but there is also increasing emphasis on the need to help all students develop a global mindset (Killick & Foster, 2021). With this in mind, progress in broadening understanding of curriculum internationalisation was noted by Leask (2023):

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[1] https://canie.org/the-canie-accord.

> A focus on providing opportunities for all graduates to develop global mindsets, an understanding of inequalities in the world, and a willingness to accept a form of global social responsibility at home is increasingly the focus of curriculum internationalization. (p. 224)

Assisting academics in their efforts to develop curricula is a further benefit of international experience (Gregersen-Hermans & Lauridsen, 2021). In their chapter, *Exploring academics' views regarding Erasmus teaching mobility*, Elena Marin and Donatella Donato consider this benefit alongside others, which result from the teaching mobility opportunities offered through the Erasmus programme.

Recent years have also seen a better analysis, greater emphasis and increasing research on the international student experience (Ammigan & Jones, 2018; Jones, 2017) and with international students in general (Mittelmeier et al., 2023). In their chapter, *Exploring Services and Support for Credit-Mobile International Students*, Adriana Perez-Encinas, Pablo Villarrubia and Sandra Tobon focus in particular on the experiences of short-term and credit-mobile students, within a broader view of international student support. Their recommendations offer opportunities for both sending and receiving institutions to enhance services in this area.

3.8 Data-Driven Understanding of Internationalisation Across the EHEA

As discussed earlier, the new political environments of nationalism, geopolitical conflict and financial challenges have placed a strain on higher education globally. Economic issues have been a major factor, including the need for innovation in the global knowledge society and economic competitiveness in local contexts. The sector is caught between competing concerns around knowledge security and political interference versus open science and academic freedom. There is a tension, particularly in high-income countries, between returning to old habits and taking the opportunity for innovation, inclusivity, and social responsibility. In these complicated circumstances, internationalisation faces similar challenges—the need for international collaboration while countering pressures which restrict cooperation.

Understanding the views of those engaged in addressing such challenges has taken on a new importance. In their chapter, *Internationalization in Europe in 2024: data-driven insights from the frontlines,* Laura Rumbley, Jody Hoekstra-Selten and Giorgio Marinoni discuss the future for internationalisation in the EHEA by analysing results from the *EAIE Barometer: internationalisation in Europe, third edition,* alongside the 6th *IAU Global Survey on internationalisation.* They note clear evidence of momentum in European higher education but also indications of stress in the sector, with some doubt as to whether internationalisation continues to be seen as an effective instrument to support institutional objectives.

4 Opportunities for Further Internationalisation and Europeanisation?

As has been seen in this chapter the issues may fluctuate, but there are always challenges to be addressed. This includes countering some major misconceptions identified by de Wit (2018): equating internationalisation with 'global' and ignoring the 'local'; perceiving western values and concepts as the sole models for internationalisation; and unfolding internationalisation with no regard for or alignment with the SDGs.

However, this chapter has also discussed several positive initiatives, indicating further potential for transformation, inclusivity, and social responsibility in internationalisation and Europeanisation. The emergence of European citizenship, culture, and its regions have been driving progress in the European Higher Education and Research Areas alongside academic collaboration and alignment, continuing to present a broad spectrum of opportunities. The chapters which now follow illustrate a number of these, and we conclude with messages resonating within the chapters as well as from discussions during the conference:

- Make the third mission of higher education, social responsibility, a more central concern of internationalisation and Europeanisation, focusing on inclusivity, social responsibility, and solidarity rather than exclusionary practice;
- Place greater emphasis on interculturalisation within internationalised curricula, engaging diverse local communities as well as developing global mindsets;
- Pay more attention to the third cycle, doctoral education, enabling cross-national equivalence in Ph.D. outcomes (de Wit et al., 2024) and enhancing its international aspects;
- Enhance services for incoming and outgoing students, both degree-seeking and credit-seeking exchange students, including support for physical and mental well-being;
- Strengthen the link between internationalisation and fundamental European academic values: academic freedom, institutional autonomy, academic integrity, responsibility for and of higher education. See Bergan and Matei (this volume) and the chapters on Values arising from this year's conference;
- Support the European Universities Initiative as a way to enhance inclusion, transformation, and innovation in cooperation and respond with action to overcome major challenges of funding sustainability and national barriers;
- Respond to the climate crisis, reducing the focus on study abroad by incorporating virtual exchange and collaborative online international learning as an integral part of the internationalisation process;
- Maintain support for both top-down and bottom-up initiatives in international policies and actions;
- Create a balance between the need for ongoing collaboration and recognition of European and national security concerns.

Internationalisation as a process has its own dimensions, challenges and opportunities, and this section addresses several of them. However, internationalisation is not a goal in itself, but a means to enhance the quality of the three missions of higher education. As will be manifest in other sections of this book, internationalisation is present in all themes, such as access and equity, as well as digitalisation.

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Internationalisation or Europeanisation? Capturing Dynamic Concepts in Higher Education Institutions

Mattia Quinteri and Junaid Kajee

Abstract The myriad international crises in recent years have highlighted the importance of responses from Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in contending with global challenges. In the European Higher Education Area, HEIs play a core role in implementing the international and European dimensions in higher education. Internationalisation and Europeanisation are shaped by HEIs' structures and individuals, and due to their evolving nature, they are dynamic concepts with contested definitions. Through the institutional logics' perspective, this paper will investigate (1) how international and European dimensions diverge within HEIs in the EHEA, (2) explore the predominant steering mechanisms employed by HEIs to facilitate the inclusion of the international and/or European dimensions, (3) outline the roles that individuals play in fostering international and European dimensions, and (4) what effects do external factors have on HEIs' organisational autonomy. This conceptual analysis will provide researchers and stakeholders with a framework which showcases how internationalisation and Europeanisation, despite their dynamicity, can be captured within HEIs, following the logics embedded in their activities.

Keywords Internationalisation · Europeanisation · Higher education · Higher education institutions · Institutional logics

1 Introduction

While provocatively declaring the end of internationalisation over a decade ago, Brandenburg and de Wit advocated for the 'need to reaffirm the core role of universities' (2011, p. 17). Despite trends in internationalisation accelerating unabated in the years that have passed since this assertion, the global landscape has undergone

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profound transformations impacting the role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and the operating environments they find themselves in. Today, as international crises such as climate change, pandemics, economic disparities, and conflicts continue to transcend national borders, the quintessential role of HEIs in contending with global challenges has been thrust into the spotlight with manifest implications for higher education and society more broadly.

The challenges of the contemporary era underscore the need for HEIs to go beyond a passive adaptation and actively engage in the intentional shaping of solutions. In this context, HEIs in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)—with EHEA intended as an imagined space transcending geographical borders (Brooks & Rensimer, 2023)—would be understood to interpret impulses from both the international and European perspectives. The persistent and interconnected nature of global issues necessitates a comprehensive re-evaluation of the role HEIs play within the EHEA. Not by chance, the current strategy launched by the European Commission (2022: 16 final) aims to empower HEIs to carry out their European objectives in higher education. HEIs thus play a pivotal role in interpreting and implementing the international and European dimensions of higher education.

Internationalisation and Europeanisation are evolving processes shaped inside the HEIs, and due to their evolving nature, they are dynamic concepts with widely differing interpretations. The exercise of defining these two concepts has been underway for almost three decades (Dagen et al., 2019; de Wit, 2024; de Wit et al., 2015; Heleta & Chasi, 2023; Knight, 2008; Knight & de Wit, 1995; Marginson, 2023). Two observations are worth noting. Firstly, in light of the diversity of views, it should come as no surprise that scant univocal consensus on the definition of the two concepts has yet been reached. Secondly, the definitions often tend to focus on the macro (social, economic, and political factors) and meso (institutional policies) levels of analysis.

As stated by Rumbley et al. (2022), internationalisation in higher education is a 'multifaceted and evolving phenomenon. It touches on a wide scope of issues and can be defined in a multitude of ways' (2022, p. 19). The following ostensibly similar definitions are loosely based on the works by Knight and de Wit (1995), de Wit et al. (2015) and Hunter et al. (2023). These definitions do not aim to be ideal and definitive but instead to delineate the directions to navigate through the concepts of internationalisation and Europeanisation within this paper. Internationalisation and Europeanisation in higher education are dynamic processes orchestrated by HEIs, pragmatically implemented in alignment with their organisational practices and identities through strategies and individuals. The primary goal of internationalisation and Europeanisation is to integrate an international or a European dimension into the institutions' education, research, and social engagement, responding to external factors at social, economic, and political levels. On the one hand, this integration occurs via a modality that is coordinated with national regulatory frameworks in mind. On the other hand, it aligns with the principles, values, standards, and procedures of the EHEA.

This paper thus examines the differences and similarities between internationalisation and Europeanisation from an institutional bottom-up perspective—considering the strategies and constituent individuals of HEIs. Using institutional logics, this paper will investigate (1) how international and European dimensions diverge within HEIs in the EHEA, (2) explore the predominant steering mechanisms employed by HEIs to facilitate the inclusion of the international and European dimensions, (3) outline the roles that individuals play in fostering international and European dimensions, and (4) what effects do external factors have on HEIs' organisational autonomy.

Structured into three main sections, the paper unfolds with a brief description of the EHEA context, highlighting the emergence of the international and, especially, of the European dimensions. The following section delineates the institutional logics' perspective, pointing out its relevance for the two dimensions and outlining its principles and main logics. The final section delves into the process of inclusion of international and European dimensions inside HEIs, dedicating the first part to outlining their main characteristics, while the second part serves to deepen the dynamics and implications of the process.

2 International and European Dimensions in the EHEA

Within the EHEA, higher education has followed its own unique developmental trajectory, distinguishing it from other regions (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Tight, 2021). This distinctive evolution is marked by a concurrent emphasis on fostering international and European dimensions. An international dimension is enabled, for instance, by the development of national strategies for internationalisation of European nation-states (Crăciun, 2018) or by institutions at a national level focused on the internationalisation of higher education, such as the DAAD in Germany (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst, 2020) or the UniPID in Finland (UniPID Finnish University Partnership for International Development, 2020). And a European dimension concurrently is enhanced, for example, by EHEA goals and European Union (EU) policy agendas or by supra-national institutions like the European University Association (2020).

Since the beginning of the 1990s, globalisation—distinct from internationalisation and intended 'as a multifaceted phenomenon and an important environmental factor that has multiple effects on education' (Knight, 2003, p. 3)—has been a key development factor for HEIs, building the political, economic and social ground base for the evolution of international and European dimensions of higher education (Crăciun, 2018; Dagen et al., 2019; de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Lee & Stensaker, 2021; Tight, 2021).

In a globalised world, the international and European dimensions found common drivers in knowledge economy (LaFayette et al., 2019) and in knowledge diplomacy, as defined by Knight (2020). Moreover, national governments have been called to respond, in the sphere of higher education, to trends beyond their national borders, such as the growing influences of rankings (Belenkuyu & Karadag, 2023; Brankovic, 2022; Buckner, 2022; Uslu, 2020), the massification of higher education (Rumbley et al., 2022; The World Bank, 2023; Tight, 2019), migration (Murray et al., 2023), the evolution of technology (Rumbley et al., 2022), and the myriad international crises (Hunter et al., 2023).

The European dimension emerged clearly for the first time from the launch by the EU of the ERASMUS programme (European Economic Communities, 1987: 87). The European dimension, distinctly perceivable through the launch of ERASMUS, represented a pivotal chapter in the evolution of European higher education. ERASMUS became a catalyst for collaboration, mutual understanding, and the integration of diverse educational systems within Europe, also through remarkable solutions such as the European Credit Transfer System. ERASMUS not only facilitated student and staff mobility but also laid the groundwork for the Bologna Process and the broader vision of a unified EHEA (de Wit & Altbach, 2021).

Since the promulgation of the Bologna Declaration (European Ministers of Education, 1999), the Bologna Process has achieved remarkable goals, which have led to the creation and the consequent strengthening of the EHEA. The three-cycle system—bachelor, master's, doctorate-, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, the European Quality Assurance Register, the EHEA Qualification Framework, and the fair recognition of academic qualifications based on Lisbon Recognition Convention (Bergan, 2019) have contributed to the fortification of the European dimension into the daily practices of HEIs.

Contrary to the backdrop evident in times gone by, characterised by a competitive 'ping pong' phase between Bologna Process initiatives and the EU policy agenda (Corbett, 2011), the contemporary landscape sees a shift towards a collaborative and synergistic relationship. Today, the EHEA and the EU are engaged in cooperative efforts aimed at jointly enhancing the integration of the European dimension within higher education. This collaborative spirit is exemplified by initiatives such as the EU's European Qualification Framework, which aligns its descriptors with the three-cycle system of the EHEA Qualification Framework (Europass, 2022). Additionally, the robustness of the quality assurance infrastructure within the EHEA, as highlighted by Grek and Russell (2023), underscores the depth of this collaboration. Noteworthy is the significant impact of Bologna Process instruments on the EU's overarching strategy, as explicitly acknowledged by the Council of the European Union (2021: 66, 2022: 167). These examples are indicative of a meaningful and reciprocal partnership where the EHEA and the EU mutually contribute to the enrichment and advancement of higher education through shared frameworks, common objectives, and strategic alignment.

Favoured by this collaborative setting, the EU is conducting a long-term project for higher education, which embeds the European Education Area (Council of the European Union, 2021: 66, 2022: 160, 2023: 165) and the European Research Area (European Commission. Directorate General for Research and Innovation, 2021). Among the initiatives, the European Education Area agenda includes the capital European Universities Initiative (EUI), which, as argued by Cino Pagliarello (2022), 'incorporates the aims of the EHEA and the ERA into a common European dimension by linking education, research and innovation within a common transnational approach' (2022, p. 150).

The EUI is currently generating growing scholarly debate in the higher education field, which focuses not only on the Initiative itself but also provides new insights to interpret the changing environment of European higher education, as well as European HEIs (Brooks & Rensimer, 2023; Cino Pagliarello, 2022; Frame & Curyło, 2022; Gunn, 2020; Hartzell et al., 2023; Kanniainen & Pekkola, 2023; Maassen et al., 2022). EUI opened the door to a comprehensive re-evaluation of internationalisation and Europeanisation in higher education, paving the way to new means of capturing these two dynamic concepts.

The above description of the unique context of the EHEA highlights the intricate interplay between the international and European dimensions. Essentially, the EHEA relies on a complex system of organisations, policies, and tools to ensure that the European dimension is seamlessly reflected in individual HEIs. This setup promotes a unified approach, emphasising common values and standards across participating institutions. HEIs, in alignment with the broader European space, embrace not only the European dimension but also respond to global dynamics by actively incorporating the international dimension, navigating through national strategies and legal frameworks, as well as HEIs' missions and strategies. This dual commitment underscores the adaptability of HEIs to international and European influences, showcasing their ability to orient themselves in a dynamic and interconnected higher education landscape.

3 Focusing on HEIs: The Institutional Logics Perspective

HEIs develop their strategies by interpreting, with varying priorities and viewpoints, the international and European external factors at social, economic, and political levels (Buckner, 2022; de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Stensaker et al., 2019; Wihlborg & Robson, 2018). Moreover, as pointed out by Alexiadiou and Rönnberg (2023), the manner in which individuals inside institutions interpret HEIs' strategies highly influences how HEIs respond to international and European impulses.

In the EHEA, during the past decades, HEIs have become strategically-driven organisations benefiting from greater autonomy (Gunn, 2020) in a context, as described above, which favoured the access of HEIs to international and European influences. Aware of those changes, the EU responded by re-evaluating the role of HEIs in the EHEA, bestowing upon them a pivotal role in higher education. In the *Communication on a European strategies for universities*, the European Commission (2022) stated that:

> Universities have a unique position at the crossroads of education, research, innovation, serving society and economy: they play a critical role in achieving the European Education Area (EEA) and the European Research Area (ERA), in synergy with the European Higher Education Area.

In the context of the EHEA and its underlying principles of communication, two critical aspects merit attention. Firstly, HEIs have the potential to concurrently incorporate the international and European dimensions across the spectrum of education (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Jones, 2022; Mittelmeier et al., 2021), research (de Wit, 2020), and societal engagement (Brandenburg et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2021) the three core missions of universities. Moreover, HEIs are fundamental in achieving broader goals in higher education, and thus, a HEI-centred approach should be adopted to understand the EHEA context.

Despite the use of institutional logics in higher education research being seen as a relatively novel approach (Cai & Mehari, 2015), it has nonetheless witnessed rapid growth in several spheres of higher education in the last decade (Cai & Mountford, 2022), and it allows for the definition of a HEI-centred perspective for internationalisation and Europeanisation. Institutional logics possess the capability to investigate how different processes could happen simultaneously in HEIs, highlighting multiple and contrasting logics intervening (Pietilä & Pinheiro, 2021). They allow us to understand how the dual commitment of HEIs, international and European, is possible, driven by logics sometimes overlapping, sometimes diverging. Essentially, it allows for the definition of similarities and differences between the international and European dimensions, starting from the HEIs.

3.1 The Institutional Logics Theory

The institutional logics perspective found its origin in the paper by Friedland and Alford (1991), where the two authors argued against the absence of agency in neo-institutionalist theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). They argued, first, that society and social relationships diffuse both material structure and cultural elements and, second, that society is constituted by multiple institutional orders influencing organisations and the actors that inhabit them (Friedland & Alford, 1991).

In the first formulation by Friedland and Alford (1991), the analysis focused on a macro-level. Further developments in institutional logics studies (Rao et al., 2003; Thornton & Ocasio, 1999) investigated within the micro-level how the different logics influence organisations and individuals. Thornton and Ocasio (1999) defined institutional logics as 'the socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality' (1999, p. 804). Following this definition, it is possible to argue that institutional logics shape internationalisation and Europeanisation.

Thornton et al. (2012) identified four main principles of institutional logics (2012, p. 6). First, the historical contingency in institutions underscores their fluid and evolving nature, emphasising that they are far from crystallised fixed entities. Consequently, any analysis centred on HEIs remains relevant only temporarily and within specific contextual boundaries. A prime illustration of this principle is evident in the rapid developments of the international and European dimensions within the EHEA in recent decades. The institutional responses to these developments serve as a clear example of how the dynamic interplay of time and context significantly influences HEIs. As the EHEA has undergone transformative shifts, the strategies, structures, and roles of HEIs within this context have likewise adapted, underscoring the temporal and contextual dimensions integral to understanding internationalisation and Europeanisation dynamics.

Second, HEIs can be interpreted from multiple levels of analysis, adopting the perspective that they assimilate different levels of logics: individual, organisational, field, and societal. For instance, this could be shown in different logics influencing academic professionals, such as the sense of belonging to the HEI and, at the same time, to a global community (Pietilä & Pinheiro, 2021). International and European dimensions are shaped by logics at different levels: not only the organisational logics of HEIs but also the logics of individuals, of higher education, and of society more broadly.

Third, the duality of agency and structure leads to considering the individuals and the strategies as well as the structure of the HEIs, with an interest in how individuals can change HEIs while being collocated in their context. Liu et al. (2023), for example, show how the competing logics between universities and their professors led to an implementation of education of international students that is divergent from national goals. Therefore, the integration of international and European dimensions derives from the synthesis of strategies and individuals and the HEIs' structures. It is the duality of structure and agency of HEIs, perceivable all along a multiple level of analysis—context and HEIs, HEIs and individuals, context and individuals—that, through different cooperating and competing logics, allows and characterises the implementation of the international and European dimensions in higher education.

The last principle, interpreting HEIs as material and symbolic, finds its ground base in the composition of HEIs, in which are intertwined both material elements-structure and practices—and symbolic aspects-ideas, beliefs, values, and culture. International and European dimensions manifest in HEIs through activities, such as the enrolment of international students or the EUI, and are sustained by intangible aspects, such as the belief in a globalised market of higher education or the EU values of mutual collaboration.

Connected to these principles and starting from the seminal article of Friedland and Alford (1991), Thornton et al. (2012) elaborated the interinstitutional system, an analytical framework to understand the main ideal logics impacting the structure and the individuals constituting the institutions. The framework is built on the concept that institutions are composed of subsystems, the main logics, created and perpetrated by individuals and organisations through a set of cultural symbols and material practices (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999; Thornton et al., 2012). As per Thornton et al. (2012), the main institutional logics are family, community, religion, state, market, profession, and corporation. While most of them can be intuitively understood, community logics foster common values, reciprocity and moral responsibility, and corporation logics prioritise the interests of the organisations.

Observing the main logics, it is important to acknowledge that every HEI, as well as the individuals belonging to them, act according to simultaneous and multiple logics (Pietilä & Pinheiro, 2021; Thornton & Ocasio, 1999; Thornton et al., 2012). In contemporary internationalisation and Europeanisation—considering studies such as the rationales driving internationalisation by Knight (2021) family and religion logics are often not impactful, while the other logics can be present to different extents. The logics embedded in the international and European dimensions lead to their differentiation.

On the one hand, the international dimension is fostered strongly by state (e.g., national strategies and regulations), market (e.g., competition for international students' fees), corporation (e.g., HEIs' positions in international rankings) and professional logics (e.g., academic ambitions of each researcher), with community logics having a lower degree of influence on the international dimension. On the other hand, community logics reflect the foundation of the European dimension, which is shared values and goals, such as the ones of EHEA, EEA and ERA, its main constituents. The community is followed by the professional and corporate logics (e.g., the prestige for both academics and their HEIs to receive European research grants). Moreover, market logics—since European initiatives like Erasmus+ are not strictly made to generate profit—and state logics—considering the supra-national nature of the dimension—are usually not the main drivers.

4 Capturing Dynamic Concepts

The international, as well as the European, external factors at social, political, and economic levels influence HEIs, which interpret their impulses according to their institutional priorities. From the lens of institutional logics, these priorities are intricately tied to HEIs' organisational practices and identities cultivated within HEIs. The dynamics are shaped by the recurrent interplay among multiple concurrent logics. These logics, reflective of various guiding principles and normative values, contribute to the formation of organisational identities and practices. Consequently, the decisions and responses of HEIs to external stimuli are deeply rooted in these institutional logics, embodying the nuanced interweaving of internal and external influences.

Logics in HEIs are the result of the interplay between agency and structure. This interplay involves strategies and individuals within the organised framework of HEIs. Logics, rather than being fixed concepts, evolve through the choices and behaviours of individuals working within the structured environment of HEIs. This mutual relationship between agency and structure highlights the two-way influence: individuals contribute to shaping the structure, and, in turn, the structure shapes and influences the agency of individuals. International and European impulses become fortified and distinct dimensions through activities embedded with different institutional logics, stemming from the reciprocal relationship between agency and structure. Embedding how this happens and its implications is the cornerstone to capture the dynamic concepts of internationalisation and Europeanisation.

4.1 Two Directions and Three Typologies

HEIs' strategies and individuals foster the inclusion of the international and European dimensions potentially in all three core missions of a university: education, research, and social engagement. The international and European dimensions manifest in a set of activities differentiated by their embodied logics. As an example, an ERASMUS mobility scheme, driven mainly by community logics, will differ from a single mobility scheme between two HEIs, often moved by market or state logics.

The activities have two directions, considering the perspective of the HEI. On the one hand, they can head towards an abroad direction, enclosing all the activities taking place outside HEIs. On the other hand, at home, they can include the actions realised within HEIs (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). Considering the increasing impact of digitalisation that inevitably influences their international and European dimensions, Mittelmeier et al. (2021) proposed the third 'at a distance' category, which embodies all the virtual activities. However, in this paper, this potential category will be embedded in the at home typology, since the digital sphere does not necessitate a physical change of location by the participants and could be thus interpreted as happening inside HEIs.

Following either one or the other direction, three different typologies of activities could be implemented. First is the mobility typology. For example, degree, credit, certificate or staff mobility abroad (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Kanniainen & Pekkola, 2023) or participation in international conferences by researchers. At home, there are Collaborative Online International Learning initiatives (Hackett et al., 2023; Rubin & Guth, 2023; Tuke et al., 2021) or participation of academics in an international webinar. The second typology is cooperation, which manifests abroad, for instance, with the creation of cross-border entities in partnerships with organisations (Kanniainen & Pekkola, 2023), such as EUI or a new campus beyond national borders. At home, it could manifest in jointly conducted research projects led by the home university or in new laboratories inside the HEI. The third typology is dissemination, which could be realised abroad in actions such as publishing, co-authoring or organising events involving local communities (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). At home, dissemination can be enhanced by fostering EHEA or global values among the HEIs' members (Jones et al., 2021; Kanniainen & Pekkola, 2023) or through internationalisation of the curriculum (Jones, 2022).

It is possible to imagine how HEIs' activities could easily cross more than one typology and transpire in both directions. For instance, a consortium created through the EUI could enhance a mobility scheme, create a platform for dissemination, engage in projects with actors external to higher education, as well as promote EU values for the staff (Cino Pagliarello, 2022; Gunn, 2020; Maassen et al., 2022). Moreover, even if the goal of an action usually aims to contribute mainly to one of the university's core missions, it is often the case that all three missions are impacted in some way. The inclusion of the international and European dimensions in the three university core missions, shown in Fig. 1, could vary from HEI to HEI, according to their unique organisational identities and practices. Analysing the role of institutional strategies

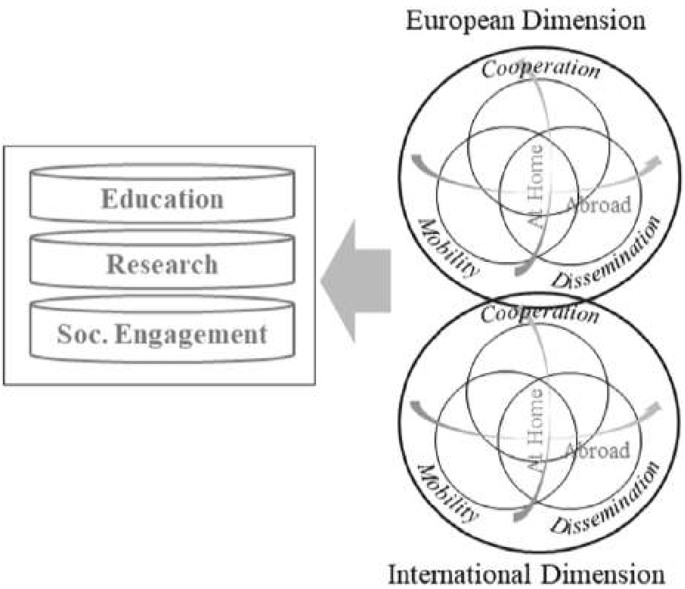

Fig. 1 Two directions & three typologies

and individuals in facilitating and shaping this process becomes, therefore, of primary interest to understanding the process itself.

4.2 The Internationalisation and Europeanisation Cycle

Considering the common context of the EHEA, in which they are generated, the institutional strategies of European HEIs share some common general aspects. However, as argued by Hunter et al. (2022), 'institutions are being required to justify their internationalisation activities not as universally desirable in their own right but in the context of their own missions, histories, institutional cultures, and political and economic contexts' (2022, p. 144). Due to their multiple institutional logics impacting their organisational identities and practices, every HEI has its own unique institutional way of including the international and European dimensions inside their organisations. HEIs have a considerable number of logics intervening simultaneously within their organisational structure that could relate to each other through dynamics specific to that interaction. As an example, the market logics determining the recruitment of international students could be in contrast with the community logics stimulated by initiatives such as ERASMUS.

As a consequence of this situation, HEIs are called to implement common mechanisms to react to the different institutional logics perpetrated by their strategies and individuals, in an act of transforming logics, originating from the interpretation of external factors through organisational practices and identities, in organisational logics shared among the strategies and the individuals. The act, from which stem shared logics, can be interpreted as the ‘negotiation’ described by Thornton et al. (2012, p. 93).

Maassen et al. (2022), in their study about the organisational implications of EUI alliances, pointed out different types of mechanisms to deal with the multiple logics intervening in the new cooperative organisations funded by the EU. Given that the purpose of these mechanisms is to deal with multiple logics, they are not only applicable to the context of EUI but also within European HEIs.

Among this type of mechanism, coordinating the set of standards and schemes that are implemented inside the HEIs is particularly relevant. For example, clear coordination on a mobility strategy, including precise mobility schemes, creates the space for strategies and individuals to operate within the same logics; or institutional incentives to receive research grants funded by the EU orient the professional logics driving academics towards contributing to the organisational strategy, that can be driven more by market logics instead.

Linked to effective coordination, HEIs should have some established conflict resolution practices, which allow the HEIs to find solutions when conflictual logics intervene. Such is the case of the ‘high quantity but low quality’ of international students in China analysed by Liu et al. (2023), where the state logics pushing for the recruitment of more international students collided with the professional logics of the professor teaching them. The first thoughts about conflict resolution could lead to top-down pushes from institutional governance. However, a study by Maassen et al. (2022) showed the effectiveness of building consensus to enhance collegial decision making over more hierarchical approaches.

Collegial decision making is a manifestation of the fundamental impact that individuals have on institutions. Individuals could be, as argued by Hunter et al. (2022), ‘essential enablers’ (2022, p. 1) of internationalisation and Europeanisation processes inside HEIs. For instance, the recommendations by Jones et al. (2021) to enable the internationalisation of higher education for society are directed not only to leaders but also, acknowledging their pivotal role, to individuals, such as teachers and researchers.

The commitment of individuals is of paramount importance to the inclusion of international and European dimensions within HEIs. Having high individual engagement creates the soil to nourish a co-creative environment, fostering well-directed institutional initiatives that embed the logics stemming from the implementers as well. Commitment of individuals is a prerequisite for reflective conversation, a practice ‘that occurs among professionals and leads to shared understandings and original and synergistic ideas’ (Hunter et al., 2022, p. 1). Reflective conversation among individuals is an act of sharing logics that could lead to drastic changes within the HEIs and the ways they shape their strategies (Hunter et al., 2022).

Regardless of specific types of logics intervening between strategies and individuals, these negotiation mechanisms lead to a new set of shared logics inside the HEIs. These logics are the ground base for the two acts that determine the inclusion of international and European dimensions: decision making and sense making.

On the one hand, decision making is the act of choosing *what* to do according to the shared logics derived from negotiation mechanisms, and determining consequentially the practices of the HEI (Thornton et al., 2012, p. 95). On the other hand, sense making is the process of determining *why* to do it through shared logics, embedding them into explicit practices that shape the identities of HEIs (Thornton et al., 2012, p. 96).

Decision making and sense making determine how international and European dimensions are included in the three core missions. The inclusion contributes to produce or re-produce organisational practices and identities, which are the organisational filters of HEIs to interpret international and European impulses deriving from external factors.

With the aim of synthetising all the concepts described Fig. 2, represents the internationalisation and Europeanisation processes as a cycle happening inside every HEI. HEIs interpret international and European impulses from external factors, which influence individuals within the HEI through their organisational identities and practices. The interpretation leads to organisational logics, which are transformed through mechanisms of negation between the HEIs' strategies and individuals. The negotiation outcomes are shared logics, which are the basis for decision making and sense making. These two acts shape the actions to be implemented and what logics these actions should convey while including the international and European dimensions impacting the three university core missions.

It is through this process that international and European influences derive their meanings in practice. They are represented through a set of bidirectional and three-folded activities characterised not by a geographical scope but by imagined spaces (Brooks & Rensimer, 2023), embedding distinct logics. Different logics for different dimensions that impact on and contribute to build the starting point of the cycle: organisational practices and identities.

Essentially, this cycle showcases how internationalisation and Europeanisation, despite their dynamicity, can be fully captured following the logics driving their dimensions, which gain their full shape only within HEIs.

4.3 Implications of International and European Dimensions

Despite the international and European dimensions being collectively included in HEIs through the internationalisation and Europeanisation cycle, it can be argued that different degrees of integration of the two dimensions impact HEIs in their organisational identities and practices.

Especially with regard to the European dimension, it has been argued that the standards and steering mechanisms by the EU and EHEA are the 'faceless masters' of European higher education, relying strongly on the Open Method of Coordination (Brøgger, 2019). Moreover, EUI can be interpreted as an attempt to bypass the limits of the EU's subsidiarity principle and the national influences, funding directly the HEIs to influence their internationalisation goals (Kanniainen & Pekkola, 2023).

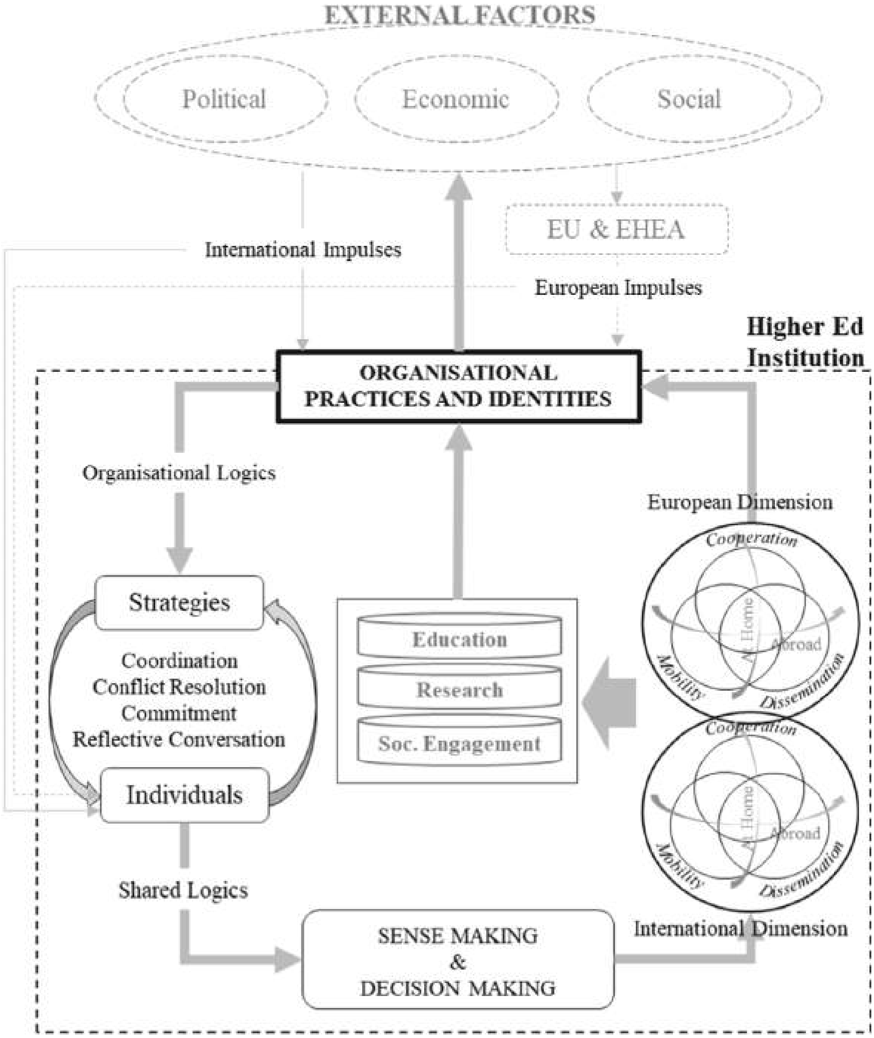

Fig. 2 The internationalisation and europeanisation cycle

Two reflections, which do not contradict these views, can be made. The Open Method of Coordination and the EU and EHEA initiatives have the undeniable potential to steer higher education at a distance; but they do not have the same binding potential as legislation or regulations at the national level for HEIs. Besides, even though HEIs are strongly pulled to pursue European goals by actively engaging in the EUI or other initiatives promoted by the EU agenda, they must contemporaneously consider whether the feasibility and benefits brought by the initiatives match the national legislative framework and incentives. It is not by chance that the new alliances of the EUI will have to face different challenges, such as their legal status, their governance, the degrees awarded, quality assurance and funding challenges (Claeys-Kulik et al., 2022; Estermann et al., 2021), bound to national constraints.

Earlier failed attempts to create something akin to the EUI, which were inhibited by the lack of HEI consensus (Gunn, 2020), led the EU and EHEA to acknowledge the need to empower HEIs to reach their goals (Cino Pagliarello, 2022; Gunn, 2020). HEIs, while including the European dimension, carefully evaluate the potential benefits to their organisations. HEIs pragmatically decide if, how and to what extent to include the dimension in their structure. It is possible to argue that, even though the European dimension demands the implementation of standards and schemes and commitment to its goals, it enhances university autonomy.

With regard to internationalisation, HEIs do not have shared standards and schemes promoted at supra-national level, and they consequently might appear to enjoy greater autonomy. However, in the act of including the international dimension, HEIs have to face the limitations set by national legislation, without having another driver supporting them at supra-national level, like the EHEA space. Neglecting the European dimension means, for European HEIs, losing a potential factor enhancing their autonomy.

Considering both international and European dimensions, the processes including them share a fundamental common trait: the pragmatically informed choice by the HEIs in determining the scale and scope of their implementation within the organisations, based on their unique characteristic organisational identities and practices.

5 Conclusion

This paper has explored how the adaptability of HEIs and their individuals to international and European impulses leads to two concurrent dimensions: international and European. Adopting the institutional logics' perspective, the analysis has highlighted how international and European influences become distinct dimensions within HEIs through activities embedded within institutional logics and stemming from the interplay between agency and structure.

The first aspect to note is that the international and European dimensions are differentiated by their main logics. The first dimension is shaped strongly by state, market, profession logics, and corporation, sometimes embedding community logics. The second dimension, instead, relies mainly on community logics, backed by professional and corporate logics, whereas market and state logics are typically not considered.

Moreover, the two dimensions directly impact the three core university missions, and they get the shape of different sets of bidirectional—abroad and at home—and three-folded—mobility, cooperation, and dissemination—activities. Directions and categories are not mutually exclusive as situations may lead to their overlap, impacting also the three core missions simultaneously.

A further aspect of fundamental importance is that the integration of international and European dimensions in HEIs, namely the realisation of internationalisation and Europeanisation, follows a cyclical dynamic marked by diverse logics. Negotiation mechanisms are employed to reconcile contested logics, originating either from within HEIs or introduced by individuals, into shared logics. The latter ones lead to decision making and sense making, which determine what actions to realise and what logics are conveyed in those actions.

The individuals, in this process, should be regarded as essential enablers (Hunter et al., 2022) inside the HEIs. The unique set of actions, implemented by said individuals, shape the organisational identities and practices, the corner stone of this cyclical process. The agency of individuals within HEIs underscores their crucial contribution to the ongoing development and refinement of organisational strategies, practices, and, ultimately, the successful integration of international and European dimensions.

Internationalisation and Europeanisation also diverge in their influence impacting the organisational autonomy of HEIs. Internationalisation, characterised by a large degree of independence on schemes and actions to implement, can operate within a higher degree of national constraints. In contrast, Europeanisation, despite enclosing a larger set of pre-defined schemes and actions for HEIs, provides them with the opportunity to surpass national limitations by embracing supra-national standards, schemes, and values, which do not have the same binding power of national regulations. In navigating these dynamics, HEIs adopt a pragmatic approach to strike a balance between international and European dimensions.

In conclusion, ‘follow the logics’ could be the way to deepen our knowledge about internationalisation and Europeanisation. The main ideas of this paper could be synthesised in the internationalisation and Europeanisation cycle. This demonstrates how internationalisation and Europeanisation, despite their dynamicity, can be fully captured following the logics driving international and European dimensions, perceivable in their full shape only within HEIs.

At the current stage, the main limitation of this analysis lies on its conceptual nature, and it is currently unfeasible to state its degree of applicability. However, the cycle could be a framework for researchers and policymakers to capture—through analysis, recommendations or foresight exercises originating from HEIs—the concepts of internationalisation and Europeanisation amid challenging global circumstances, marked by constant change.

Further empirical applications of the cycle and the institutional logics approach, possibly in the EUI research context, could integrate and overcome the limitations of this conceptual paper. Moreover, despite the framework’s formulation for a European context, we have no reason to doubt the potential for broader applicability in other supra-national/regional contexts, such as South-East Asia or Latin America.

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Bologna Process and the Internationalisation of the Third Mission of the University: Completing the Policy Script

Flora Laszlo

Abstract The present paper investigates key arguments for the inclusion of the third mission of the university into the internationalisation policy script of the Bologna Process. Existing concrete initiatives in this area are scrutinised as evidence for both the necessity and practical possibility of such an endeavour. Excellent studies are available that underscore the centrality of internationalisation to the entire Process as well as its particularities. One of these particularities has to do with the fact that the focus of the Bologna Process discourse on internationalisation and related initiatives in the European Higher Education Area touches primarily, if not exclusively, on aspects regarding education (especially student mobility), which is only one of the three main missions of the university, along with research and service to society. This paper discusses the reasons for leaving out the third mission so far and concludes with further arguments for considering internationalization of the third mission when reflecting on the priorities and targets for the future of the European Higher Education Area.

Keywords Internationalisation of higher education · Third mission of the university · Bologna process · European Higher Education Area

1 Introduction

Internationalisation of higher education is an impactful, multifarious phenomenon that has attracted significant attention from researchers in the last several decades. Outside the realm of scholarship, internationalisation has also been a matter of concern for public policymakers and public authorities more generally, as well as for all other categories of stakeholders in higher education, from university leaders to students and from regulators to parents and employers. Internationalisation of higher

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education is, by now, a relatively well-established albeit continuously evolving sub-field of studies. Several comprehensive reviews of the state of affairs in this sub-field (Craciun, 2019; de Wit, 2020; Tran et al., 2023) have identified topics and themes of predilection, such as motivations for and triggers of internationalisation, manifestations or forms of internationalisation, and the magnitude and differential impacts of different forms and manifestations of internationalisation.

For the purpose of the interrogation in the present paper, it should be noted that, in general, the studies of internationalisation of higher education tend to focus on aspects that pertain to the first two missions of the university—education and research. The third mission, service to society or civic engagement, has attracted a lot less attention as a research topic (Jones et al., 2021). It can be argued that the explanation for this imbalance resides in the fact that research mirrors the reality on the ground: there are a lot fewer actual initiatives promoting the internationalisation of the third mission, that is, internationalisation of the university's direct contribution to addressing economic and social issues for the benefit of defined communities, as compared to the internationalisation of education (curriculum, student mobility, etc.) or research.

This is also the case with the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).[1] Launched in 1999, the Bologna Process is one of the most significant regional developments in higher education. One of the main thrusts of this Process was to create programmatically, based on an explicit design or plan, a continental, European-wide space for dialogue and practice in higher education, with attached if not superposed cultural, economic and political ambitions, such as supporting economic advancement in the member countries, the emergence of a larger (and possibly integrated) labour market, the creation of a European *ethos,* and even the creation of a European *demos* (Matei, 2018).

The Bologna Process is not a European Union programme or initiative, but it is important to note that there has always been a variable-geometry partial overlap with European Union strategies, policies, and programmes in higher education and research. Also, the European Commission is a member of the Process.

While far from being completely successful in implementing its declared objectives or perfectly consistent internally, the Bologna Process has made remarkable innovation and progress possible in higher education. Similarly, while the EHEA is, in many ways, incomplete, even skewed and not perfectly consistent across its member countries, it does constitute a space for dialogue and practice with real substance. The EHEA is, in other words, a "reality" as a regional project and "construction" in higher education, with genuine substance in at least a few areas, along a few specified "dimensions", to follow the language of the Bologna Process itself.

[1] "The Bologna Process, launched with the Bologna Declaration of 1999, is a voluntary intergovernmental process in higher education based on jointly agreed principles, objectives and standards. (…) The EHEA, as the common European space for higher education, is considered a result of the Bologna Process" (Matei & Iwinska, 2018). At present, EHEA comprises 49 states, and the European Commission is also a member. Russia and Belarus are nominally members as well but currently their membership is suspended since the attack on Ukraine in 2022.

Internationalisation has been a key dimension of the Bologna Process since its very start and represents an inherent part of this ambitious, continent-wide project being implemented now for more than 20 years. The Process itself is sometimes presented as a result of internationalisation pressures or as an answer to internationalisation pressures and, at the same time, also as a trigger of a large *sui generis* internationalisation strategy and set of activities.

Precise characteristics of internationalisation within the Bologna Process will be presented in the next section of this chapter while looking specifically at the place of the third mission in this context. For this, the main Bologna Process documents will be reviewed, along with both scholarly work on the topic and policy literature. Separately, the analysis of notable examples of inclusion of the third mission in internationalisation efforts in Europe will build on scholarly literature and also on the personal experience of the author as a participant in such activities and initiatives.

As discussed by Compagnucci and Spigarelli in a comprehensive literature review study (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020), the third mission of the university is an evolving phenomenon and has been conceptualised in somewhat different ways by different scholars. Their generic definition will be used in this chapter, which sees the third mission as representing the economic and social mission of the university and its contribution to defined communities (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020). An alternative term for the third mission is civic engagement. A useful definition for this term was proposed by Jonathan Becker in his article *What civic engagement is … and is not*: "In the 21st century, civic engagement means recurrent and purposeful efforts by members of a community, who through their voluntary interaction with others, seek to promote the common good—locally, nationally, or globally—by means of political and non-political processes and actions" (Becker, 2023: 11).

The main objectives of this paper are (1) to analyse the place of the third mission in the internationalisation policy script of the Bologna Process, and (2) to put forward in a systematic manner arguments for the inclusion of the third mission in this script, while (3) provide an inventory of and analyse representative examples (whether successful or not) of such attempts in Europe.

2 Internationalisation and the Third Mission of the University Within the Bologna Process: Policy, Scholarship, Practice

This section analyses the place of the third mission in the internationalisation policy script of the Bologna Process. In this context, "policy script" refers to the programmatic policy discourse within the Bologna Process, which includes normative principles and, more importantly, defined objectives for the specific area of internationalisation, often with "instructions" or guidelines regarding how these objectives are supposed to be put in practice. "Internationalisation policy script" is used here in analogy to "script" in filmmaking: the written text about the characters, plot and action in the respective film, or the relatively well-detailed outline regarding what is supposed to happen, sometimes sequence by sequence.

The Bologna policy script for internationalisation can be reconstructed by looking at the key programmatic documents of the Process, the Ministerial Communiqués, adopted between 2001 and 2020, usually every two or three years.[2] Together with the founding Bologna Declaration of 1999, the Communiqués are the main documents charting the course of the Process. They were adopted at conferences of ministerial delegations from the member countries plus the European Commission, which is also a member. The Communiqués often include elements of evaluation of the progress to date in the implementation of the objectives of the Process in specific areas. These objectives are formulated as joint voluntary "commitments" of the members, thus not legally binding. The evaluation of the implementation of these Process commitments, realised systemically by Eurydice and known as "implementation reports",[3] is also a very good indication of what exactly are the objectives of the Process (what is evaluated), what is the script about them, and how it is implemented in practice. Occasional independent progress evaluations undertaken by different research organisations or one-off teams of researchers are also highly informative in this regard. Also, important European organisations, acting as intermediary organisations, can and have played a role in clarifying the script and facilitating its realisation or evaluation. The European University Association is one of the most important examples of such organisations.

Academic research completes the sources that allow a succinct summary of the Bologna Policy script to be drawn with regard to internationalisation and also to identify the place of the third mission in this context:

a. Internationalisation represents a key strategic dimension of the Bologna Process. With one exception (Paris, 2018), all Ministerial Communiqués address explicitly the issue of internationalisation.
b. The primary focus of internationalisation in the context of the Bologna Process is student mobility.
c. Other aspects of internationalisation, such as internationalisation of research, are also present in European higher education, but they have emerged largely outside the context of the Bologna Process.

Internationalisation, operationalised as student mobility, is repeatedly mentioned in the Ministerial Communiqués, and this began already with the Bologna Declaration of 1999. Two aspects that appear to be considered intrinsically related to student mobility, quality assurance and recognition of qualifications, are also repeatedly and extensively mentioned in several Communiqués. More recently, a third aspect, understood as student mobility in the context of internationalisation, is related to issues of fairness (in terms of access, equity, and inclusion), or what is framed as the social dimension of student mobility.

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[2] All Bologna process Ministerial Communiqués are available at https://www.ehea.info/page-ministerial-declarations-and-communiques. Accessed on 15 December 2023.

[3] https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/, accessed on 15 December 2023.

The 2020 Rome Communiqué (Bologna Process, 2020) explicitly mentions that EHEA is based on "interconnectedness" realised through international cooperation. This is a rare major mention in the official Bologna discourse of internationalisation about an aspect of internationalisation that transcends student mobility. In only one other Communiqué, from Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve (Bologna Process, 2009) is internationalisation mentioned as a condition for achieving success in the area of sustainable development in higher education, with direct reference to the UN SDGs. Unlike for the case of student mobility, it appears that there has been no policy or practical follow-up to this call to develop internationalisation within the EHEA that, in turn, would support sustainable development.

Higher education dynamics in Europe are not all decided upon or driven by the Bologna Process. There are important policy developments that are initiated by national or system-level public authorities or by the European Union (EU) and its institutions (mainly but not exclusively the European Commission). Although the Commission is a member of the Bologna Process, the EU and Bologna Process higher education and research policies do not overlap fully, including in the area of internationalisation. Importantly, the EU policies in higher education often have an impact beyond the EU member states alone.

A study of the understanding of internationalisation in "European higher education" commissioned by the policy directorate of the European Parliament confirms that student mobility and education are the main focus within "Europe", although other aspects are mentioned as well, such as internationalisation of research: "increasing international (and especially outbound) student mobility is a key policy focus within institutional internationalisation policies; (…) as well as international student mobility, international research collaboration and international strategic partnerships are given priority among the internationalisation activities undertaken by European institutions" (de Wit et al., 2015: 280).

This study also mentions that the most important perceived benefits of internationalisation are in the area of education: "the key benefits /reasons for pursuing internationalisation are seen as the improvement of the quality of teaching and learning and preparing students to live and work in a globalised world" (de Wit et al., 2015: 76). The study makes clear that the concern and policy push for the internationalisation of research come from the EU, not from the Bologna Process.

We can see in this succinct summary of the internationalisation policy script within the Bologna Process that there is no mention in it of the third mission of the university, nor, it seems, any mention of the internationalisation of teaching and learning by any means other than mobility. This is perhaps not surprising, given that the third mission is rarely addressed in internationalisation policies or studies about internationalisation, in general. It is possible to mobilise quite extensive evidence in support of this assertion. For example, a computer-based taxonomy built through a scrutiny of all national internationalisation strategies in existence at that time (Craciun, 2019) found no explicit mention of the third mission in these strategies, despite the fact that the author includes social aspects in the scope of her definition of internationalisation.

In turn, the studies dedicated specifically to the third mission of higher education mention internationalisation very rarely. A recent comprehensive literature review of the scholarship regarding the third mission of the university does not mention internationalisation even once (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020).

At the intersection of these two thematic areas of research in higher education, internationalisation and the third mission, it will not be surprising that studies about internationalisation of the third mission are extremely rare. However, they do exist.

A highly informative and potentially impactful study is Jones et al. (2021). This study investigates the moral and policy arguments for including the third mission, operationalised as social responsibility of the university in a global perspective, into the scope of internationalisation, the potential benefits of this inclusion, and the price to pay for non-inclusion. The study puts forward a particular model, Internationalisation of Higher Education for Society (IHES), for realising this desideratum. Another rare study that looks specifically into third mission aspects of the internationalisation of higher education was commissioned by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), and it was published as a report in 2020 (Brandenburg et al., 2020).

The absence of a concern for or attention to the internationalisation of the third mission in the Bologna Process is thus not at odds with the global situation in this area or areas. Internationalisation and the third mission are very rarely treated together anywhere, whether in policy or scholarship. The EU, an important participant in shaping the discourse about internationalisation, has advocated for overcoming this situation by calling for a "comprehensive internationalisation" (de Wit et al., 2015), which goes beyond just student mobility. The EU played a major role in advocating the need for comprehensive strategies, and also in launching some policy initiatives and supporting certain programmes that do pay explicit attention to internationalisation of the third mission (*as discussed in the next section*). It appears that this more comprehensive approach of the EU and the appeal to include the third mission in internationalisation strategies and activities have not penetrated the Bologna Process policy script. There have been few similar attempts made by other important participants or key stakeholders in the Bologna Process, such as the European University Association or the European Student Union. Nevertheless, these stakeholders have rather played along with the mainstream Bologna Process script. When attempts to promote a different way of thinking have been made by other key Bologna Process stakeholders, such as the Council of Europe, for example, by promoting the model of an anchor university (*discussed in the next section*), they have not succeeded in changing the script either.

The focus on student mobility in this context went hand in hand with an understanding that internationalisation is beneficial for student learning. However, as mentioned by Jones et al. (2021) in their discussion on the global social responsibility of universities, learning does not happen only in the classroom or on campus. "Service learning" is mentioned as an important example of student learning acquired through engagement with real-life communities in addressing their real-life challenges. International openness must, of course, include student mobility, but it should not be reduced to student (and maybe staff) exchanges, internationalisation of curriculum or putting in place good recognition and quality assurance frameworks and mechanisms. International students can and must learn also through civic engagement activities. This is a major argument for the inclusion of the third mission into the internationalisation policy script in the EHEA, in addition to the argument regarding the social responsibility of the university, to which an international or internationalisation dimension must be attached as well.

A third argument has to do with the need to address the perception that, allegedly quite often, if not always, internationalisation and international students do not benefit local communities. In an EHEA country like the Netherlands, for example, which has seen a major uptake in the number of international students in recent years, there is increasing opposition to internationalisation or to more internationalisation insofar as this is understood as an increase in the number of international students, within academia itself, in policy circles and within the general public, based exactly on the perception that international students do not benefit local communities. Sometimes, international students can be perceived as benefiting universities themselves if they pay fees or higher fees than national students (which is not the case in many EHEA countries anyway), but not the local communities. Thus, internationalisation is sometimes perceived by the public as a self-serving activity of higher education institutions.

Including the third mission systematically into the scope of internationalisation should allow international students and staff to be involved in activities that directly benefit local communities, thus helping the university to mobilise more knowledge and talent and make a contribution to addressing social and economic issues—and also to show sceptical observers that local communities can and do benefit from internationalisation.

If the EHEA is in some ways an incomplete construction, this is also in part because internationalisation, important as it is for the fate of this continental project, is largely restricted to only one key area of work in the university, which is education, and even here almost exclusively to student mobility. It may be time to reconsider the place of the third mission in internationalisation. For this, one could build on lessons learned from discrete, rather than systematic, attempts and examples, which show that this is possible and also how exactly it becomes beneficial to pay direct attention to the internationalisation of the third mission. There are not many examples like these, still they can offer a very good basis for this reconsideration. Some have been discussed elsewhere (Brandenburg et al., 2020). The list of examples discussed in Sect. 3 of the present paper draws on higher education literature as well as on the direct experiences of the author of this chapter.

3 Experiences of Internationalisation of the Third Mission in the European Higher Education Area

Several recent experiences in Europe illustrate the possibility and maybe the need for the inclusion of the third mission of the university into internationalisation strategies and internationalisation activities within the Bologna Process.

3.1 Smart Specialisations

Although originating within academic rather than policy spheres and used in different parts of the world, the concept of smart specialisation, also referred to sometimes as "smart specialisation strategy" or "research and innovation strategies for smart specialisation" or "RIS3" (Foray et al., 2012) or simply S3,[4] acquired a good degree of centrality in the cohesion strategies and regional development programmes of the EU around 2014–2018 (Fotakis et al., 2014). All EU member states were required to have their own national smart specialisation strategies. The enthusiasm for smart specialisations reached a high around this time, with some stating that "smart specialisation is currently probably the largest innovation policy experiment in the world" (Radosevic & Ciampi Stancova, 2018: 264). At present, this wave of enthusiasm has largely passed but smart specialisation is still used as a policy tool by EU institutions, including as a conditionality for funding in certain programmes.

The concept of smart specialisation is based on the assumption that most universities (and research organisations, which are also part of the story for this example) have only limited resources and, therefore, cannot compete or excel in all areas. The recommended solution is to focus on one or a few particular niches or areas of strengths—to "specialise". In its policy application, the concept was expanded to include a summons or appeal to universities and research organisations to team up with local/regional public authorities and local/regional business organisations. These three poles together, universities and research organisations, local authorities, and businesses active locally, are invited to identify joint areas of specialisation that are relevant locally—areas of economic activity in particular. Public authorities would provide financial, regulatory and political support for those chosen areas or niches, teaming up with economic actors. Universities, in turn, would provide the necessary knowledge directly, if already available, by translating research results into production within the respective niches and also by contributing to training the necessary human resources for that area. Many such projects have been started in various areas, from automobile manufacturing to pharmaceutical or wine industries (Reichert, 2019).

What is relevant to the discussion here is that this approach also calls upon international cooperation to make smart specialisation initiatives successful. Internationalisation was considered a crucial aspect of smart specialisation strategy (Foray et al., 2012). The main entry point to internationalisation was research: local universities and research organisations in less developed regions, in particular, may not have the capacity to produce the necessary new knowledge alone. More generally, impactful research is understood to be necessarily international. Support from the EU for smart specialisation projects stimulated universities, including with dedicated funding, to create international networks promoting both research and education, always meant for the benefit of particular, well-circumscribed regions or cities and in particular niche areas.

[4] See, for example, the EU Smart Specialisation Platform, accessed at https://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/what-we-do on 15 December 2023.

The model of smart specialisation shows at the level of policy thinking but also in the practice of regional development how international cooperation in higher education and research can be designed and carried out with the specific purpose of contributing to solving real-life challenges (economic, but not only) at the local level. This model is based on the conviction that international cooperation is not only useful but also necessary in order to ensure success in ambitious local development endeavours. It is an example of a policy approach that intrinsically links internationalisation and the third mission of the university.

At present, it is difficult to predict whether this concept will regain and preserve a high degree of centrality in regional development efforts in the EU or even whether it will survive in the long term at all. As mentioned above, enthusiasm from smart specialisations as a policy concept and tool has receded significantly in the last four-five years. Yet, this is a major example of including the third mission of the university in internationalisation policies and initiatives. Important lessons can be drawn from this experience regarding the necessity, possibility, and also deficiencies and possible traps in linking internationalisation and the third mission. These lessons could be used in the context of the EHEA when considering how or whether to link the two explicitly and programmatically.

3.2 Anchor University Model

The anchor university model was initially developed in the United States, with Rutgers University-Newark[5] considered a major promoter (Bergan et al., 2019). It has been embraced by other universities and by policymakers in the US. In Europe, a few individual universities adopted the model, such as Birmingham University in the UK.[6] The Council of Europe, for example, through the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Local Mission of Higher Education,[7] has promoted a dialogue among European universities with a view to facilitating the eventual adaptation and adoption, on a larger scale, of this model in Europe.

The concept of an anchor university entails that the respective university, acting alone or sometimes in consortium with other universities, including from abroad, becomes an engine for social and economic development in the immediate region, a developmental anchor and not just in a single niche or area of specialisation, like in the example discussed immediately above in Sect. 3.a. The respective university, including its international students and staff, will not undertake teaching and learning (education and training) and research in a manner that is disconnected from

[5] See, for example, https://www.newark.rutgers.edu/meet-rutgers-newark/and-newark/anchor-institution, accessed on 15 December 2023.

[6] See https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/business/research/research-projects/city-redi/wm-redi/theme-5/universities-as-anchor-institutions.aspx accessed on 15 December 2023.

[7] See https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/working-groups#"2222597847":[6] accessed on 15 December 2023.

its local community. On the contrary, it will pay systematic and permanent attention to linking education and research with concrete initiatives (third mission activities) that are meant to directly serve members of the respective local community. That can mean creating employment opportunities, contributing to improving existing or creating new services, formulating, and implementing local policies in various areas together with local authorities, etc. Being an anchor university becomes symbolically and operationally a defining characteristic of the respective institution, and all members of that academic community are invited to participate, including, once again, international students and staff, and also international partners.

If the example of smart specialisations shows how universities can use international cooperation to produce more and better directly applicable research in relation to a local/regional niche project, the anchor university model shows how social responsibility can be a crucial, genuine, and effective institutional characteristic of a university, traversing all its activities, and how international staff and students can participate in servicing the local community.

This is a source for another set of lessons, adding to and refining what could be learned in the EHEA from the smart specialisation model when it comes to bringing internationalisation and the third mission of the university closer and more efficiently together.

3.3 European Universities Initiative/European University Alliances

The European Universities Initiative[8] is a new (launched in 2018) and not uncontroversial initiative of the European Union in higher education. Just as for other EU programmes, universities from countries that are not members of the EU can also participate, which adds to the power of influence of the EU.

This new initiative is meant to take forward significantly the EU agenda in the area of internationalisation. In part, the idea is that, in principle, consortia of European universities, of which there have been many, but which normally exist only for a limited period of time, will become permanent. These consortia, or European University Alliances, might even lead to an integration of the participating universities into a new type of higher education institution, that would be genuinely transnational—intellectually, operationally, and also legally (Matei & Becker, 2022). At present, there are 50 European university alliances of this type, with more than 430 participating higher education institutions. It is envisaged that by mid-2024, there will be about 60 alliances with more than 500 participating institutions.[9]

[8] The official EU website for this initiative is available at https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/european-universities-initiative/about?, accessed on 15 December 2023.

[9] Cf. https://education.ec.europa.eu/news/european-universities-2023-call-results#:~:text=Higher%20education%20institutions%20in%20the,Bosnia%20and%20Herzegovina%20and%20Montenegro. Accessed on 15 December 2023.

While it is too early to say where this initiative will be going, it is clear from the steps already taken that, at least in intention, this is one of the most daring projects of the EU in higher education. We need to note, at the same time, that it promotes a new model of internationalisation, attempting to build genuinely transnational higher education institutions (Matei & Becker, 2022).

Several of these alliances include civic engagement, or third mission objectives and activities in their joint strategies. The author of this chapter led the civic engagement work package (WP) of CIVICA, the European University of Social Sciences.[10] CIVICA has other WPs organised, not surprisingly, around education at the undergraduate, master's and PhD levels, and also an ambitious research WP. The fact that this international, or possibly one day transnational, alliance has a dedicated civic commitment WP (and so do other alliances) is, to some extent, surprising and quite remarkable. This is a recognition and assertion of the principle that for this European University Alliance, it is important to contribute directly and, as an alliance—not only as individual higher education institutions, to address social, and economic challenges, maybe also political challenges (speaking of democracy) facing defined communities located around member universities in nine countries (including the UK in this case, so not only in the EU). It is important to mention the strong cooperation and the development of networks among international students across the alliance members in the framework of the civic engagement programs. For example, as a concrete project in this WP, the "CIVICA for All" platform was created. This is a common platform launched for the primary benefit of refugee students affiliated with the member universities, providing a safe space for dialogue and knowledge sharing.

Of course, there are many difficulties with putting in practice this principle: What are the exact boundaries of "communities" in this case? Who decides what issues to address? How exactly will this alliance or future transnational university spreading over nine countries go about concrete third mission activities? Yet, this is a remarkable example of an effort to include the third mission into a major and novel internationalisation initiative in Europe. While this is a very recent initiative, still there are already lessons that can be drawn from it and from which the Bologna Process can learn.

3.4 Independent University Network Initiatives

International university networks sometimes undertake initiatives that include third mission activities, outside intergovernmental or inter-ministerial policy frameworks such as those put forward by the European Union or the Bologna Process, discussed in this paper. These can be called independent university network initiatives. There is no inventory of such initiatives available, and the very concept of "independent university network initiatives" is not tested. Only one will be discussed here, with which the author has been directly involved.

[10] https://www.civica.eu/areas-of-work/civic-engagement/ accessed on 15 December 2023.

The Open Society University Network (OSUN)[11] was launched in 2020, also with the ambition to create a new model of higher education institution, only that this time it was intended to be global (not just European) and independent from states or public authorities more generally (Matei & Becker, 2022). OSUN aimed to integrate learning and knowledge creation—in the social sciences, the humanities, the sciences and the arts—across geographic and demographic boundaries, to promote civic engagement to advance open societies, and expand access of underserved communities to higher education. There are several initiatives across the network focusing on the third mission of universities. One of its flagship programs is the OSUN Science Shop, which engages citizens and civil society organisations from several countries in networked education and research-related collaborations by taking in their questions/requests, which are of immediate relevance within their local communities, and transforming them into course assignments, student internships, theses or other research projects in the participating OSUN higher education institutions.

Such collaborations serve the respective communities by contributing to addressing concrete challenges they identify themselves as well as wider university education purposes and creating mutual learning opportunities involving universities and local communities. As an intermediary and facilitator, the Science Shop actively seeks and encourages local-international partnerships and offers coordination and support when necessary to balance the different knowledges, perspectives, and interests.

The OSUN Science Shop project is an example of how to connect international students with local communities and gives the opportunity for these students to work together and learn from each other across the participating institutions.

3.5 Individual University Initiatives

Case studies of universities with significant internationalisation activities that pay attention to the third mission can also substantiate how one can be successful in this area.

Central European University (CEU) is known as a university that is international by design; it was born as an international university. Today, over 90% of its students are international. Remarkably, there is no single national majority in the student body. CEU is also densely international, with about 100 countries represented in a student body that counts fewer than 1,500 students in total.

Relocated to Vienna in the wake of the attacks it was subjected to by the Hungarian government (2017–2020), CEU systematically involves its international students, faculty, and staff in third-mission activities that benefit local communities.

[11] See https://opensocietyuniversitynetwork.org/ for the website of the network. Accessed on 15 December 2023.

One of its most successful initiatives in this area is the Socrates Project, a service-learning, non-degree type activity, implemented in close cooperation with Bard College Network[12] at both Budapest and Vienna campuses of CEU and Bard College Berlin (BCB). This programme has been initiated by the Civic Engagement office of CEU, in partnership with BCB, taking inspiration from and with professional support from the Bard Network Clemente Course in the Humanities, a model tested in the US and other parts of the world. The main aspiration of the programme is to provide "a transformative educational experience for adults facing economic hardship and adverse circumstances".[13] CEU and BCB students (for the most part, international students as well) act like tutors, teaching and mentoring local beneficiaries, who, especially in Vienna and Berlin, are typically adult learners coming from migrant backgrounds who did not have a chance to pursue university studies. The programme is a chance for CEU and BCB to offer wider intercultural learning opportunities for their own students and also to build bridges with and bring educational benefits to local communities. Certainly, there was an educational value for CEU directly and not just for the external beneficiaries. CEU students participating had a chance to connect with local citizens and support the third mission efforts of the university, but they also gained a life-changing experience on their own educational path.

Obviously, there are more examples and experiences in the EHEA that could be studied and discussed and from which one could learn.

4 Conclusions

The analysis in this paper confirmed that, as is already well documented, the Bologna Process includes internationalisation as a core programmatic direction or dimension. At the same time, this analysis also shows that the focus of the internationalisation policy script of the Bologna Process is on education and, more precisely, on student mobility. Of the three missions of the university, this focus covers (partially) only one education. While internationalisation of research, the second mission, is addressed in Europe given, in particular, dedicated strategies and policy initiatives of the EU, the third mission of the university (service to society) remains largely ignored and is not properly addressed in the overarching higher education internationalisation policy frameworks in Europe/the European Higher Education Area.

This chapter interrogated the main arguments for the inclusion of the third mission in the internationalisation policy script of the Bologna Process. These arguments can be summarised as follows:

– The Bologna Process approach to internationalisation remains incomplete and inefficient without the inclusion of the third mission in its internationalisation policy script.

[12] https://www.bard.edu/network, accessed on 12 February 2024.

[13] https://clemente.bard.edu, accessed on 12 February 2024.

- The EU efforts to promote the internationalisation of the third mission in Europe are important but insufficient. The Bologna Process and the EHEA governance structures and policy learning avenues are better placed and better fitted to undertake a major rethinking of internationalisation policy, which should include proper attention to the third mission. The reasons for this are:

  By virtue of its Treaty, the EU has only a very limited mandate in higher education (and in education and culture more generally), while it does have extended and clear competencies in research. Thus, the EU cannot easily and directly adopt policies in higher education. It can and it does adopt and promote effectively policies in the area of research (mainly in the context of the European Research Area), including some that touch on the internationalisation of the third mission, in particular but not exclusively through the innovation dimension of these policies. Including the third mission in the internationalisation policies and initiatives in research is important but not sufficient. Such policies and initiatives, the overall "policy script" here, must include education as well, which the EU can only address partially and with difficulty.

  The EU's capacity to trigger changes in policy thinking across the whole of Europe in higher education is also limited. The Bologna Process has a complementary capacity in this regard.

- The inclusion of the third mission in the internationalisation policy script of the Bologna Process is necessary because this is a necessary condition for the international aspects of the social responsibility of the university to be well addressed.
- Internationalisation of the third mission is not only a matter of social responsibility. It is also an important avenue for student learning, one that the Bologna Process has so far largely ignored.
- As a *sui generis* space for dialogue and practice in higher education, the Bologna Process has made possible remarkable innovation, such as with regard to degree structures and degree types, quality assurance, social dimension of higher education or student mobility. There has been no such innovation with regard to the third mission. There was a "deficit of innovation" here. Linking internationalisation and the third mission would allow innovation in both these areas.
- Promoting and enhancing the internationalisation of the third mission activities could help to address issues of trust (or lack of trust) in higher education, in particular by correcting the (mis)perception that internationalisation does not benefit local communities or host countries beyond income from students (where applicable).
- Existing discrete initiatives linking internationalisation and the third mission, some of which are discussed in this paper, are proof of both the possibility and the necessity of including the third mission into the internationalisation policy script of the Bologna Process.

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Exploring Services and Support for Credit-Mobile International Students

Adriana Perez-Encinas, Pablo Villarrubia, and Sandra Tobon

Abstract An increasing number of students are participating in international credit mobility and other short-term programs, and as a result, there is a growing demand for services to enhance their mobility experience. Yet with some exceptions (e.g., Almeida (2020)), there is a lack of literature exploring the services and support infrastructure demanded by credit-mobile students. Consequently, this research fills a critical gap by presenting the results of the first institutional survey as part of a European project, "Erasmus Careers", examining inbound and outbound mobility services and support that institutions provide at the different stages of the international student lifecycle for credit-mobile students in a European context. The survey reached out to 80 institutions across Europe, yielding a robust response rate of 70%. The survey encompassed 25 questions, categorised into four sections: institutional particulars, services and support mechanisms, academic facilities, and teaching methodologies. Results show the broad spectrum of services and support that institutions extend to international credit-mobile students. Predominantly, the services offered relate to accommodation, language courses, and cultural engagement activities. Moreover, the survey indicates that institutions provide support at various stages of the experience of these international students, including pre-departure, arrival, and during their stay. Additionally, the survey reveals that both local and international students generally enjoy equal access and opportunities in most institutions when accessing university facilities or support services. However, the survey also highlights areas where institutions can enhance their services and support for credit-mobile students. Notably, there is room for improvement in providing support during the students' stay, including academic support, as well as mental and physical health services. These research findings can serve as a guide for institutions seeking to improve

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their support structures for credit-mobile students and as a basis for policymakers to formulate policies that bolster student mobility across Europe.

Keywords International student mobility · Student support services · International student lifecycle

1 Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected world, international student mobility has become an important component of higher education, fostering global perspectives, cultural exchange and enriching academic experiences. According to the OECD (2023), the countries with the greatest attractiveness for international mobility in 2020, in relation to the number of mobile students enrolled in tertiary education institutions, are Luxembourg (48.4%), Australia (26%) and the United Kingdom (20.1%). The European Commission continues promoting participation in short-term international mobility, or credit mobility, under the umbrella of the Erasmus + program for learners and staff with increased funding (European Commission & Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2022). In 2021, the EU hosted 695,695 international students pursuing various forms of tertiary education. The majority aimed for either a bachelor's degree (43.6%) or a master's (44.0%), while 10.2% pursued doctoral degrees, and 2.2% enrolled in short-cycle tertiary courses (Eurostat, 2023). These statistics show that international mobility, whether short-term (i.e., Erasmus or similar) or for degree mobility, is at the core of the European higher education system.

Hence, institutions welcoming internationally mobile students face a dual challenge: leveraging the cultural diversity these students bring while also tailoring service offerings to streamline the arrival and adaptation processes needed by different types of students for the local socio-cultural and academic environment.

The EU-funded Erasmus Careers Project[1] has been instrumental in exploring the many aspects of this phenomenon. While the survey we undertook did not ask institutions to specify any particular mobility type, nevertheless, most responses came from European institutions where credit mobility is predominant. Drawing on this, we aimed to use the project's findings to shed light on the services and support mechanisms provided to short-term internationally mobile students, thereby contributing to the enhancement of their educational journey.

As the landscape of international education continues to evolve, it is imperative to understand the unique challenges and opportunities that internationally mobile students face during their academic pursuits, which may be particularly an issue for short-term or credit-mobile students, given that the duration of their study is relatively brief. The Erasmus Careers Project has conducted a rigorous survey analysis to provide valuable insights into this area, and the introduction outlined in this

[1] https://project.erasmuscareers.org/.

chapter serves as a gateway to the project's scope, objectives, and the critical context surrounding the study.

Within the field of international education, fostering a welcoming and inclusive environment for all internationally mobile students is paramount (Van Mol & Perez-Encinas, 2022). Achieving this goal, however, requires not only an identification of the various services and support systems available, but also a nuanced understanding of the specific needs and challenges that different types of mobile students face (Perez-Encinas et al., 2021).

This chapter is concerned with the Erasmus Careers project, which undertook a comprehensive institutional survey analysis to explore how universities and educational institutions have addressed these needs. Within this analysis, we delve into the heart of the matter, uncovering the strengths, shortcomings, and prospects for improving the experience of short-term internationally mobile students. The Erasmus Careers Project is a collaborative effort that unites the academic community and relevant stakeholders to drive meaningful change in the field of international education. As we embark on this exploration, it is important to recognise the pivotal role this research project plays in potentially fostering a more inclusive, supportive, and enriching environment for short-term internationally mobile students worldwide.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Support Services for Internationally Mobile Students

The globalization of education has led to a significant increase in student mobility across international borders. This trend, often referred to as international student mobility, has created a growing need for support services tailored to the unique needs of mobile students (Ammigan et al., 2023). The importance of recognizing the needs of students as individuals rather than cohorts is becoming increasingly clear (see Jones, 2017), and these needs will differ (in part) according to the duration of stay. However, more broadly, there is a fundamental set of support services which should be available for all internationally mobile students and which play a crucial role in facilitating their academic, cultural and social integration into host institutions (Amendola & Restaino, 2017).

The drivers, needs and expectations of each student who decides to take part in international mobility are different, and so is the demand for services they expect. With regard to degree mobile students, Ammigan et al. (2023) analyzed 378 reflective essays written between 2013 and 2020 on the platform of a university in the United States, which aimed to record the experiences of international students who attended this university. The results indicated the following as the main themes valued by the students: experiences related to aspects of cultural adjustment; quality relationships and common humanity amidst differences; mismatch of expectations and reality in America; aspects of psychological adjustment; personal growth as hybridized identity; and educational system and academic culture.

External factors like COVID-19 have underscored numerous challenges encountered by internationally mobile students, necessitating meticulous consideration when devising support services. For instance, Veerasamy and Ammigan (Veerasamy & Ammigan, 2022) analyzed from an institutional perspective the adaptive capacity of an American university to meet the needs of its international students during the pandemic and found that the institutional resources made available to offices primarily centered around general software and technology, lacking provisions for training in online support service delivery or effectively serving a culturally diverse and vulnerable student population during a health crisis. This shows the diversity of needs and the impossibility of establishing direct social interaction of students imposed by the quarantine, but it allows us to glimpse needs that may not have been analyzed and that may require effective support from receiving institutions, also in non-Covid times.

Likewise, Raaper et al. (2022) elucidated that students manifested a plethora of requirements for belongingness within significant social circles during their academic journeys, surpassing the provisions offered by both their home institutions and the educational establishments they attended. Consequently, the authors advocate for the implementation of social support systems akin to social networks, facilitating the cultivation of intimate interpersonal bonds throughout the duration of their studies.

2.2 *The International Student Lifecycle*

This is a comprehensive framework designed to support student mobility on a global scale. For credit-mobile students, this encompasses five distinct stages: pre-arrival, arrival, during studies, pre-departure, and re-entry services at the home institution (HE, 2014; Perez-Encinas et al., 2021).

By understanding and addressing the unique needs and experiences of students throughout their international journey (Fig. 1), institutions can tailor their support services to provide an enriching and well-rounded educational experience (Perez-Encinas, 2017). This framework is essential for designing appropriate institutional support systems that enhance the overall quality of credit-mobile international students.

According to the work done by Madden-Dent et al. (2019) on degree-seeking students, they found that support services were offered mainly during the arrival and post-arrival stage. The study revealed that the most commonly provided support

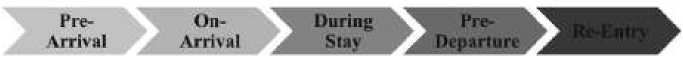


Fig. 1 Different stages of the international student lifecycle for credit-mobile students (Perez-Encinas, 2017)

services for international students included sharing online reading materials (through international student websites, newsletters, or translated brochures), conducting orientations and check-in meetings tailored to international students, and organizing language and cultural activities. These services are crucial for integration and cultural adjustment, highlighting the significant role that hosting institutions play in supporting international students through these processes (Perez-Encinas & Ammigan, 2016; Thomson & Esses, 2016; Ward, 2015).

Archer et al. (2010) offered recommendations for the whole international student lifecycle, starting from the time of application and arrival, cultural and social integration, accommodation and living, to work experience and employability. Kelo (2006) took a comparative view of preparation and support for international students in higher education, drawing on cases and good practices from around the world. Meanwhile, Kelo et al. (2010) considered a range of needs and support requirements for international students at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, with a particular focus on European higher education.

The following section delves into the different challenges faced by students when pursuing education abroad and outlines their support needs.

2.3 Challenges in Supporting Internationally Mobile Students

Supporting internationally mobile students presents a myriad of complex challenges for educational institutions and host countries. As there is a wide range of factors that impact the experience of international students in higher education, Jones (2017) classified student experience into four milieus: personal, institutional, familial and national. All of them present challenges for institutions to better cater for student experiences. In fact, these challenges extend beyond the logistical aspects of immigration and enrolment to the diverse needs, experiences, and expectations of students arriving from different parts of the world (Perez-Encinas & Rodriguez-Pomeda, 2019) and for different study purposes. From linguistic and cultural adjustments to the nuances of academic systems and social integration, this section will explore the multifaceted obstacles faced by both students and the institutions that host them, shedding light on the importance of creating holistic and inclusive support systems to ensure the success and well-being of a growing population of global learners.

Cultural Adjustment: Refers to the process of acclimating to and adopting the norms, customs, and social expectations of a new cultural environment. This encompasses various aspects such as language proficiency, understanding social norms and etiquette, adapting to educational practices, and forming meaningful relationships within the new community. Cultural adjustment involves a period of transition where students may experience a range of emotions, including excitement, confusion, frustration, and homesickness as they navigate unfamiliar cultural terrain. Successful cultural adjustment is essential for academic success and personal well-being, as it enables students to engage effectively with their academic and social surroundings, develop cross-cultural competence, and ultimately thrive in their new academic and social environments (Ammigan et al., 2023; Gokten & Emil, 2019; Luce, 2022; Perez-Encinas & Rodriguez-Pomeda, 2019).

Legal and Visa Issues: Typically refer to the regulatory and administrative matters that international students encounter related to their legal status and visa requirements while studying abroad. This encompasses various aspects such as obtaining the necessary visas, complying with immigration laws, understanding rights and responsibilities, and navigating any legal procedures that may arise during their stay in the host country. These issues are crucial considerations for international students as they impact their ability to study, work, and reside legally in the host country and, therefore, require careful attention and adherence to relevant regulations and processes (Dębiec & Materka, 2015; Ward, 2015).

Isolation and Homesickness: Represent common challenges experienced by international students when studying abroad. Isolation refers to feelings of loneliness or being socially disconnected, often stemming from being away from familiar support networks such as family and friends. Homesickness, on the other hand, encompasses a longing for one's home country, culture, and familiar surroundings. These emotions can significantly impact students' mental well-being and academic performance, highlighting the importance of support systems, social networks, and strategies for coping with these challenges while adjusting to life in a new environment (Dębiec & Materka, 2015; Perez-Encinas & Ammigan, 2016; Veerasamy & Ammigan, 2022).

Communication Barriers: Denote obstacles that hinder effective interaction and understanding between individuals from different linguistic or cultural backgrounds. These barriers can arise from differences in language proficiency, cultural norms, nonverbal cues, and communication styles. Such challenges can impede academic success, social integration, and the development of interpersonal relationships for international students. Overcoming communication barriers requires efforts such as language learning, cultural sensitivity training, and the use of alternative communication methods to foster mutual understanding and collaboration in diverse academic and social settings (Ivan et al., 2022).

Financial Concerns: Encompass the anxieties and challenges related to managing the costs associated with international education, including tuition fees, living expenses, and other financial obligations. International students often face additional financial burdens such as currency exchange rates, visa fees, and health insurance costs. These concerns can significantly impact students' ability to pursue their academic goals and may lead to stress, uncertainty, and limited access to resources. Addressing financial concerns requires careful financial planning, seeking out scholarships and financial aid opportunities, and exploring options for part-time employment or other forms of financial support to alleviate the financial burden on students pursuing international education (Privarova & Toma, 2016).

In summary, international students face a range of challenges while studying abroad. Cultural adjustment requires adapting to new social norms and academic practices, often leading to feelings of isolation and homesickness due to being away from familiar support networks. Legal and visa issues add complexity, involving navigating regulations and administrative procedures to maintain legal status. Communication barriers hinder effective interaction between individuals from different backgrounds, impacting academic and social integration. Additionally, financial concerns arise from managing educational expenses, including tuition fees, living costs, and other financial obligations, which can significantly affect students' ability to pursue their academic goals.

Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive support systems, cultural sensitivity training, financial planning assistance, and access to resources to ensure international students can succeed academically and thrive in their new environments. By addressing key issues and challenges, institutions can create a more inclusive and supportive environment that promotes intercultural understanding and academic excellence for all students, regardless of their country of origin. Effective support services contribute to the growth and diversification of educational institutions and can help foster global citizenship.

How the literature relates to the needs of short-term international students is explored in the next section.

2.4 Support for Credit-Mobile or Short-Term International Students

The following draws on and extends the main issues identified in the literature that need to be considered when designing support services for credit-mobile or short-term international students. They are relevant both for the receiving and sending institutions and follow the order of the international student lifecycle for this group of students.

2.4.1 Pre-arrival

Pre-arrival Services: Providing information and support to prospective international students before they leave for their destination country is essential. This includes visa assistance, pre-arrival orientation, and cultural adjustment counseling (Dębiec & Materka, 2015).

Housing Assistance: Guidance on finding suitable housing and understanding local housing regulations is essential for international students, in particular for those staying for a relatively short time. Many institutions offer on-campus housing options or have partnerships with local landlords, which can be communicated to students before they leave their home institution (Perez-Encinas & Ammigan, 2016; Roberts et al., 2021; Ward, 2015).

2.4.2 On Arrival

Archer et al. (2010) emphasize a range of important support services for incoming students, including welcome and pickup services, support for the first night, academic registration/enrolment and local orientation.

2.4.3 During the Stay

Orientation Programs: Upon arrival, host institutions often offer orientation programs of various lengths that introduce and welcome international students to the campus, academic expectations, and local culture. These programs seek to help students feel more comfortable in their new environment (Madden-Dent et al., 2019).

Academic Support: Academic support services may include English language training, tutoring, and study skills workshops to help international students excel in their coursework (Dębiec & Materka, 2015; Perez-Encinas & Rodriguez-Pomeda, 2019; Thomson & Esses, 2016).

Cultural and Social Integration: Support services should focus on helping students adjust to their new cultural environment. This may include organizing cultural events, language exchange programs, and providing resources for international student clubs and organizations (Ammigan et al., 2023; Archer et al., 2010; Fombona Cadavieco et al., 2015; Kelo et al., 2010; Roberts et al., 2021).

Health and Wellness Services: Access to health care, counseling, and mental health support is critical to the overall well-being of international students. Institutions often offer health insurance options and mental health resources (Madden-Dent et al., 2019; Veerasamy & Ammigan, 2022).

2.4.4 Pre-departure and Reentry

Counselling and Administrative Services: International students experience academic and administrative obstacles when preparing to return to their home country. It is essential to provide counselling services that assist them in planning their return, such as the recognizing the ECTS achieved during the mobility (Perez-Encinas, 2017), supporting students to manage cross-cultural transitions (Arthur, 2015) as well as mentally preparing the students to return home and providing them with mental and physical assistance if needed to smooth the adaptation back to their home institution/country.

Career Services: Services related to boosting students' career paths are also important during these stages. Supporting mobile students to reflect on all learning outcomes from the period abroad, including the employability skills they have developed, is crucial (Jones, 2016).

All the issues noted above are critical in designing support structures for short-term or credit-mobile international students that will reinforce and enhance their experience at different stages of the student lifecycle. We now turn to the comprehensive institutional survey undertaken by the Erasmus Careers project to explore how universities and educational institutions have addressed these concerns.

3 Methodology of the Current Study

The research method employed for this study was a quantitative survey-based approach (Nardi, 2018). In this method, a structured survey was designed and distributed to a diverse set of higher education institutions. The survey was carefully constructed to elicit specific information regarding the services and support structures available to internationally mobile students, particularly focusing on the five key stages of the internationally mobile student lifecycle, as discussed above (HE, 2014; Matheson, 2018; Perez-Encinas & Ammigan, 2016; Perez-Encinas & Rodriguez-Pomeda, 2019).

Respondents were asked to provide numerical data and responses to predefined questions, enabling the collection of quantifiable and standardized information. Subsequently, the collected data was subjected to statistical analysis, allowing for the measurement of relationships, trends, and patterns within the dataset. This rigorous and systematic approach ensured that the research findings were grounded in empirical data, making it a valuable resource for assessing and enhancing support services for credit-mobile students within the context of the Erasmus Careers Project.

The survey was created for the Erasmus Careers Project using the software Qualtrics. The survey was distributed through social media platforms, using the profiles of X (previously Twitter), Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn of the project researchers, as well as other institutional and official accounts related to student mobility. Additionally, an e-mail campaign was conducted.

The goal of the project was to determine which services institutions offer to mobile students. As the focus was on European institutions, the e-mail campaign was designed by sampling the number of institutions that receive mobile students in Europe per country, primarily credit-mobile students (although the survey did not differentiate between mobility typology): from the 2,655 institutions that are across 34 countries registered on the European Tertiary Education Register (ETER), a European-level database that provides a reference list of Higher Education Institutions in Europe, stratified proportional sampling was carried out. This sampling also took into account the legal status of the institutions, whether they were public or private, to ensure representation of institutions from all countries and all legal statuses from the selected database ETER. Subsequently, the head of the international relations office or other people involved in mobility from the most important institutions of each country (those with more students) were contacted, following the sampling, and were requested to complete the survey.

During the 50 days in which the survey was active (29th May to 18th July 2023), the survey collected 397 answers. Of these, 262 were discarded due to incompleteness, another 9 because they were answered by students, and an additional 8 were rejected for not being completed by countries belonging to the European Tertiary Education Register. A total of 118 valid responses (29.7%) were obtained, completed by individuals responsible for international relations or internationalization at their institution, as well as other personnel involved in student mobility, such as professors or administrative staff.

Furthermore, those 118 final answers originated from 80 different higher education institutions across 23 different countries. As can be seen in Fig. 2, for example, there were 36 responses from Romania, 18 were from Spain, and 13 from Germany.

Most of the answers received were from public institutions, as shown in Fig. 3: 88.98% of the answers received were from public institutions.

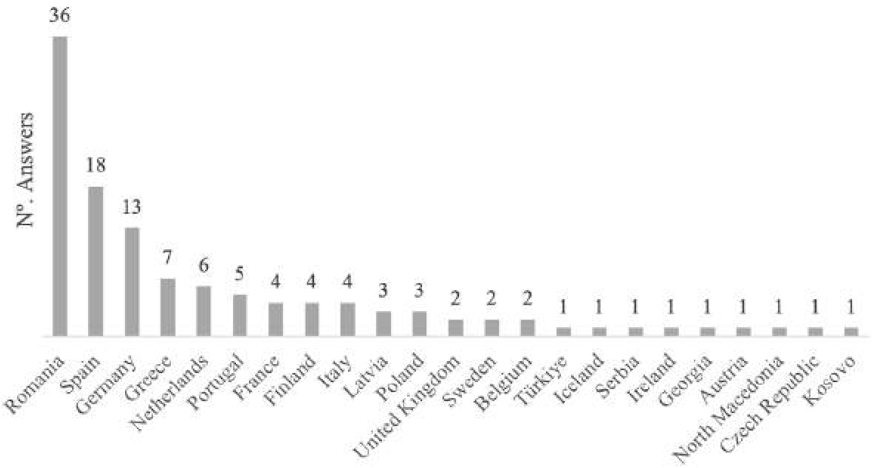
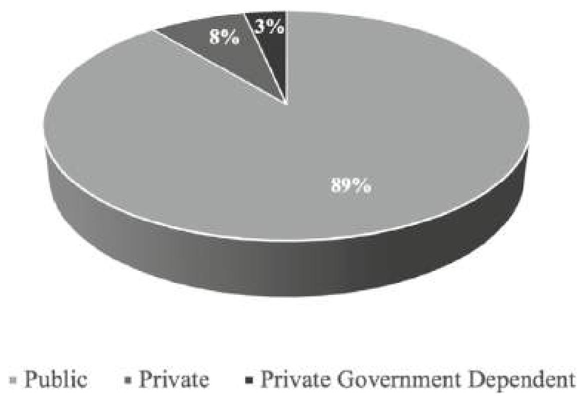


Fig. 2 Answers by Country

Fig. 3 Answers by Legal Status



4 Results

In the institutional survey, higher education professionals were initially required to specify the target recipients of services offered by their institution (incoming students, outgoing students, or both), as well as the satisfaction with the quality of the services provided, using a Likert Scale with the following parameters: 1—Very dissatisfied, 2—Dissatisfied, 3—Unsure, 4—Satisfied and 5—Very Satisfied. For a more detailed analysis, the international student lifecycle was segmented into five different stages (pre-arrival, on arrival, during stay, pre-departure, and re-entry).

During the ***pre-arrival stage***, the initial stage, the majority of the services are usually provided to both groups of students (incoming and outgoing), as illustrated in Fig. 4. This is with the exception of *financial aid* and *information on mobility opportunities*, which are more offered to outgoing students (the second service mentioned also has the highest quality satisfaction for outgoing students, as shown in Fig. 5), or *transport information about the host country*, s*upport in finding accommodation*, s*upport during communication with local authorities* and *mentoring programs*, which mainly relate to incoming students (being the first service mentioned, *transport information about the host country* is also considered as the one with the highest quality satisfaction for incoming students), as it can be seen in Fig. 5. Furthermore, the satisfaction gap between incoming and outgoing students is most pronounced in the *support in finding accommodation service.*

In the ***on-arrival stage***, there are some notable changes in the available services compared to the previous stage: services are more provided to incoming than outgoing students. The *welcome meeting at the host institution* is the most offered service to incoming students (Fig. 6), and it is the one with which they express the highest

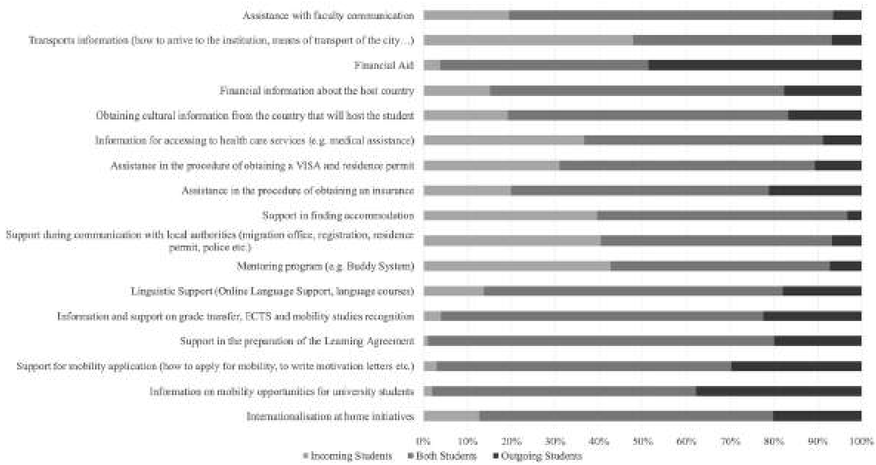


Fig. 4 Difference in services provided to mobile students during the pre-arrival stage

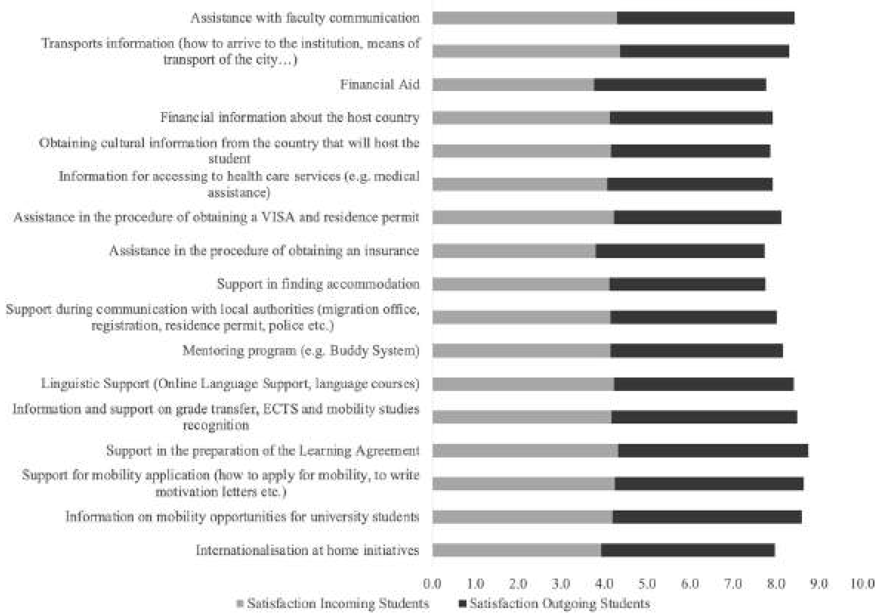


Fig. 5 Difference in the satisfaction with the quality of services provided to outgoing and incoming students during the pre-arrival stage

satisfaction in terms of quality (Fig. 7). It contrasts with the least offered support service during this stage, which is *finding accommodation.*

Through the ***during stay stage***, services are mainly targeted at students that are in the host institution. However, the *academic adviser*, *psychological support*, or *financial assistance*, among others, are services that are mostly offered to both outgoing and incoming students, as shown in Fig. 8.

The *library service* and the *help in finding a part-time student job* are the ones in which the satisfaction gap is more pronounced. Incoming students benefit more from the first service mentioned, whereas outgoing students benefit more from the second. As shown in Fig. 9, higher education professionals felt more satisfied with the *library service* provided for incoming students, whereas for outgoing students, it was *linguistic support*.

During the ***pre-departure stage***, prior to the return to their home institution, the services exclusively offered to outgoing students begin to expand in comparison with previous stages (and this expansion persists until the end of the international student lifecycle). A good example is the *internship opportunities service*, offered especially to students returning to their home institution, with near to 20%. On the other hand, the *international student's belongingness to the host institution* predominantly relates to incoming students, as shown in Fig. 10. The service with the lowest satisfaction

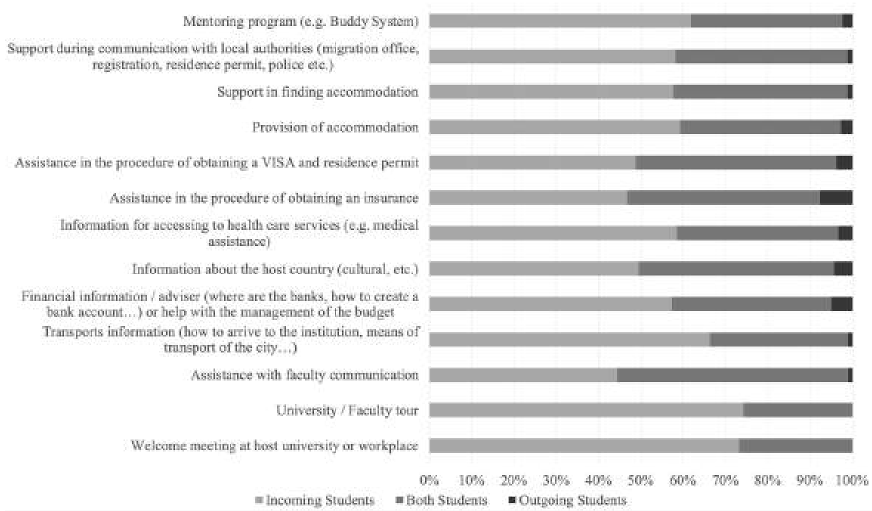


Fig. 6 Difference in services provided to mobile students during the on-arrival stage

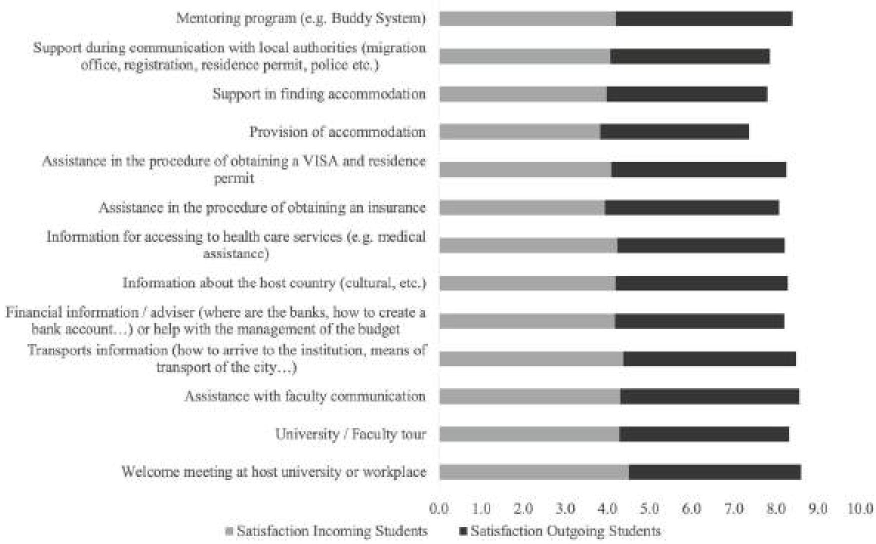


Fig. 7 Difference in satisfaction with the quality of services provided to outgoing and incoming students during the on-arrival stage

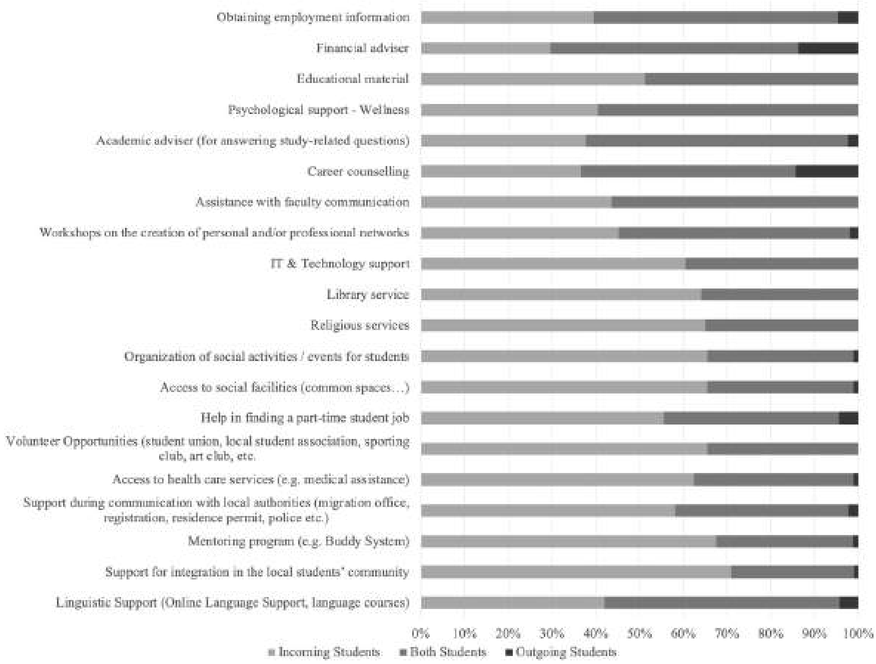


Fig. 8 Difference in services provided to mobile students in the during-stay stage

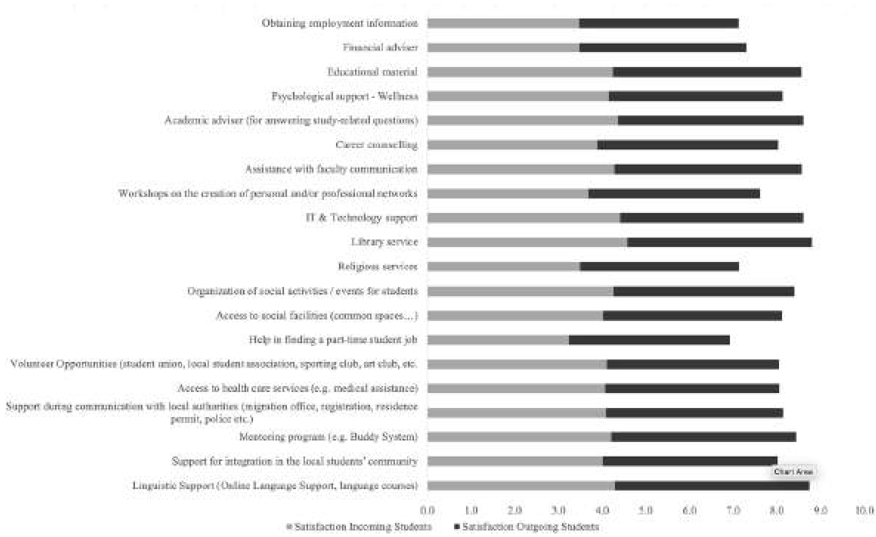


Fig. 9 Difference in satisfaction with the quality of services provided to outgoing and incoming students in the during-stay stage

rating in terms of quality for both types of students is *obtaining employment information*. This contrasts with *clear information about administrative requirements*, which receives the highest grading in terms of quality, as detailed in Fig. 11.

Finally, as previously mentioned, during the ***re-entry stage***, which is the last stage of the international student lifecycle, services are mainly provided to students returning to their home institution, according to the respondents (see Fig. 12). The *process of recognition of the ECTS achieved during mobility* is the service with higher

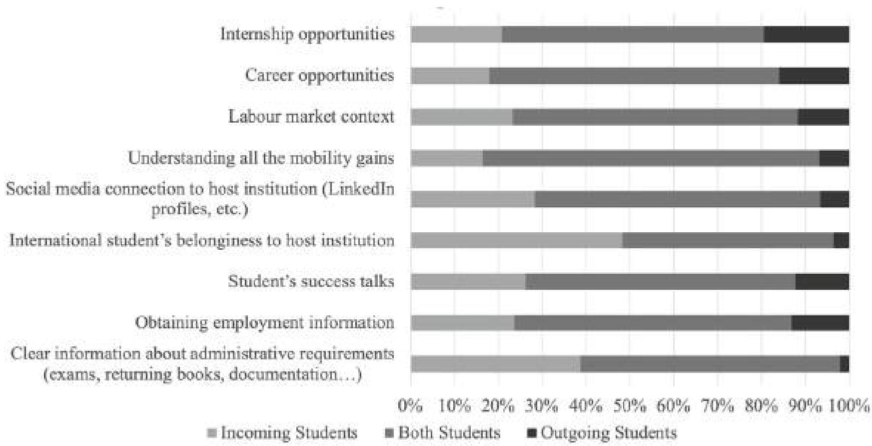


Fig. 10 Difference in services provided to mobile students during the pre-departure stage

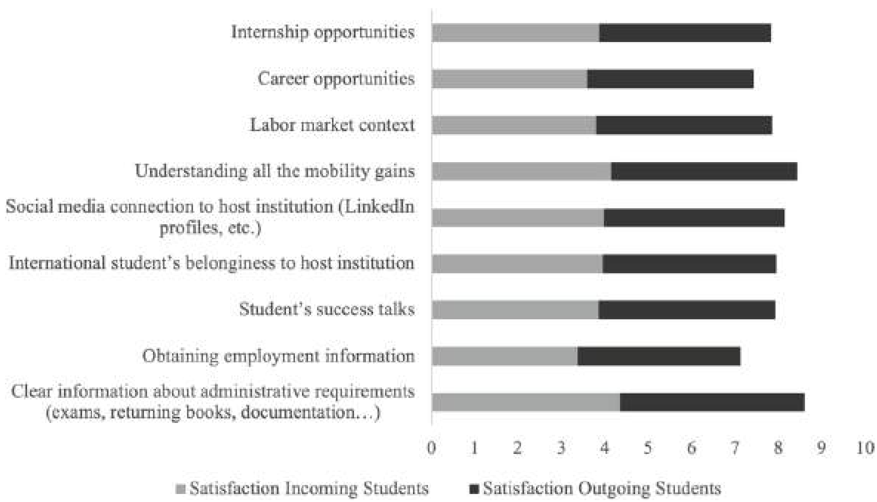


Fig. 11 Difference in satisfaction with the quality of the services provided to outgoing and incoming students during the pre-departure stage

satisfaction for outgoing students, while the highest rating for incoming students is for the *academic information* service, as indicated in Fig. 13.

To complement this data, the survey included a question about the overall perception of satisfaction with the services offered, as shown in Fig. 14. Firstly, it can be observed that the gap widens significantly when comparing the general perception of satisfaction between incoming and outgoing students, compared to the detailed

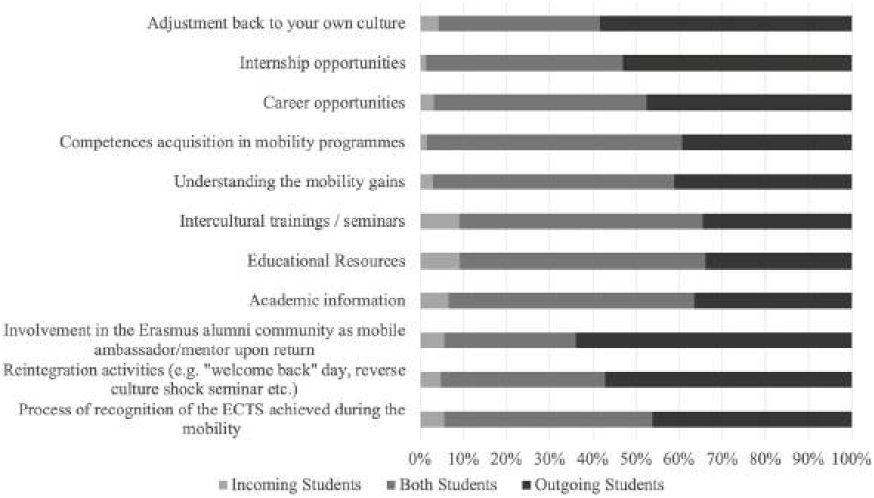


Fig. 12 Difference in services provided to mobile students during the re-entry stage

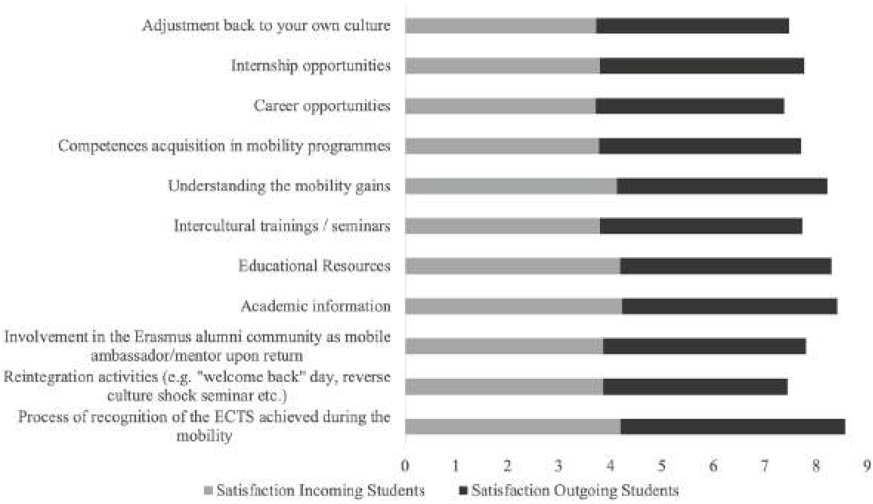


Fig. 13 Difference in satisfaction with the quality of services provided to outgoing and incoming students during the re-entry stage

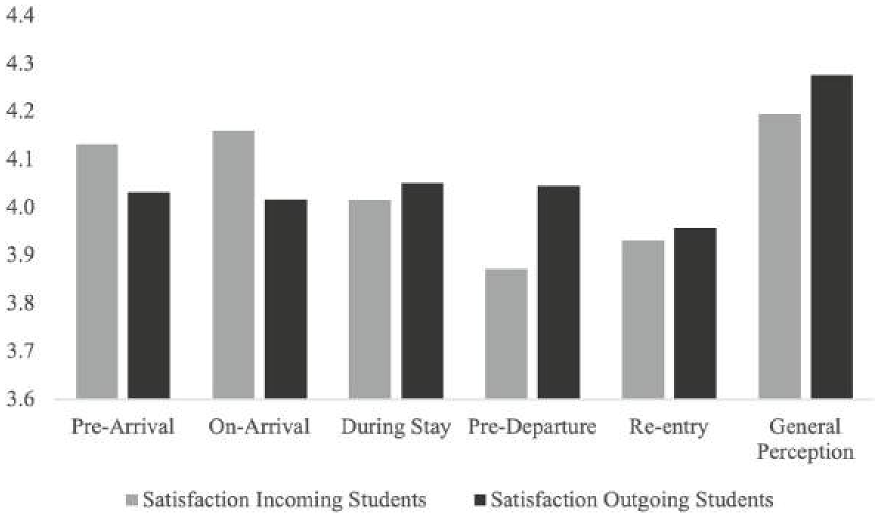


Fig. 14 Comparison between the mean of satisfaction by stages and the general perception (by type of student)

analysis of the individual services (as shown in previous Figures). Furthermore, the overall perception of satisfaction favors outgoing students, contrary to the detailed analysis, where incoming students appeared to benefit (with the exception of the pre-departure stage where outgoing students benefit the most by a significant margin).

To conclude, respondents were asked about their degree of agreement with certain statements about whether local and international students have equal opportunities.

Based on the results available in Fig. 15, it can be concluded that in most institutions, local and international students have the same opportunities: in all the statements, the mean is higher than 4.5. Notably, the question concerning equal access to university academic facilities for both international and local students received one of the highest mean scores, approaching the maximum possible of 5.

5 Discussion

The institutional survey aimed to understand better what support is offered in every stage of the International Student Lifecycle (ISL). We found that the support is not the same throughout the different stages: most support is concentrated during the arrival stage since there is a crucial need for information and interaction during this transitional period. However, we recognize the importance of extending support across all stages of the ISL to ensure a more comprehensive provision for international students from start to finish, although this will be different for short-term versus degree-seeking students.

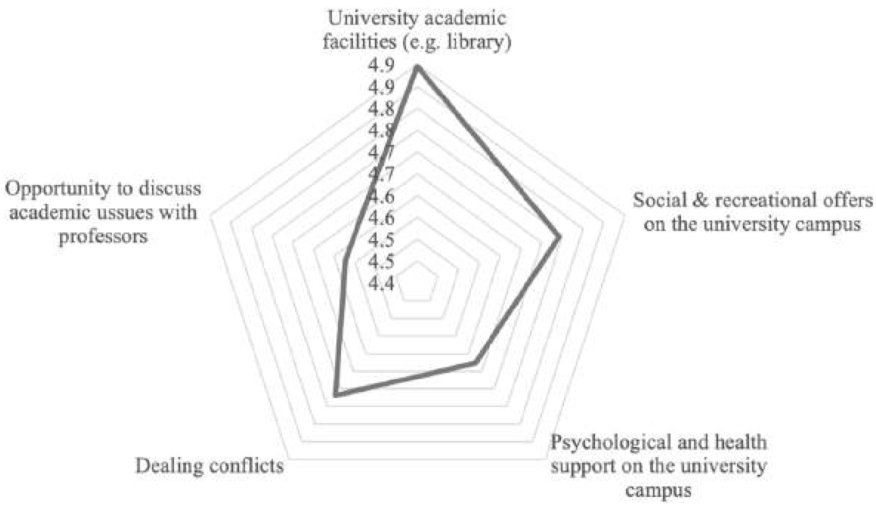


Fig. 15 Ensuring equal access to services for both international and local students

The institutional survey sheds light on availability and satisfaction levels of support services across different stages of the International Student Lifecycle. The survey highlighted variations in services offered to incoming and outgoing students, with a focus on key stages such as pre-arrival, on-arrival, during stay, pre-departure, and re-entry. Notably, support services during the pre-arrival stage were found to be more comprehensive, particularly in areas such as financial aid, mobility opportunities, and accommodation support. However, there was a notable disparity in satisfaction levels between incoming and outgoing students across various stages, indicating areas for improvement in service quality and accessibility.

Furthermore, the overall perception of satisfaction favored outgoing students, suggesting a potential gap in meeting the needs of incoming students, particularly in the pre-departure stage. It is evident that efforts should be made to enhance support services for incoming students throughout the ISL to ensure a more equitable and satisfactory experience for all international students. Additionally, the survey highlighted the importance of ensuring equal access to services for both international and local students, with positive perceptions regarding opportunities and access to university facilities.

Finally, the findings underscore the need for continuous assessment and improvement of support services to better meet the evolving needs of international students throughout their academic journey, thereby fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment for all students, regardless of their international status and type of study program.

6 Limitations, Future Research and Conclusion

The outcomes of this research offer a comprehensive view of the credit mobility support services offered by higher education institutions across Europe. This approach not only enables a broad assessment across countries but also facilitates the identification of critical areas for enhancement and future avenues of action. We now note the primary limitations encountered during this research which, in turn, pave the way for promising avenues of future investigation.

Sampling: The research was based on surveys distributed to a specific set of institutions. Future research can expand the scope by using more diverse and representative samples that include a wider range of institutions and regions. This would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the global landscape of mobility support services.

Delimitation of the International Student Lifecycle: The study focused on the five key stages of the international student lifecycle for credit-mobile international students. Future research can delve deeper into each stage for degree-seeking students and explore the nuances and variations between the two groups. For example, Ammigan and Jones (2018) evaluate the degree to which international students are satisfied with different aspects of their university experience. They found that satisfaction levels across four dimensions of international student experience—arrival, living, learning, and support services—were positively associated with students' overall university experience. Additionally, examining the impact of unexpected events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, on international student experiences and support services may be a promising avenue.

Student Perspective: Current research has primarily considered institutional perspectives. Future research can shift the focus to the students themselves, capturing their direct experiences and perceptions. Qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews and ethnographic studies can provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of internationally mobile students, highlighting their specific needs and challenges and how these can be better addressed by institutions.

Credit Mobility Versus Degree-Seeking Students: The survey gathered responses from various types of mobile students, with a focus on credit-mobile students (short-term). In relation to that, previous research has found that credit-mobile and degree-seeking students have different needs and perceptions. Short-term or credit-mobile students highlighted more aspects of the international experience related to social life, academic matters, city offerings, career prospects, financial help services, living expenses, cultural experiences, language skills, research opportunities, buddy services, and accommodation. On the other hand, degree-seeking students were also inclined to mention issues related to academic matters but also careers and financial support as the main concerns during their mobility (Perez-Encinas et al., 2021).

However, a comparison between both groups of mobile students (credit and degree-seeking) can enrich the literature in the field and serve as a springboard for future research exploring mobility support services.

In summary, this study has contributed to increasing understanding about the services and support offered to credit-mobile students in the European context, as well as concluding that such support is crucial for all kinds of mobility. Future research could delve into long-term student mobility and analyze the differences between the support services offered to each group.

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Internationalization in Europe in 2024: Data-Driven Insights from the Frontlines

Laura E. Rumbley, Jody Hoekstra-Selten, and Giorgio Marinoni

Abstract Over the last two decades, there has been clear evidence of momentum in Europe with respect to internationalization in higher education. However, there are also indications of stress on the sector, and the ongoing role of internationalization as a preferred (or effective) instrument to support the achievement of institutional and system-wide objectives is not necessarily assured. How is the sector to understand the future of internationalization in the European Higher Education Area? Two recent data collection exercises (the *EAIE Barometer: internationalisation in Europe, third edition* report and the *6th IAU Global Survey on internationalization*) provide useful indications of key developments and point to a number of compelling observations. Several key insights stand out. These relate to matters of adapting to role changes; managing multiple layers of responsibility for internationalization across organizations, complex challenges, and a wide portfolio of priority areas for future attention; strengthening confidence in (and alignment with) leadership for internationalization; and the question of delivering impact from internationalization.

Keywords Higher education internationalization · Research on internationalization · Europe · European higher education area

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1 Introduction

The *Bologna Declaration* of 1999 set in motion a unique-in-the-world "voluntary harmonisation process" (EHEA, n.d.) across the higher education systems of 29 different countries in Europe. This call to action focused on a number of specific issues, such as aligning degree cycles, ensuring readability and comparability of degrees between systems, and promoting mobility by addressing obstacles to this activity, with a primary "objective of increasing the international competitiveness of the European system of higher education" (Bologna Declaration, 1999). Importantly, the Bologna Declaration stood then and continues to stand today—as the Declaration gave way to the Bologna Process and then to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), now involving more than 45 countries—as a remarkable statement of commitment to internationalization in higher education more broadly. That is, by expressing an interest and willingness to open their respective systems of higher education to evolution in policy and practice expressly for the purpose of connecting with a broader community of similarly motivated countries, the ministers who signed the declaration signaled a key role for internationalization in the future of higher education in Europe.

A quarter century later, internationalization indeed occupies a significant position in European higher education. This is true not only operationally within higher education institutions across Europe but also in terms of policy discourse at national and regional levels. As evidence of the growth and relevance of internationalization in practice over the last 25 years, attendance at the annual conference of the European Association for International Education (EAIE), the signature yearly event for professionals working in the field, may be indicative. In 1999, some 1550 individuals attended the EAIE conference (de Wit et al., 2013), while in 2023, nearly 6750 participants registered for this event (EAIE, 2023). Similarly, participation in Erasmus + staff and student mobility activities has steadily grown over the last two decades. More than 1.2 million learners and staff carried out a mobility activity in 2022, including both individual and group mobility. And since 1987, over 13.7 million people have benefited from the program actions supporting learning mobility (European Commission, 2023).

The policy landscape is similarly replete with examples of the ways in which internationalization has been foregrounded in the aspirations for European higher education in recent years. Among the most prominent examples of this is the European Universities initiative. Launched in 2017 by the European Council (European Commission, n.d.c), the initiative aims to establish "60 European Universities alliances involving more than 500 higher education institutions by mid-2024." Notably, these "transnational alliances of higher education institutions" are expected to pave "the way towards the universities of the future" (European Commission, n.d.a) via "long-term joint strategies" and "European inter-university campuses", among other dynamic elements (European Commission, n.d.b).

Over the last two decades, there has been clear evidence of momentum in Europe with respect to internationalization in higher education. However, there are also indications of stress on the sector. From geopolitical tensions and rightward political shifts in many countries to demographic trends and the significant, and still unresolved, social and economic vulnerabilities that were exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic—the ongoing role of internationalization as a preferred (or effective) instrument to support the achievement of institutional and system-wide objectives is not necessarily assured.

In light of these various dynamics, how are we to understand the future of internationalization in the European Higher Education Area? One way to answer this question is to consider the perspectives of those who operate at the nexus of policy and practice, i.e. individuals who are responsible for carrying out the work of internationalization—operationally and/or strategically—within higher education institutions and other relevant stakeholder organizations. Two recent data collection exercises provide precisely this type of insight and point to a number of compelling observations.

The *EAIE Barometer: internationalisation in Europe, third edition* report (Rumbley & Hoekstra-Selten, 2024) provides the findings of an extensive survey of international higher education professionals that was carried out by the European Association for International Education between September and November 2023. More than 2800 respondents from 46 of the 49 EHEA countries participated in this survey exercise. Respondents were based at institutions of various types and sizes, with most working at public institutions or organizations. They hold a variety of distinct professional positions across nearly a dozen different functional areas and represent the full range of career tenure, from fewer than two years of experience in the sector to 15 or more years in the field. These individuals provided input on a wide range of questions, all specifically directed at matters of internationalization that addressed such issues as:

- respondents' feelings about their own professional positions;
- their opinions about the roles and influence of different stakeholders on institutional/organizational processes and priorities;
- their levels of confidence in or satisfaction regarding the performance of their institutions or organizations; and
- their reflections on how their institutions engage with some of the 'hot topics' of the day, including environmental sustainability and climate action, student/staff well-being, and virtual internationalization activities.

For its part, the International Association of Universities' (IAU) 6th Global Survey on Internationalization in Higher Education (Marinoni & Pina Cardona, 2024), having received responses from 722 higher education institutions (HEIs) in 110 countries and territories, highlights interesting comparisons between private and public HEIs across different world regions and looks for common understandings of the potential benefits, risks, and challenges facing internationalization at the global level. The report further provides insights into intersectional aspects of internationalization in teaching and learning, research and society/community engagement, and links between internationalization and societal priorities such as sustainable development, diversity, equity, and inclusion. In doing so, the *6th IAU Global Survey* report paints a picture of the current state of internationalization around the world, its recent transformations, and its possible evolutions moving forward.

Unlike the EAIE Barometer, the 6th IAU Global Survey is an institutional survey, and HEIs were also asked to carry out internal consultation before submitting only one reply. This was to ensure that replies represented an institutional perspective and not a personal point of view. Overall, HEIs adopted this approach, but nonetheless, in some questions, some differences in replies based on the respondent's position are identifiable. In terms of respondents' position, heads of international offices represent the single largest group at about 40%, staff members in international offices together with the head of the international office make up more than half of the respondents, while heads of institutions together with the deputy heads of institutions constitute nearly a quarter of all respondents.

The number of replies to the survey was sufficient to allow for regional analysis, and Europe is the region with the highest number of replies, with 281 HEIs from 37 countries. The regional analysis allows for comparison between the regions, and the first result which is worth highlighting is that there is no clear overall distinction between Europe and other world regions, in the sense that results from Europe do not diverge substantially from those of other regions of the world for the majority of subjects explored in the survey. Of course, there are some European 'particularities' that emerge in relation to some topics but not overall. The only region showing more notable divergence is North America.

Taken together, several key insights stand out. These relate to matters of adapting to role changes; managing multiple layers of responsibility for internationalization across organizations, complex challenges, and a wide portfolio of priority areas for future attention; strengthening confidence in (and alignment with) leadership for internationalization; and the question of delivering impact from internationalization. As explored further in the subsequent sections of this chapter, these insights require careful consideration by policymakers across the EHEA as they work to understand and shape the future of higher education in Europe.

2 Navigating Change

Arguably, change is a constant in life, and therefore, everyone working in higher education is constantly 'navigating change' in one way or another. However, there is evidence from the EAIE Barometer that concretizes this notion in two specific ways. First, while just 28% of EAIE Barometer respondents indicated that they have less than five years' experience working in international higher education overall, a full half (53%) reported that they have five years or less experience in their *current roles*. This is a clear indication that individuals working in the field at almost all levels of experience have been experiencing job or role shifts in the last five years.

Even more notable, 81% of EAIE Barometer respondents report that their role now requires more time/effort, new/different skills, or both, compared to three years ago (see Fig. 1).

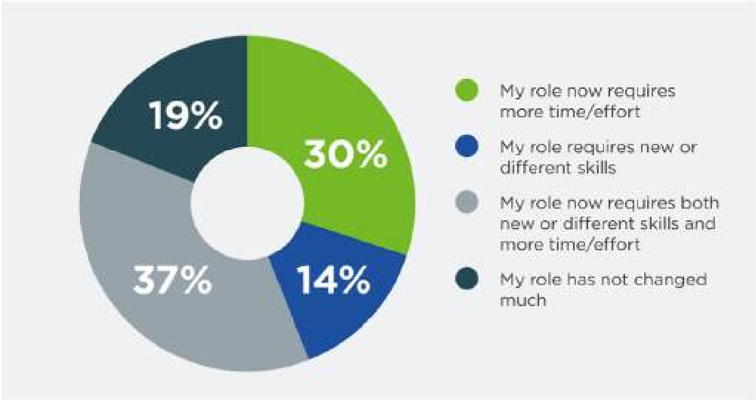

Fig. 1 Perception of role changes over the past three years (n = 1737). *Source* Rumbley and Hoekstra-Selten (2024)

From an institutional perspective, this increased workload is a matter of concern, as shown by the results of the *6th IAU Global Survey* with regard to the institutional risks of internationalization (see Fig. 2). Indeed, 'Increased workload for academic and administrative staff" emerged as the main concern in Europe, where it was chosen by the majority of HEIs (61%).

Perhaps precisely as a result of both the observed role/position changes and the sense of increased pressures or different responsibilities, EAIE Barometer respondents are also overwhelmingly inclined (at 84%) to report that they have a significant

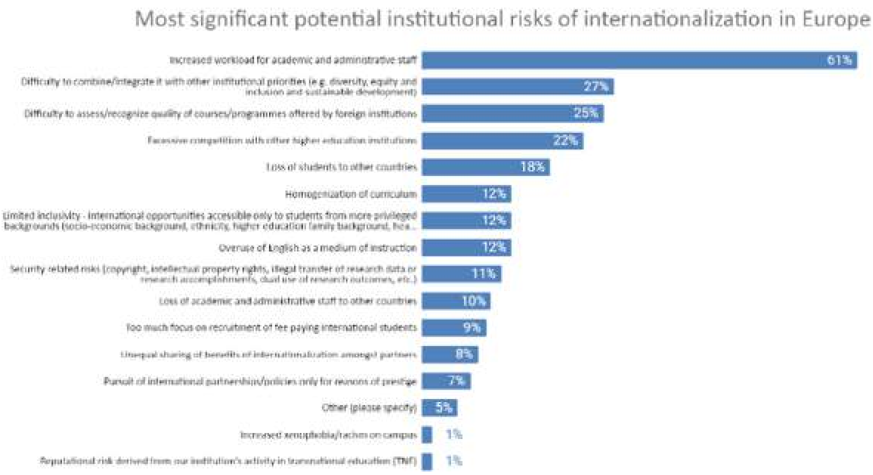

Fig. 2 Most significant potential institutional risks of internationalization in Europe. *Source* Marinoni and Pina Cardona (2024)

or moderate need for training or professional development in relation to their current role.

Happily, there appears to be a strong base on which to build new skills, given the overall high level of satisfaction among professionals working in international higher education across the European Higher Education Area today. Indeed, 91% of respondents reported being either ‘very satisfied’ or ‘satisfied’ in their current positions, and nearly as many (89%) indicated the same levels of satisfaction with the ‘sense of purpose’ their position provides. There also is a sense of stability across this workforce in the sense that nearly 80% of respondents say they expect to continue working in the field for at least the next three years, while most of the scant 3% saying they are likely to leave the sector within that timeframe will do so due to retirement.

As institutional leaders and policymakers commit to ambitious partnerships, aspire to attract larger numbers of international students, and/or move to introduce new initiatives that seek to raise the regional or global visibility of HEIs or entire national systems, energy, engagement, and expertise are required of professional and academic staff at all levels to advance this work. Understanding the realities of those frontline individuals and supporting their ability to do their best work in new and often more demanding roles is an important consideration for the sector moving forward.

3 Challenges to Internationalization

Internationalization, like any process, does come with risks and challenges. As seen in the previous section, increased workload is highlighted as a risk by the respondents of both the EAIE and IAU surveys. The IAU survey specifically investigated risks and challenges to internationalization, and it is also worth mentioning that still others that emerged organically from the results.

Although no overarching societal risk emerges in Europe, it is interesting to see that the most common risk, selected by more than one-third of respondents (36%), is brain drain. Not surprisingly, HEIs indicating such a risk are located mainly in Eastern and Southern Europe, with Ukraine topping the list.

Insufficient financial resources emerge as the most common challenge to internationalization internal to the institution at European HEIs, while the situation for external challenges is more variable, with no single challenge identified by the majority of respondents. However, once more, limited funding emerges as the most common (44% of HEIs), followed by language barriers (42%).

The coupling of insufficient funding and increased workload is a matter of concern, as it points to a situation in which both HEIs and individuals working in internationalization are doing more with less, and such a situation is clearly not sustainable.

The concern about brain drain in specific parts of Europe points to the fact that internationalization is still suffering from inequality between countries, even inside Europe. It is important to underline that some of the countries most concerned about brain drain are outside the European Union but still within the EHEA. However, this concern does exist also among European Union member states and reflects the economic and labor market situation of some countries, especially those located in Southern and Eastern Europe, that suffer from a migration of their graduates towards other countries where they can get better salaries and general working conditions. Overcoming inequality in terms of opportunities for graduates remains an important challenge for the EHEA.

It might be surprising that language barriers are considered an important challenge to internationalization by so many HEIs and that this concern is spread across the EHEA. In fact, unlike brain drain, no clear pattern emerges from the results of the IAU survey in terms of European sub-regions, with a considerable number of replies in this sense coming from Germany.

Finally, another challenge that emerges from the IAU Global Survey worth mentioning is the influence that governments and deteriorating political relations between countries have on the internationalization of research. In fact, Europe and North America are the only regions of the world where most HEIs reported an influence of political tensions between countries on their international research activities. Such influence is expressed either as newly introduced governmental rules and regulations limiting collaboration with HEIs in some countries or simply as institutions' own decisions to revise or suspend collaboration with HEIs in some countries. It also manifests itself at different levels, sometimes affecting collaboration in research in specific disciplines and sometimes at the institutional level.

Overall, the results of the survey show that the effect of political tensions on research is seen more at the disciplinary level rather than institutional level. However, the percentage of HEIs that replied that they were required to completely suspend research partnerships with institutions in some countries because of newly introduced governmental rules and regulations (11%) or because of their own decision (6%) is not negligible.

4 Managing Multiple Layers of Responsibility

In addition to accounting for the individual realities of frontline staff and their professional development needs, forward-looking policy, and practice in relation to internationalization should also be necessarily concerned with matters of organizational structure. In what ways are responsibilities for internationalization organized within institutions? What are the implications of these organizational approaches, and what are the perceptions of their effectiveness or fitness for purpose?

Leveraging information from the previous EAIE Barometer survey exercises in 2015 and 2018, the *EAIE Barometer, third edition* has highlighted across the EHEA the continuation of a clear trend away from reliance on a single central office or team (see Fig. 3).

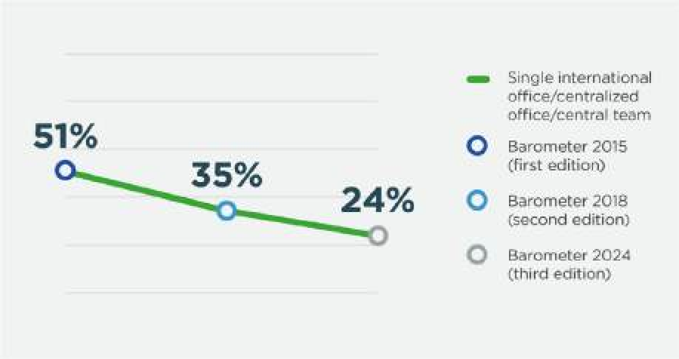

Fig. 3 Change over time in how responsibility for internationalization is organized. *Source* Rumbley and Hoekstra-Selten (2024)

Indeed, as evidenced in Fig. 4, more than two-thirds of respondents (69%) indicate that their institutions today rely on either multiple central teams, on decentral teams, or a combination of central and decentral teams.

On the one hand, there is cause for encouragement in the current state of affairs. One can argue that a move away from single centralized team structures for internationalization speaks to a wider embedding or mainstreaming of the phenomenon across a range of units within HEIs. This can perhaps indicate its evolving 'normalization' (versus its consideration as 'exceptional' or just 'nice to have') and possibly a sign of a deeper institutional commitment. Indeed, to this point, the results of the *6th*

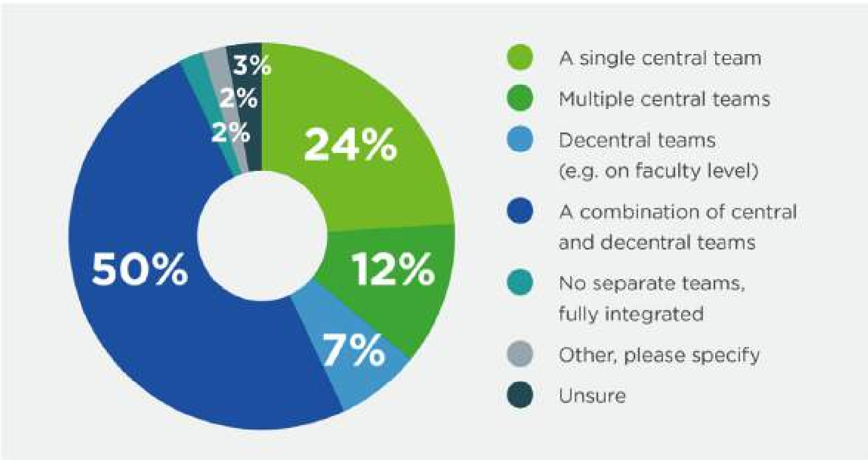

Fig. 4 How is responsibility for internationalization organized (i.e. structured) at your institution? (n = 1954). *Source* Rumbley and Hoekstra-Selten (2024)

IAU Global Survey show that the presence of an office/team to oversee the implementation of the internationalization policy/strategy/plan has become common at HEIs in Europe: 90% of HEIs replied in this sense. Meanwhile, most Barometer respondents (58%) seem satisfied with the way that responsibilities for internationalization are organized at their institution/organization, which is also a positive indicator of health and vitality in relation to this work.

But, as the sector moves forward, thoughtful reflection is also in order. A full 34% of Barometer respondents are either unsatisfied or very unsatisfied about how responsibilities for internationalization are organized at their institution/organization, and another 8% are unsure of how they feel about these arrangements. Clearly, there is room for some critical discussion about what is perceived to be positive or less so about these various organizational approaches. Additionally, it could be reasonably suggested that a move away from single central oversight for internationalization within HEIs implies an increase in complexity in relation to this work, with attendant risks—i.e., with multiple actors working at different levels, how are coherence and efficiency conceived and managed?

As HEIs across the EHEA evolve organizationally—whether as a result of participating in highly ambitious formal initiatives, such as the European Universities alliances or in response to other internally or externally generated stimuli—questions around managing multiple layers of responsibility for internationalization are likely to remain relevant for the foreseeable future. Leaders and policymakers are encouraged to reflect critically on the decision-making processes for allocating responsibilities for internationalization and to draw regularly on the perspectives of actors at all levels within their institutions and organizations when it comes to reviewing and revising these organizational structures and approaches.

5 Strengthening Confidence in and Alignment with Leadership for Internationalization

As with any complex phenomenon, it can be argued that effective leadership is a key ingredient for both short and long-term success. How do frontline professionals working in internationalization perceive the leadership for this work at their institutions or organizations? Are the perspectives of those in leadership roles aligned with colleagues operating at different levels within HEIs? And how influential are key funding and policy-steering actors, whose visions and priorities arguably play a leading role when it comes to institutional action lines and directions?

The *EAIE Barometer, third edition* data provides answers to these questions but, importantly, raises important questions about these issues, too. Regarding perceptions of leadership performance, it is encouraging to note that a solid majority of Barometer respondents are either very confident (18%) or confident (45%) in the leadership for internationalization at their institution. Still, a not-insignificant 31% are not very confident or not at all confident in their leadership.

Meanwhile, it is interesting to note that while, for many of the Barometer questions, there is broad similarity in answers no matter the level of responsibility of respondents, some key differences are in evidence. For example, when it comes to perceptions about staff participation in Erasmus+ opportunities, responses from those who identify as ‘Head of international office’ or holding ‘Other leadership’ roles are different from those without these kinds of leadership roles. Notably, they are more inclined to consider that the work environment allows for participation in these opportunities ‘without any significant obstacles,’ and they more commonly feel ‘incentivized to participate in Erasmus+ staff mobility’ and—quite significantly for those in ‘Other leadership’ roles—that their institution ‘recognizes and rewards participation’ in these EU-funded staff mobility opportunities (see Fig. 5).

This discrepancy in perspective is also visible in the results of the *6th IAU Global Survey*, despite the fact that the IAU survey should represent the institutional perspective and not that of specific individuals responding to it. However, the results of the question on the importance of internal drivers of internationalization indicate, on the one hand, a shared understanding of the institution’s leadership and the international office as the key internal drivers for internationalization efforts, yet various stakeholders within the responding HEIs tend to overestimate their own influence in shaping these initiatives.

The strong discrepancy in these perspectives should stand out as an issue of concern for those in leadership roles, particularly in light of the previously documented desire by Barometer respondents for further training to perform in their roles—which can, in some cases, be achieved through Erasmus+ staff mobility activities—and when considered in light of the 31% of Barometer respondents who do not feel confident about the leadership at their institutions.

Meanwhile, it is interesting to consider the question of effective leadership for internationalization through the lens of perceptions about the influence of national and European-level actors. That is, how are major players in the policy arena seen to be ‘leading’ the direction of travel for institutions? The *EAIE Barometer, third edition* found that just over half (53%) of respondents consider European-level authorities to be either influential or highly influential in terms of ‘driving your institution’s internationalization goals’, and slightly more than this (58%) attributed this same level of influence to national authorities. However, compared to a similar question put to *EAIE Barometer, first edition* respondents nearly ten years ago, there is a notable difference in responses (see Fig. 6).

Interestingly, the *6th IAU Global Survey* generated quite different results on the role of national and supranational policies as external drivers (or ‘leaders’) for HEIs’ internationalization. Indeed, 40% of IAU respondents consider ‘Government policy (at national/state/province/municipal level)’ very important, while a further 44% consider it important. Results for regional (EU) policies are similar: 35% of respondents consider it very important, and 41% consider it important.

The discrepancy in findings between the IAU and EAIE surveys on this point is not easily explained. Of course, the Barometer’s overarching EHEA findings present decidedly a high-level perspective from the region without significant nuance. In fact, there are quite different pictures that emerge at the level of specific countries

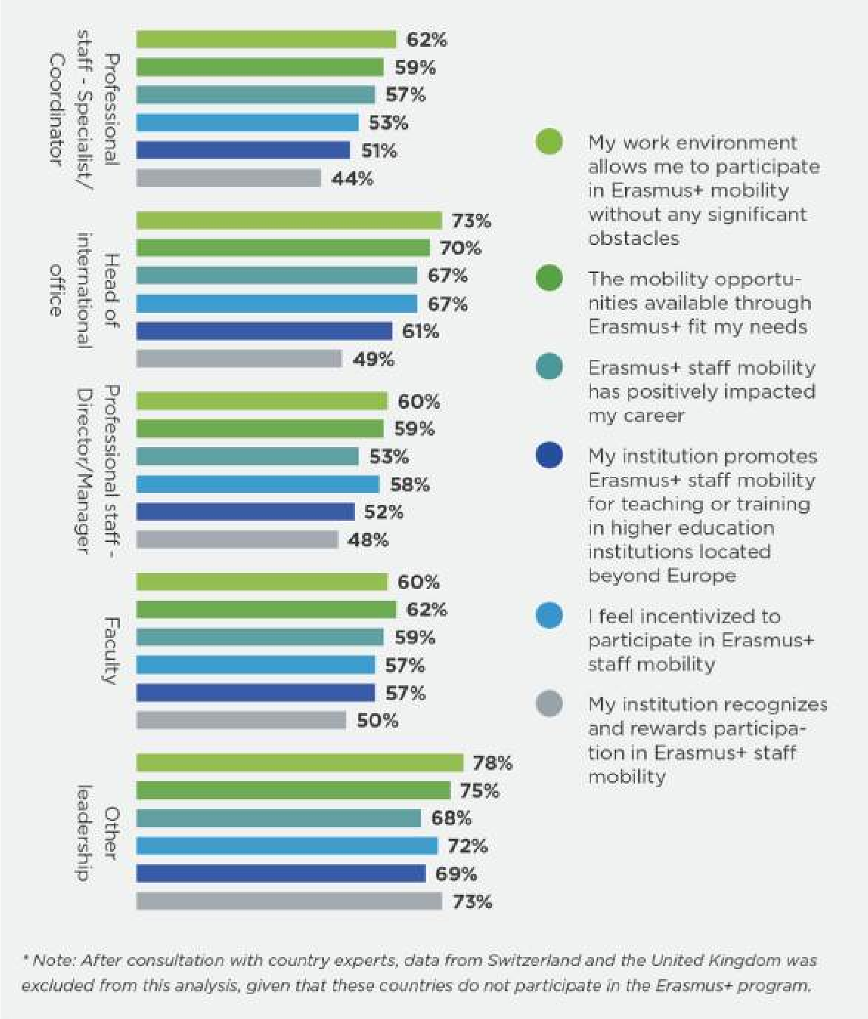

Fig. 5 Erasmus+ opportunities for staff, by position (% strongly agree + agree) (n = 1805)*. *Source* Rumbley and Hoekstra-Selten (2024)

when it comes both to the matter of confidence in institutional/organizational leadership and the question of the influence of national and European-level authorities. However, this data does point to the fact that there are contexts in which leadership for internationalization is in question and where the steering roles of national and/or European-level authorities are decidedly less influential or ambiguous.

As institutional leaders and policymakers look to the future, this data may encourage critical reflection as to whether stakeholders in their context are effectively aligned around the same objectives, confident in the direction of travel,

Barometer 2015 (first edition)	
Influence of national policy level on your institution's internationalisation policy	68%
Influence of European policy level on your institution's internationalisation policy	66%

Barometer 2024 (third edition)	
Influence of national authorities in driving your institution's internationalisation goals	58%
Influence of European-level authorities in driving your institution's internationalisation goals	53%

Fig. 6 Perceptions about national and European-level influence, EAIE Barometer first and third editions (highly influential + influential). *Source* Rumbley and Hoekstra-Selten (2024)

and clear about the roles to be played by the various 'leading actors' involved in advancing the internationalization agenda. The careful identification of misunderstanding, misalignment, or distrust can open the door to critical conversations about how to strengthen the agenda for the road ahead.

6 Addressing Multiple Priorities

Along with questions of *how* frontline international education professionals feel about roles, and the *ways* that internationalization can be organized, and alignment achieved across stakeholder groups, there is the very important matter of what specifically the work of internationalization in higher education across Europe should address.

Data from the *EAIE Barometer, third edition* suggests an 'everything is important' result in this regard. What is meant here is that, across all regions of the EHEA, very strong percentages of respondents—most often 85% or considerably more—indicated that there is a need for their institutions to dedicate more or continued levels of attention to a multitude of activities over the next three to five years (see Fig. 7).

Strengthening international/intercultural content of the curriculum, virtual internationalization activities, and student/staff well-being were the topics most frequently selected as specifically needing *more* attention, while partnerships and networks and student/staff mobility were most frequently selected as needing *more or continued* attention at respondents' institutions.

Topics of interest	Eastern Europe (n=336)	Northern Europe (n=457)	Southern Europe (n=340)	Western Europe (n=648)	Western Asia (n=127)
Crisis preparedness/management	88%	85%	86%	81%	87%
Data/knowledge security	85%	86%	87%	82%	86%
Digitalization of administrative tasks	92%	88%	94%	91%	94%
Environmental sustainability and climate action	88%	89%	88%	91%	90%
Inclusion and diversity	89%	91%	92%	94%	94%
International development and capacity building projects	94%	81%	93%	83%	96%
Local/regional community engagement and/or development	88%	77%	91%	83%	88%
Partnerships and networks	98%	94%	96%	95%	98%
Recruiting international talent (students/staff)	90%	86%	88%	80%	89%
Research collaborations and outputs	97%	87%	92%	86%	98%
Strengthening international/ intercultural content of the curriculum	95%	92%	96%	93%	94%
Student/staff mobility	97%	95%	97%	95%	98%
Student/ staff well-being	94%	94%	96%	93%	95%
Virtual internationalization activities (COIL, virtual exchange, *etc*)	86%	87%	88%	85%	84%

Fig. 7 More and continued levels of attention to topics of interest, by region. *Source* Rumbley and Hoekstra-Selten (2024)

These results are perfectly in line with those of the *6th IAU Global Survey* regarding the importance of internationalization activities and the future priorities for internationalization.

In fact, although the way the questions were formulated was slightly different in the IAU survey (the IAU survey asked to identify the three priority activities and the three most pressing future priorities for internationalization), the results show that there are no clear priority activities nor clear future priorities, but that several activities are considered important.

There are at least two ways to consider this information. On the one hand, there may be cause to celebrate, in that the sector as a whole is not fixated on a small number of priorities to the exclusion of others. No one key priority (or two) seems to be dominating the agenda. So, this can be seen as reinforcing the understanding of internationalization in higher education as a 'comprehensive,' multifaceted undertaking, which has been a hallmark of the contemporary understanding of the phenomenon (Hudzik, 2015).

But in practice, a sense that 'everything matters' may present serious challenges for institutions and higher education systems, where resources are finite and competing priorities are in play. Of course, the fact that more institutions across the EHEA are reporting reliance on more than one single central team to address internationalization responsibilities may signal that HEIs are increasingly better positioned to act effectively on a multitude of fronts simultaneously. Even still, against an agenda of such significant breadth and depth, the work of internationalization across the EHEA will continue to present both strategic and operational stakeholders with considerable challenges—and, of course, exciting opportunities.

7 Delivering Impact

Data from the *EAIE Barometer, third edition* and the *6th IAU Global Survey* clearly reflects a sense that there is much work to be done on many fronts when it comes to internationalization in Europe. But what can be said about the 'impact' of internationalization at this time?

For its part, the Barometer exercise chose to tackle this question from the perspective of how respondents see the urgency of this topic at their institution/organization, how much pressure they feel in their own roles, where they perceive this pressure to come from, and the areas in which they sense that their institution or organization is most concerned with delivering evidence of impact.

Notably, 63% indicated that there is urgent or very urgent discussion or debate on the question of internationalization's impact in their institutional context, while nearly 30% perceive either no urgency in the debate or simply no discussion on this topic. At the same time, nearly half of respondents (47%) feel very significant or significant pressure in their role to produce evidence of the impact of internationalization.

By far and away, the most common sources of pressure to produce evidence of impact are institutional and organizational leaders, followed by national government or higher education authorities (see Fig. 8).

There are, of course, real differences in the sources of pressure from country to country—for example, some countries exhibit significantly higher tendencies to cite pressure from academic staff or current students. However, it is notable that at the macro level across the EHEA, there is relatively little sense from frontline professionals working in international higher education that pressure to produce evidence of impact comes from local/regional governments, employers, the media, or community actors or organizations. This raises important questions about the extent to which internationalization of/in higher education is registering in the public consciousness in many countries, particularly at the local/regional level.

Also of interest is the EAIE Barometer data that suggests that many respondents perceive their institution/organization to be as concerned with delivering impact from

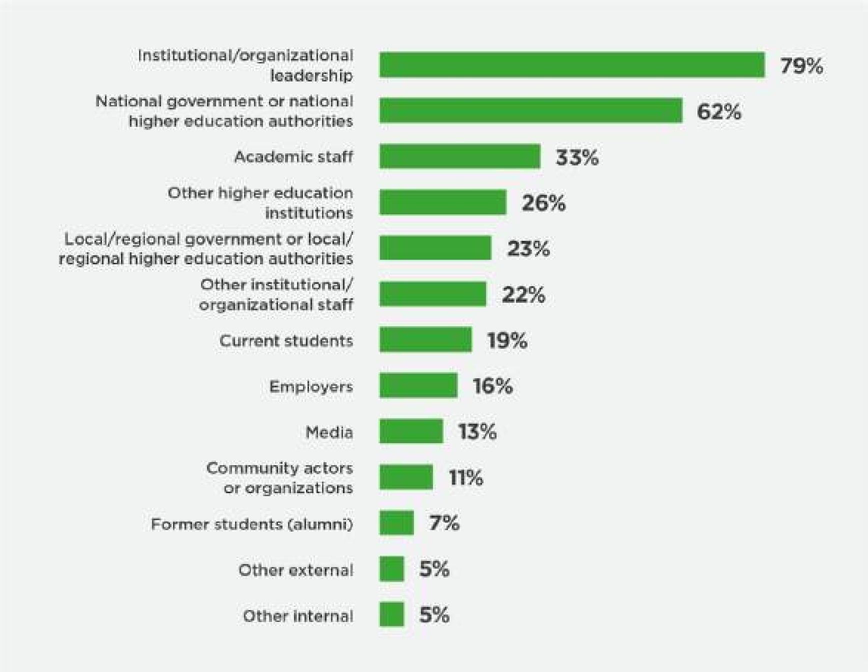

Fig. 8 Where does the pressure to produce evidence of impact come from? (Select all that apply) (n = 1690). *Source* Rumbley and Hoekstra-Selten (2024)

internationalization in regard to reputation or rankings as it is with the other core higher education interests of student learning outcomes and research activities (see Fig. 9).

Notable also is the fact that 22% of *EAIE Barometer, third edition* respondents cited the financial health of their institution or organization as an area where delivering impact is relevant. In contrast, back in 2018, the second edition of the Barometer found that just 12% of respondents identified 'financial benefits' as a main goal of internationalization for their institution.

What does this apparent increased sensitivity to financial health and the prominence of reputation and rankings as a perceived key indicator tell us about how the impact of internationalization is being considered across the EHEA today? What does the relative lack of perceived urgency around climate action/environmental sustainability and community impact (both locally and internationally) say about the way that institutions understand the relationship between internationalization and the broader social good? And what does a widespread sense of urgency around the matter of impact, combined with at least some pressure to produce evidence of impact on the shoulders of a majority of frontline international higher education workers, mean for the field? Are these motivating or demotivating factors for the type of progress envisioned for the future of higher education by the region's institutional leaders and policymakers? These are important questions for further consideration.

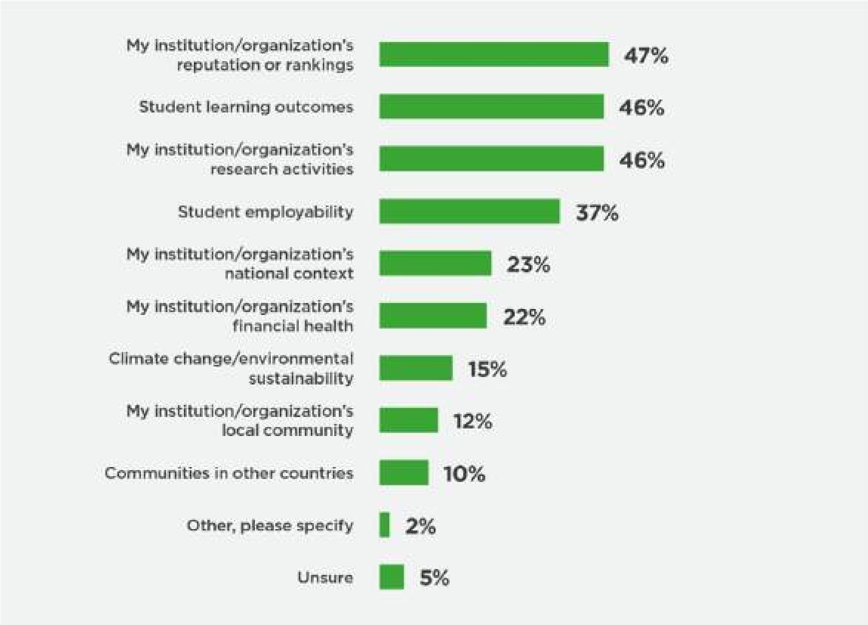

Fig. 9 In which areas is your institution/organization most concerned with delivering impact from its internationalization activities? (Select up to three) (n = 2135). *Source* Rumbley and Hoekstra-Selten (2024)

8 Conclusion

The results of both the *IAU 6th Global Survey* and the *EAIE Barometer, third edition* clearly show that internationalization is a continuously evolving phenomenon and that change is the norm. Change manifests itself in different forms. This can be seen at the level of the individuals who are the central actors involved in this work, in their needs, their way of working, and their responsibilities. These survey results also show that internationalization is becoming increasingly important and complex, developments that require relevant structures and procedures to be in place within HEIs. The findings from both surveys also imply that skilled individuals are continuously needed in this sector and require ongoing training as well as support in order to do their best work and avoid their workload becoming unsustainable. Complexity in internationalization is also evident by virtue of the multiple stakeholders involved in the process, their sometimes differing perspectives, and the diverse range of activities and priorities that HEIs are implementing and addressing.

Navigating the multiple layers of complexity embedded in the work of internationalization is no easy task. Likewise, the impact of this work should not be measured or represented in overly simplified ways. In this sense, the fact that many professionals working in internationalization perceive that reputation, or rankings, is one of the main areas in which their institution is concerned with delivering impact is a worrying result. Luckily, many such professionals also sense that student learning outcomes and research activity are also commonly considered by their employing institutions as relevant to efforts to deliver impact from internationalization.

Even still, institutional leaders and governmental actors should engage in serious reflection and active discussion about what the internationalization of higher education is ultimately aiming to achieve across the EHEA as a whole and in specific national contexts. Is internationalization appropriately aligned towards core academic functions and broad societal benefit? Are competitive approaches to internationalization and the search for institutional prestige, alongside financial or economic motivations, in the best interest of the EHEA if we consider the original rationales for the EHEA's development? What do robustly and thoughtfully 'internationalized' higher education institutions and systems need in order for the European Higher Education Area to thrive in the coming period? Frontline perspectives from professionals and institutional representatives indicate that there is steady ground to build on but also more work ahead to ensure that internationalization is leveraged coherently and constructively in service to the EHEA's interests today and in the years ahead.

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The Role of Erasmus+ Capacity Building Projects in the Internationalization of Armenian Higher Education

Lusine Fljyan

Abstract Armenia's commitment to internationalization was made clear when it joined the Bologna Process in 2005 and then hosted the Bologna Ministerial Conference in 2015. Armenia seeks to align its education with European standards and practices. The country has been engaged in various international platforms and projects, of which the EU-funded Erasmus+ CBHE (Capacity Building in Higher Education) program stands out. This chapter explores the impact of these projects on the internationalization of Armenian higher education in three areas: curriculum development, the social dimension, and internationalization strategies. It describes the role of these areas in internationalizing higher education in Armenia by analyzing 10 Erasmus+ CBHE projects from 2015 to 2020 and their influence on higher education in the country. The study utilizes project documentation, interviews, and focus groups to understand the multidimensional effects of these initiatives. Significant outcomes include new study programs, innovative pedagogies, a strategic shift towards internationalization in universities, and forming academic partnerships based on European best practices. However, further efforts towards internationalization are required, supported by EU programs and reforms, to effectively integrate Armenia into the global educational landscape.

Keywords Armenian higher education · Erasmus+ program · Internationalization · European higher education area · Student and staff mobility · Language proficiency in higher education

1 Introduction

Internationalization has profoundly influenced higher education systems in all countries (de Wit, 2011). It serves multiple functions, from enhancing academic quality to fostering global competences among students. It encompasses a range of activities

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and strategies, from curriculum and policy development to fostering global academic partnerships and enhancing mobility opportunities for students and staff.

The Bologna Process has significantly contributed to the internationalization of higher education in Armenia, primarily by offering improved and greatly increased opportunities for cooperation with partner universities throughout the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

This integration has been facilitated by Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) projects, which have played a crucial role in bringing Armenian higher education closer to European standards (EHEA, 2015a). Through an examination of ten EU-funded Erasmus+ CBHE projects executed between 2015 and 2020, this study aims to identify the impact of these initiatives on Armenian higher education and to uncover lessons from this experience from which other relative latecomers to the EHEA may benefit.

The ten projects examined in this article have:

- enhanced the competitiveness of Armenian higher education institutions;
- improved curriculum design and made Armenian higher education institutions more attractive to foreign students, mainly from outside of the EHEA (Asia and Africa);
- improved the quality of education (Gevorgyan et al., 2021);
- made Armenian degrees more recognizable internationally;
- improved the compatibility of the Armenian higher education system with those in the rest of Europe (National Erasmus+ Office in Armenia, 2020).

2 Internationalization and Globalization of Higher Education

The study takes a comprehensive approach to the internationalization of higher education, as this provides valuable insights into its processes and outcomes, highlights effective practices, and identifies areas for improvement.

Internationalization is understood as a broad and multifaceted process that encompasses various strategies and activities aimed at integrating international, intercultural, and global dimensions into the purpose, functions, and delivery of higher education (de Wit et al., 2015: 29).

As far as students are concerned, internationalization is also understood as a set of competences with which universities can and should equip their graduates to help develop knowledge-based economies (Bergan, 2010: 58). Put simply, modern societies and economies cannot thrive unless they are both knowledge-based and international.

Some argue that there is a difference between the "internationalization" and "globalization" of higher education. For example, Mitchell and Nielsen suggest that "internationalization of higher education is seen as something higher education institutions do while globalization is something that is happening to them" (Mitchell & Nielsen, 2012: 3).

To some extent, Mitchell and Nielsen's views on these two notions resonate with Altbach and Knight's approach, in which they distinguish between globalization and internationalization and identify the latter as the policies and practices adopted by academic systems to respond to the global academic environment. Their perspective also includes specific initiatives such as branch campuses, cross-border collaboration, programs for international students, and the establishment of English-medium programs and degrees (Altbach & Knight, 2007: 290).

Finally, de Wit makes a clear distinction between these two notions by viewing globalization as the economic, political, and societal forces pushing education toward greater international involvement. In contrast, internationalization is seen as the strategies and policies that institutions adopt to respond to globalization. De Wit emphasizes that while globalization is a broader, often external, force, internationalization is more about deliberate institutional strategy (de Wit et al., 2015). De Wit and others, such as Hudzik (2015) and Jones et al. (2021), advocate a holistic approach to internationalization, which integrates an international, intercultural, and global dimension into all aspects of higher education, including teaching, research, and service to society more broadly. De Wit also acknowledges the importance of adapting international strategies to local contexts and underlines that policies and practices must be adapted to fit the unique cultural, economic, and political realities of different regions and institutions (de Wit, 2011).

According to Fontana (2017), either tertiary education hinders good governance in a country, or the lack of good governance and democratic principles in its governance leads to poor quality and, hence, slow integration in internationalization processes. Fontana maintains that the lack of efficient internationalization of higher education will lead to the decline of the state (Fontana, 2017). First, universities thrive in an atmosphere of academic freedom, open discourse, and free exchange of ideas. In environments of restricted democracy, where freedom of expression and academic autonomy are curtailed, universities face limitations in fostering open debate. Scholarly research and the pursuit of truth are easily compromised when academics are subjected to censorship or self-censorship due to political pressures. Acemoglu and Robinson (2019) argue that limited political freedoms and constraints on civil society can lead to a "narrow corridor" where institutions, including universities, struggle to function effectively.

Second, accountability mechanisms can enhance the quality and effectiveness of higher education institutions. This not only enhances the quality of education but also builds trust among international stakeholders (Salmi & Saroyan, 2007).

Third, universities play a crucial role in nurturing active and engaged citizens. They provide education that empowers individuals with the knowledge, understanding, and skills to participate meaningfully in democratic processes (Bergan, 2010; Bergan & Harkavy, 2018). In restricted democracies, where dissent is discouraged, and political engagement is constrained, universities may find it challenging to fulfill this civic role, with long-term consequences for the quality of democratic governance within society.

Not least, for a country emerging—imperfectly—from a non-democratic past, like Armenia, it is essential to embrace the overall role of democratization in the development of internationalization of higher education systems. Modern universities should generate and disseminate a culture of democracy among their students and staff as well as in society more broadly (Council of Europe, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). The Council of Europe has defined 20 competences (Council of Europe, 2018a: 38) which are essential to democratic societies as well as to an internationalized economy. Internationalization of higher education is a values-driven process which should not only provide the students with generic and specific competences but also educate the whole person by opening their horizons to the whole world (Bergan, 2010: 67). In this respect, it is also worth underlining the words of John Aubrey Douglass, who says that "the key to giving the individuals unlimited future is to provide them not only with freedom but also with knowledge and opportunities" (Douglass, 2021: 21). He emphasizes that without the right knowledge and opportunities, freedom might lead to choices that are uninformed or limited in scope. Thus, a holistic educational approach that extends beyond academic skills to include fostering democratic values and a global perspective reinforces the notion that informed choices and broadened horizons are essential.

3 Higher Education in Armenia: Context and Overview

Higher education in Armenia has undergone significant changes and developments following the country's independence in 1991. As of August 2023, there were 54 higher education institutions in Armenia, where 71,300 students were enrolled in full-time and part-time degree programs (Education and Culture, 2023).

Increased autonomy and a proliferation of private higher education institutions not only diversified its educational landscape but also presented challenges in maintaining consistent quality across the sector. The degree of public authority exercised through quality assurance is characterized by a balance between maintaining institutional autonomy and ensuring quality and accountability. This involves regular accreditation processes, the development of internal quality assurance systems within higher education institutions, the adherence to national qualifications frameworks aligned with the overarching framework of qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA),[1] and the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) (EHEA, 2015b).

The lack of autonomy restricts independent decision making, and half of the members of the governing boards of the universities, as well as all rectors of public universities, are members of the ruling party. In the words of Atoyan et al. (2021: 2): "Thus, state universities in academic issues are under the multipurpose control of the government. The government approves the content of the entrance exams and organizes them in a centralized manner. State universities agree with the government

[1] https://www.ehea.info/page-qualification-frameworks, accessed March 31, 2024.

on the number of paid places as well". Private universities generally enjoy a greater degree of autonomy than public universities, allowing them more flexibility in terms of curriculum development, governance, and financial management. This autonomy enables them to adapt quickly to changing educational needs, innovate, and tailor their programs to market demands. However, this independence often comes with a reliance on the university owners or private funding sources, which means that the financial health and strategic decisions of private universities reflect the interests or financial capabilities of those in control rather than academic considerations.

Armenia has the highest level of brain drain in the South Caucasus, according to the brain drain index (Yeghiazaryan, 2022). This means that talented young people prefer to leave Armenia to be educated in a foreign country. Internationalization must be furthered without encouraging undue brain drain, and this is an exceedingly difficult balance.

4 Bologna Reforms in Armenian Higher Education

Armenia's transition from its Soviet past marked a significant shift in its approach to higher education and has, among other things, been marked by a strong international orientation. A number of reforms that are in line with the main objectives of the Bologna Process started in Armenia in the early 1990s, long before the Bologna Declaration was adopted in 1999. The Armenian State Engineering University and later Yerevan State University, as well as the Armenian Agrarian University (1995), adopted a two-tier system aiming to reorient Armenian higher education according to models used abroad (Sargsyan & Budaghyan, 2007: 18).

The Bologna Process, launched in 1999, became a driving force for Armenian higher education institutions. The Law on Higher Education adopted in 2004 created a legal framework for implementing the Bologna reforms, as it outlined the main operational principles for Armenian higher education institutions in line with the Bologna objectives. The Bologna Process was first mentioned in the Strategy of Higher Education Reforms approved by the Government in 2003 (Strategy of Higher Education Reforms, 2003) and was further developed in a strategic paper entitled "The Bologna Reforms in Armenia" (Government Decree, 2006 N 43-N).

The transition to a two-cycle system took place in 2005–2006, and the adoption of ECTS in 2007–2008 (Hunanyan, 2010: 168–169). The Armenian National Qualifications Framework (NQF) was adopted in March 2011 (Government Decree No 332-N), revised by Government Decree No 714-N in 2016 with new definitions for each level (European Training Foundation, 2021: 3). The ratification of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (January 7, 2005) created the conditions for recognition of foreign qualifications (EHEA, 2004: 2).

5 Internationalizing Armenian Higher Education

Armenia's strong and far-flung diaspora has significantly contributed to the internationalization of Armenian higher education through financial contributions and investments, academic and research collaboration, curriculum development and accreditation, capacity building, and skills transfer (Hergnyan & Makaryan, 2006; Minoian & Freinkman, 2005). Nevertheless, their initiatives have been fragmented and have not led to overall capacity building.

The conflict over Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) over the recent three decades and the forced expulsion by Azerbaijan of more than 120,000 ethnic Armenians from Artsakh in autumn 2023, after Azerbaijan had subjected the population there to severe deprivation over a long time (Moreno Ocampo, 2023), further underlines the imperative of internationalization. It not only highlights the ongoing geopolitical tensions in the region but also underscores the importance of Armenia's higher education sector connecting with the global community, both for the country's development and for safeguarding its cultural and intellectual heritage.

When comparing the internationalization process of Armenian higher education with that in other parts of Europe and the developed West, it becomes evident, however, that Armenia is in the initial stages. From 1991 to 2005, Armenia was ideologically distanced from the global educational reforms, and whatever measures were undertaken may be seen as a "placebo" (Khachatryan, 2016)**.** After it acceded to the Bologna Process in 2005, Armenia demonstrated its commitment to making societal change through education reforms. However, a study carried out by the Open Society Foundations (OSF) underlines that higher education in Armenia is characterized by "exaggerated control grip by the political regime; lack of an authentic program of reforms; pervasive corruption; continuously decreasing quality standards; and massive emigration of young talent" (Matei et al., 2013: 5).

6 The Erasmus+ CBHE Projects

So, the Armenian university system has sought to internationalize and has been greatly helped by Armenia's participation in European higher education programs. TEMPUS projects and the then Erasmus+ Capacity Building Higher Education (CBHE) projects became the most important instruments for bringing Armenian higher education closer to the rest of Europe. The European Commission has implemented several successful tools in Armenian higher education, the most powerful of which is the K2 Capacity Building Higher Education (CBHE) projects.

The Erasmus+ CBHE and the implementation of various "Bologna tools" increased the competitiveness of the higher education institutions in the region, which started to attract foreign students, mainly from Asia and Africa. International Departments were established at Armenian universities, which started to recruit foreign students. Many universities developed foreign language programs and started to provide support services to foreign students. The implementation of the international best practices ensured that the quality of the study programs at Armenian higher education institutions was in line with the European Guidelines and Standards (ESG) and facilitated the international recognition of Armenian degrees. Further reforms improved the compatibility of the Armenian higher education system with those in the rest of Europe. This alignment has provided opportunities for Armenian students and faculty to participate more effectively in international academic exchanges and collaboration. Armenia's active engagement in this process indicates its commitment to enhancing its educational quality and increasing its global academic presence.

However, Armenia still lacks a unified overall strategy for the internationalization of higher education, even if individual institutions incorporate internationalization goals into their mission statements. Further research is needed to understand how Armenia and other countries can effectively implement international educational processes and overcome related challenges (Aperyan, 2021), but the lack of an overall strategy lessens even the positive impact of the Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) projects, which is the focus of this article.

Against this background, this chapter aims to analyze the impact of 10 EU-funded Erasmus+ Capacity Building for Higher Education (CBHE) projects[2] on the internationalization of higher education in Armenia in the period of 2015–2020. The study focuses on curriculum development, inclusiveness, and internationalization strategies, completed with the involvement of Armenian partner institutions. These were the main directions of internationalization in the EHEA, and the new capacities have enabled Armenia to move in the same direction as other EHEA member states.

The study aims to assess the impact on three main levels: individual, institutional, and national. It is hoped that this will help other latecomers to the EHEA to identify strategies that can be effective at different levels of their higher education system and adapt them to meet their specific needs and objectives. For individuals, this may involve enhancing employability and skills. Institutions may focus on improving research and teaching quality, while national strategies might aim at increasing the country's attractiveness as an education destination. To this end, the logical framework matrices of the projects, publicly available documents, and project websites were analyzed. In addition, interviews were conducted with participants in 23 focus groups.

KA2 designates the CBHE[3] projects in Erasmus+. From 2015 to 2020, 30 projects were implemented in Armenia, and 24 Armenian higher education institutions and 18 other organizations were involved. Thirteen projects were for curriculum development, seven were for the modernization of Governance and Management of higher education institutions and ten for strengthening relations between higher education and the broader economic and social environment (Gevorgyan et al., 2021; National

[2] HARMONY, C3QA, InnoCENS, MARUEEB, HERITAG, LNSS, INCLUSION, DOCMEN, PROMIC and REFINE.

[3] Capacity Building Higher Education.

Erasmus+ Office in Armenia, 2020). The projects enabled the Armenian universities to establish cooperation with 23 Program Countries (EU countries and non-EU countries associated with the program).

CBHE projects are transnational, based on multilateral partnerships, and support the modernization, accessibility, and internationalization of higher education in Partner Countries, many of which are outside the European Union. Through the CBHE projects, Armenian educational institutions benefit from modernized curricula, improved teaching methodologies, and increased opportunities for student and staff mobility. Two projects[4] are structural, while eight[5] are joint projects. 693 staff trained and 195 new modules and seven new classrooms or labs were developed through them.

7 Internationalization of the Curricula

In six[6] out of ten projects, changes were effected through curriculum development and reform, which incorporated European standards and practices. These reforms helped align educational content with international benchmarks, making academic qualifications more globally recognizable and transferable. Such improvements also helped students enhance their employability and be more actively engaged in international academic and professional mobility programs. Overall, the achievements in individual and institutional development were realized through a combination of capacity-building activities, collaborative partnerships, and the commitment of staff and institutions to implement best practices across various facets of higher education.

This took place at course and program level accompanied by improvement of the teaching methodologies. Curriculum development not only aligned educational content with international benchmarks but also improved the employability and mobility of students and academic staff. This is crucial for preparing students for a globalized world, thereby strengthening Armenia's capacity for curriculum development within the international education framework.

In the HERITAG, MARUEEB, and REFINE projects, the revision or implementation of the study programs enhanced the relevance of the curriculum and integrated both interdisciplinary approaches and new technologies. The students further benefited from guest lectures. Several double degree programs within the REFINE CBHE project (2017–2020) at three Armenian higher education institutions were labor-market oriented and enhanced the students' chances of finding employment commensurate with their competences (Jraghatspanyan, 2021). The quality and relevance of the programs were improved by training teachers through new methodologies. The modular approach to curriculum development created a model that could be adopted

[4] HARMONY and C3QA.

[5] InnoCENS, MARUEEB, HERITAG, LNSS, INCLUSION, DOCMEN, PROMIC and REFINE.

[6] Engineering Science—Microelectronics (DOCMEN, InnoCENS), Environment (MARUEEB), Tourism Management (HERITAG), Migration (PROMIG), Finance (REFINE).

by other Armenian universities. Regulatory frameworks and guiding principles for curriculum development and delivery address gaps in university practices.

Involving students in the projects helped them benefit from curriculum development (PROMIG, InnoCENS) and increased their intercultural competences through communication with international peers. Within InnoCENS 44, ideas were developed by students in teams together with their mentors and submitted in an international competition (InnoCENS Innovation Business Idea Competition List, 2020), where the winners from each member university took part in the Global Final at the University of Valencia.[7] Within the same project, an innovation center was established at the NUACA which organized training courses for the students, and the students were invited to collaborate with the Center for Advanced Infrastructure and Transportation at Rutgers University.[8]

The Erasmus+ CBHE projects not only align educational goals with global challenges (EHEA, 2020) but also facilitate cross-cultural understanding, global mobility, sustainable development, and responsible global citizenship. Thus, the HERITAG project exemplifies the promotion of internationalization through sustainability by integrating global concerns and practices into higher education and industry collaboration. By creating interdisciplinary master's specialties in Geo-Information Technologies (GIT) for cultural heritage and tourism, integrating marketing and entrepreneurship skills, the project directly contributes to internationalization by preparing graduates with a global perspective and skills applicable in diverse contexts.

The C3QA project focused on developing quality assurance for internationalization in third-cycle (doctoral) programs. Within the project, the EUA Salzburg principles for doctoral education (EUA, 2010) were applied, and for the extension of each principle, specific recommendations were developed for the universities as well as for the MoESCS of Armenia.

8 The Social Dimension of Higher Education

The Erasmus+ CBHE projects aimed at improving inclusion in higher education, which is part of the European Union's efforts to support modernization, accessibility, and internationalization in Partner Countries. Capacity building is a core aspect of this initiative.

The wider objective of the CBHE INCLUSION project[9] was to implement the social dimension in higher education in Armenia by capitalizing on knowledge transfer and cross-regional cooperation. The cross-regional nature of the project

[7] https://gidec.abe.kth.se/InnoCENS/, accessed March 31, 2024.

[8] https://nuaca.am/archives/ads/fundamentals-of-project-management-course?lang=en, accessed March 31, 2024.

[9] Development and Implementation of Social Dimension in Armenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina through Cross-Regional Peer Learning, 2016–2019.

encouraged learning from existing practices and long-lasting cooperation between the two regions (Neighbourhood East and Western Balkans) and European partners. As has become clear from the interviews for this article, the social dimension is widely integrated into the core curricula and the strategy of the American University of Armenia (AUA), which is a disability-friendly institution where students with all kinds of special needs receive special support from admission through graduation. This includes support from the Student Success Center, funding and scholarship advice, and supportive tutor system credentials. AUA has a well-established infrastructure and network for accommodating the needs of students with both physical and learning needs, with a wide range of tools to assess the needs of students and build new university strategies based on this assessment.

As a result of the project, institution-level guidelines on the development/operationalization of social dimension strategies were developed based on EU best practices, and a checklist for inclusive learning and teaching was prepared. Two Armenian higher education institutions prepared a training methodology and used it to train teachers from 50 Armenian secondary schools.

The Ministries of Education and Science and of Labor and Social Affairs collaborated on this project, which led to two significant outcomes: firstly, universities received special state funding to enhance educational opportunities for students with special education needs; secondly, a specific provision was incorporated into Armenia's new Law on Higher Education and Science, which prohibits any increase in tuition fees for students with special education needs.

Yerevan State Academy of Fine Arts (YSAFA) and the American University of Armenia have developed strategies for providing inclusive learning and teaching. They both have a virtual learning environment which was in place even before the COVID-19 pandemic. YSAFA established such an environment when the higher education institutions moved online in March 2020. Within the project, special equipment was purchased to facilitate the integration of inclusive methodology in the curricula to the needs of the university students.

Curriculum development was already underway at the AUA. At the same time, YSAFA developed a new strategic program where all the planned improvements in the social dimension were specified. All the legal acts and regulations of the higher education institution were revised from the perspective of the social dimension. Nevertheless, even though the social dimension has become a priority of the YSAFA, its representatives confirmed that there have been no infrastructure improvements yet to respond to the education needs of students with physical disabilities.

YSAFA included the social dimension in the new university strategy 2021–2025, which aims to improve the curriculum and the teaching methodology to foster inclusiveness and widen participation in different initiatives.

On the institutional level, master plans were adopted and approved. At the national level, inclusive education toolkits such as "Guidelines for Inclusive Teaching and Learning in Higher Schools and Universities" (Middlemas et al., 2018), "Towards Inclusive Education in Armenia" (Toolkit, 2019), and "Inclusive Education at Higher Education Institutions in RA National Guidelines" (Guidelines, 2019) were developed, strategies and initiatives at the universities were reviewed, and secondary school and university teachers were trained. These initiatives had a long-term impact on education and community development in Armenia, and they brought about environmental change and ensured social sustainability.

Strategies to improve inclusiveness and participation in educational initiatives, especially for foreign students and those with language barriers, demonstrate a commitment to internationalization by addressing the diverse needs of all students.

LNSS (Library Network Support Services) is another Erasmus+ project with a focus on the social dimension encouraging the development of library infrastructure for a diverse student population, including students with special needs. 91.67% of the survey participants (students and staff) responded that their libraries are not accessible to disabled people (LNSS Survey, 2016).

Module 7 of the project entitled "Access to Libraries and Society for Learners with Special Needs" built the capacities of three Armenian universities (two in Yerevan and one in the region of Syunik) to develop library access policy and planning, library technologies, conducting disability audits, inclusive design and services delivery for libraries and disability awareness training.

Both projects—LNSS and INCLUSION—contributed to integrating the social dimension into university curricula and strategies, thus promoting inclusiveness and accessibility at Armenian higher education institutions.

9 Internationalization Strategies

Specific strategies include all aspects of the development of higher education relevant to internationalization. They aim to integrate the results of research on internationalization with a simultaneous focus on strengthening the strategic, infrastructural, and human capacities of the Armenian higher education institutions.

HARMONY's wider objective was to contribute to increasing the attractiveness of the Armenian higher education system, transforming the higher education institutions into centers of excellence for research, development, and innovation in the global context.

The Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports of Armenia (MoESCS), through intensive collaboration with the HARMONY project, has improved its understanding of internationalization policies and practices in the Programme countries. The project contributed to the development of comprehensive strategies through the development of internationalization strategies and strategic plans and toolkits, as well as through the establishment of fully equipped International Relations Offices at Armenian higher education institutions. The HARMONY project also contributed to developing strategic documents with an international focus at Eurasia International University. It implemented concrete measures to monitor strategy effectiveness, enhancing the internationalization of management, academic mobility, and integration of international perspectives into teaching and research. The project also fostered institutional improvements in policy and regulation and supported the international mobility of students and staff (Ohanyan, 2018). In many cases, Armenia's engagement in Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) projects provided other opportunities, including Erasmus+ K1 (K 171 and K131) projects for student and staff mobility. The collaboration with institutions in Programme countries has enhanced English language proficiency and facilitated the development of English language study programs and courses. These efforts have significantly broadened the opportunities for Armenian academic staff and students to participate in international cooperation.

The curriculum development within the projects was accompanied by the development of study programs and courses delivered in English. These measures have increased the opportunities for academic staff, students, and institutions to engage in international cooperation and also opened up access to a variety of global academic resources, most of which are in English.

On the institutional level, the Armenian universities learned from best practices in the EU. Policy papers and regulatory frameworks were also developed to bridge the gap in legislation that held back the internationalization of these universities, such as Institutional Internationalization Strategies (HARMONY), Internal Quality Assurance Manual for Doctoral Education (C3QA), and Policy on Copyright (LNSS). Some projects improved the teamwork and team-teaching skills of academic staff as well as students (DOCMEN, PROMIG, HERITAG, InnoCENS), which contributed to the acceleration of cooperation with international partners.

Within the HARMONY project, the Armenian universities developed internationalization strategies based on methodological assistance, SWOT analysis, and strong institutional Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). As a result of the update of the Academic Mobility Regulation of Eurasia International University the MoESCS, outgoing students are now exempted from tuition fees at both their home and host universities. This has led to an increase in the number of mobile students at both universities.

The report developed under the HARMONY project revealed that many Armenian higher education institutions did not have strategic plans for internationalization and provided poor methodological assistance to students and employees to participate in academic mobility programs. The Ministry encourages international cooperation by facilitating international institutional partnerships, creating consortia and alliances for joint and double degree programs, and developing international research cooperation.

YSAFA included the social dimension in its new university strategy 2021–2025, which also refers to foreign students who do not know Armenian and may face communication and education problems, as well as local students who do not have sufficient foreign language skills to participate in student mobility programs.

On the national level, guidelines were developed and approved, institutional-level master plans were adopted and approved, and materials to raise the awareness of secondary school students and teachers were adopted. Resources for inclusive teaching and learning were collected and could be used by individuals and institutions as well as policymakers to develop national policies and practices to further the social dimension. Strategies and initiatives at the universities were reviewed, and secondary school teachers were trained. All the initiatives have had a long-term impact on education and community development in Armenia, and they have brought about environmental change and ensured social sustainability. These activities and measures have had a positive impact on the social landscape of the higher education system in Armenia.

Strategies to improve inclusiveness and participation in educational initiatives demonstrate a commitment to internationalization by addressing the diverse needs of all students. LNSS and INCLUSION also contributed to integrating the social dimension into university curricula and strategies, thus promoting inclusiveness and accessibility.

Among the most significant impacts of the program at the institutional level is the increase in the budget for the development of international activities as well as the administrative staff. The report developed under the HARMONY project revealed many drawbacks in higher education regulations. For example, many Armenian higher education institutions did not have Strategic Plans for Internationalization and provided poor methodological assistance to students and employees in participating in academic mobility programs. The Ministry encourages international cooperation by facilitating international institutional partnerships, creating consortia and alliances for joint and double degree programs, and developing international research cooperation.

However, the MoESCS has not yet developed an internationalization strategy for higher education. Despite the achievements of individual institutions, the lack of a national strategy seriously hampers the development of this capacity at Armenian higher education institutions. The Ministry should create a policy to guide universities in internationalizing teaching and academic programs, improving international impact and visibility, and internationalizing research. It should also allocate funds to foster internationalization development through different measures.

10 Conclusions and Recommendations

The Armenian starting point in the European Higher Education Area was a deteriorated higher education system as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Bologna Process appeared as an opportunity to restructure its system and make it cohesive with the EHEA in the long run.

The main lesson learned from the Erasmus+ CBHE projects is that educators in Armenia must have the capacity to learn new ways of doing old things and combine new and old approaches, methods, and resources to provide a contemporary education in line with the changing needs of society and the workforce.

Development depends on learning, and learning requires searching and doing. The Erasmus+ CBHE projects have proved to be the most important tool for the internationalization of higher education in Armenia because they link the domestic challenges to a larger international context and enable the Armenian higher education community to learn from international best practices. They encourage Armenia to invest simultaneously in human capital and economic development.

From the analysis of 10 Erasmus+ CBHE projects conducted from 2015 to 2020, it has become evident that this EU initiative has brought changes not only on the structural but also on the curricular level: revision of existing study programs, development of new ones, and implementation of innovative teaching and learning methodologies, guidelines, and tools.

The Erasmus+ projects analyzed here helped decision makers identify the main problems that higher education faces and then solve them through joint projects and collaboration. Within the Armenian reality, the implementation of the Erasmus+ CBHE projects has opened a dialogue on educational values, such as academic integrity, inclusivity, innovation, and quality in education. This dialogue would not have been established without the CBHE projects.

The Erasmus+ CBHE projects helped align Armenia's higher education with European standards, thereby increasing its attractiveness to international students and improving the quality, compatibility, and recognition of Armenian degrees.

Continued internationalization, supported by EU programs and reforms, will be crucial for Armenia to integrate more effectively into the global educational landscape and address the brain drain issue.

This chapter emphasizes the dynamic nature of higher education internationalization, influenced by technological, geopolitical, and societal changes, and the critical role of democratic principles in facilitating effective internationalization processes. The Erasmus+ CBHE projects significantly influenced curriculum development, social inclusion, and international strategies in Armenian higher education, not least through curriculum reform and the introduction of new technologies and interdisciplinary approaches. They also fostered inclusivity and accessibility for all students, developed strategic partnerships, and improved policy frameworks. This comprehensive approach underlines the importance of international cooperation and capacity building in modernizing Armenia's higher education system.

The Erasmus+ CBHE projects have played a transformative role in developing internationalization strategies within Armenian higher education. By establishing strategic partnerships, enhancing academic mobility, and fostering the integration of global perspectives into curriculum and research, these projects have significantly advanced the internationalization of Armenian universities. They facilitated the adoption of European educational standards, improved institutional capacity for global engagement, and prepared graduates for the international labor market. This strategic alignment with global educational practices not only enhances Armenia's educational competitiveness but also contributes to its socio-economic development. The Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) projects have facilitated curriculum modernization and enhanced the social dimension of education. Overall, these projects have, therefore, played a pivotal role in transforming Armenia's higher education landscape, making it more inclusive, globally engaged, and better prepared to meet the challenges of the 21st century. The Erasmus+ projects are the only unifying system-level tool for developing the internationalization of higher education in Armenia.

However, the benefits on the individual and institutional levels are greater than on the national level. The national policy changes are longer processes involving legislation, alignment with broader government priorities, and coordination among various stakeholders. National policy initiatives involve more complex budgetary processes and allocations that are controlled by higher levels of government, making it harder to direct resources quickly and effectively to areas identified as priorities. The preparation of a new Law on Higher Education and Science was launched in 2015, but the draft law has undergone various changes in line with shifts in the political agenda of Armenia, and it has not yet been adopted. As noted above, the absence of a national internationalization strategy is keenly felt.

Despite ongoing reforms, the country does not yet have even one university among the 500 most advanced universities in the world.[10] The number of students at Armenian universities is declining, and in the academic year 2023–2024, 50% of the study places at the universities were vacant, and semi-empty universities are less attractive to prospective students.[11]

Based on the comprehensive analysis of the impact of the Erasmus+ CBHE projects on the higher education system, several recommendations can be made to enhance the internationalization process:

- Armenian higher education institutions should increase the efficiency of the projects and ensure their lasting contribution. This may be done through knowledge sharing and dissemination, involving more specific stakeholders in such projects.
- While university stakeholders may already possess some of these skills, targeted training and development initiatives can enhance their readiness and capacity to engage in CBHE projects more effectively. Institutions may organize workshops, training sessions, and other professional development opportunities to prepare stakeholders for successful participation in these projects.
- The Armenian government, together with educational stakeholders, should formulate and implement a national strategy for the internationalization of higher education, encompassing policy support, funding mechanisms, and clear objectives. Continued and expanded Armenian participation in Erasmus+ CBHE projects is an essential means to achieving this goal.
- It is imperative for universities to persistently engage in new CBHE projects that are strategically designed to bolster capacities congruent with their institutional objectives, national frameworks, and the broader priorities of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Such a proactive approach facilitates the development of robust educational ecosystems that are responsive to the dynamic needs of students, academia, and the wider society, thereby contributing significantly to the advancement of quality education, research, and international collaboration within the EHEA context.

The continued support from Erasmus+ and other international initiatives will be crucial in achieving these goals, ensuring that Armenia's higher education system

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[10] https://www.topuniversities.com/world-university-rankings/2023?page=20&region=Asia, accessed March 31, 2024.

[11] https://oragir.news/hy/material/2023/07/19/85702, accessed March 31, 2024.

not only aligns with European standards but also contributes actively to the global educational community. If Armenia succeeds in this, it will also be an example of good practice to other countries coming from the same background and facing similar challenges.

Armenia's engagement in the Bologna Process and Erasmus+ CBHE projects underscores the significance of strategic commitment to internationalization. EHEA members should view internationalization not as an optional add-on but as a strategic imperative that fosters curriculum development, social dimensions, educational quality, and cultural awareness.

The success of the CBHE projects highlights the importance of a comprehensive approach that encompasses curriculum development, teacher training, governance reforms, and the integration of internationalization at all levels of higher education. This approach ensures that internationalization efforts are systemic, sustainable, and impactful.

Other latecomers to the EHEA can benefit from Armenia's use of Erasmus+ Capacity Building Higher Education projects as an efficient tool for internationalizing higher education. The country's engagement in these projects has been instrumental in linking domestic challenges to a wider international context, enabling Armenian higher education institutions to learn from international practices.

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Study-Abroad Portals in the EHEA: A Case Study of the *Study in Romania* Platform

Wesley Felipe da Silva Siqueira

Abstract National governments employ various strategies to attract prospective students, encompassing comprehensive public policies and targeted marketing initiatives. Countries often promote themselves as study destinations through official study-abroad platforms aimed at international audiences. These "study-in" websites inform on administrative and bureaucratic requirements for admission to higher education institutions, allow international students to explore available degrees and, in many cases, are the direct channel for applying for degree programs and scholarships. This study explores the role of national study-abroad portals in the digital transitions of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). It investigates how national governments leverage such platforms to attract international students and promote their universities and programs abroad using nation branding strategies. By analyzing the *Study in Romania* platform and comparing it to similar websites, the study aims to address the research question: What is the role of official study-abroad portals within the digital landscape of the EHEA? The research is supported by both primary data, through an interview conducted with a staff member of The Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding (UEFISCDI) in December 2022, and secondary empirical data, such as the enrollment numbers of foreign students at universities in a given country. Through a comprehensive review of data and literature, the study provides insights, lessons learned, and recommendations for enhancing the *Study in Romania* platform to position the country as a more attractive study destination. The findings of this study are intended to assist universities and national governments in refining their digital strategies to attract and support international students within the EHEA.

Keywords Study-abroad portals · Study-in initiatives · Study in Romania · Study in Europe · European Higher Education Area (EHEA)

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1 Introduction

The international higher education sector is an incredibly competitive market, especially in the recent context of advanced globalization (Aziz et al., 2016; Lomer et al., 2018; Sataøen, 2019). Amid intensive competition, 29 European nations created the Bologna Process in 1999, aiming to harmonize their respective higher education systems, facilitate student and staff mobility across the continent, and increase the autonomy and competitiveness of European universities globally (Bologna Declaration, 1999).

Later, the group created the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in 2010, seeking to adopt a common system of comparable credits and degrees (bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels, or the three-cycle system), cooperation in comparable methodologies and requirements for quality assurance, among other goals (Budapest-Vienna Declaration, 2010). Although not all EHEA members have achieved the main desired targets and reforms yet, the Bologna Process influenced the adoption of internationalization policies and significant growth in student mobility across Europe (Eurydice, 2020). Currently, the EHEA comprises 49 countries alongside the European Commission (EHEA, n.d.).

Placed in the domain of International Higher Education (IHE) and limited to the EHEA geographic space, this paper analyzes the promotion of countries as study destinations through official national platforms targeted at foreign audiences. For this purpose, it incorporates perspectives from *Place Branding* and inspects examples of similar study-abroad websites in the EHEA compared to the Romanian one.

Although a considerable amount of research exists about countries as study destinations from the perspective of different disciplines, there are very few examples of investigations exploring the information portals for prospective foreign students. Investigated European examples include *Study in Lithuania*, *Study in Latvia* and *Study in Estonia* (Krauze & Sloka, 2021), *Study in Finland* (Jokila, 2019), *Study in Norway* and *Study in Denmark* (Sataøen, 2019), among others.

This research contributes to the field by examining the *Study in Romania* program, as no dedicated studies about it have been identified. A further innovation is to fill the comparative gap by analyzing existing study-in portals among EHEA nations. Currently, the largest comparative sample is about 23 international education websites from countries listed in the top 160 ranking of universities by Times Higher Education (Sataøen, 2019).

As a result of the new proposed comparison, the present study elaborates on lessons learned from the data and literature review, providing recommendations for the *Study in Romania* platform to better promote the image of Romania abroad as an attractive study destination. The findings of this study should help universities and national governments improve digital approaches to attracting and supporting international students in the EHEA.

There are several definitions for "international students" that shape the debate in the literature. Considering that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) holds the largest dataset about student mobility, comprising over one hundred countries, their definition is adopted in this study. Hence, international students are understood as those who moved from their original country to the destination country to attend educational activities (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2021).

In this context, international mobility is analyzed only in terms of *degree* mobility at the tertiary level, i.e., individuals who participate in full-cycle study programs at universities abroad. Moreover, this paper focuses on the perspective of incoming or inbound mobility, which is measured by the number of enrolments in higher education institutions of the host country (OECD, 2022) and is an indicator of how an educational system is attractive for foreign citizens (European Migration Network, 2019). Accordingly, this paper approaches the Romanian case through the particular lenses of incoming degree-seeking international students, as is common in the literature (Wang, 2021).

2 International Higher Education Practices

There were nearly 6.4 million students attending degree programs at universities abroad in 2021 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2021). One-third of these decided to study in anglophone countries—with the United States, the United Kingdom (UK), and Australia as top destination countries, with 13%, 9%, and 5.9%, respectively, of the global market share (OECD, 2023; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2021). On the other hand, the EHEA is essentially a non-anglophone grouping in which only three out of the 49 members are English-speaking nations (the UK, Ireland, and Malta).

When developing international higher education policies and strategies, non-anglophone countries like Romania must avoid simply copying the practices of top-receiving anglophone countries without proper contextual analysis (Wang, 2021). According to De Wit et al. (2021), "it is crucial for non-Anglophone countries to capitalize on comparative advantages when trying to attract international students" (p. 14), in which "the quality and reputation of a country's higher education are also important factors" (Ibid.).

This perspective guides the current analysis towards collecting valuable lessons for the EHEA countries. In this sense, the majority of European nations should have a clear understanding of how to promote and value their national languages without neglecting English as the dominant global language of instruction, science, and scholarship (Unangst et al., 2021).

Another recommended approach is to draw the attention of students from emerging economies, which may contribute to diversifying their source markets beyond traditional countries. Furthermore, they can leverage, for marketing purposes, the fact that they are more affordable study-abroad destinations compared to top receiving countries (De Wit et al., 2021).

2.1 Study in Europe

As the only organizational member of the EHEA, the European Commission is an influential actor that sets the agenda in the region. In 2022, the Commission published a strategy that reinforces the role of universities as drivers of the global role and leadership of the EU and empowers these institutions to be actors of change in digital transitions (European Commission, 2022). According to the strategy, universities are instrumental in promoting European values and are part of European soft power. It is a priority for the EU to consolidate its reputation and make Europe more attractive as a study destination in the world (Ibid.).

This strategy is not only a narrative, since the Commission also established the development of the "Study in Europe" portal intending to promote European higher education offers worldwide (European Commission, 2022). The website informs prospective international students about funding, study, and research opportunities in 33 European nations, including direct access to their respective national "study-in" platforms (European Education Area, n.d.).

3 The Romanian Context of Incoming Mobility

Romania has 87 Higher Education Institutions, 53 public and 34 private universities (Ministerul Educației, 2023). The system received over 554,000 students enrolled in all tertiary education cycles (Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctorate/Ph.D.) in the 2021/ 2022 academic year (Ministerul Educaţiei, 2022).[1]

In the same year, Romania hosted almost 35,400 foreign students from 149 countries, representing nearly 6.4% of all enrolled students in higher education (Ministerul Educaţiei, 2022). Compared to the official target of 10% international enrollments at Romanian higher education institutions by 2030 (UNESCO, 2022), the current rate represents a challenge that needs to be overcome within the next six years.

Most degree-seeking students coming to Romania were from non-EU/non-EEA nations in the 2021 academic year (70.7% of all incoming mobility). In the same period, the top ten source countries were the Republic of Moldova (36.6%), France (8.8%), Israel (7.6%), Italy (7.1%), Germany (5.0%), Morocco (3.4%), Greece (3.0%), Serbia (2.1%), Tunisia (2.1%), and the Syrian Arab Republic (1.9%) (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2021).

Among non-anglophone countries, incoming mobility recruitment comes mostly from neighboring countries, returning diaspora, or from countries which share cultural and linguistic similarities (Wang, 2021). The presented data corroborates this idea. For Romania, the Republic of Moldova dominates over one-third of inbound

[1] For the academic year 2022/2023, Romanian universities had over 538,000 enrolled students (Ministerul Educației, 2023). However, the total number of international students for this period is unavailable. Therefore, this paper relies on the most recent data from 2021/2022.

students, which is consistent with the shared national language (Romanian) and strong cultural and historical ties (Ibid.).

Nearly 80% of inbound students seek degrees at the bachelor's level, while almost half of incoming students (49%) pursue programs in the fields of Medicine, Dentistry, and Pharmacy in Romania (Ministerul Educaţiei, 2022). Medical programs in Romania stand out as an attractive field for international students due to their non-restrictive admission policy and active promotion of educational offers outside the EU while supplying a high global demand for diplomas in this area (Fiţ & Haj, 2021).

According to foreign students, one of the main reasons to study in Romania is the EU and EHEA membership since degrees are recognized in other European countries and graduates can access mobility opportunities within the region (Fiţ & Haj, 2021; Santa & Haj, 2020). Furthermore, the possibility of obtaining a European diploma for lower tuition fees and with a low cost of living, compared to other EU/EEA nations, is an interesting advantage for incoming students (De Wit et al., 2021; Fiţ & Haj, 2021).

3.1 Context Analysis of Current Policies in the Field

Several actors compose the framework of public authorities responsible for international higher education in Romania. The most relevant are the *Ministry of Education* (ME), the *Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research Development and Innovation Funding* (UEFISCDI), the *Ministry of Foreign Affairs* (MAE), and the *Ministry of Internal Affairs* (MAI) (Egron-Polak et al., 2015a). This paper highlights the role of the first two, considering their direct scope of work in the field.

The *Ministry of Education* is the national authority in Higher Education, supervising the admission process of international students (especially non-EU/EEA students and scholarship receivers) and issuing the acceptance letter for those approved (Egron-Polak et al., 2015a). Additionally, this ministry also proposes national policies and strategies for higher education (Legea învăţământului superior, 2023, art. 5).

Overall, several actors are responsible for developing, implementing, and monitoring IHE policies at the global level, the majority being government-related organizations (Helms et al., 2015). In the case of Romania, within the structure of the ME, there is the UEFISCDI—an intermediate autonomous body. This national government agency is the main Romanian executive actor in the field. Similar to other nations, it is able to operate even though there is no official national strategy for recruiting international students in the country (Minaeva et al., 2021).

The main international education roles of UEFISCDI include implementing projects, conducting data collection, managing the *Study in Romania* program, publishing studies, policy briefs, and reports, supporting universities in their strategic capacity development, and supervising funding competition among universities (Egron-Polak et al., 2015b; Fiţ et al., 2022).

During international education fairs, expositions, and conferences abroad, Romanian universities promote the image of the country as a study destination (Fiţ et al., 2022; Fiţ & Haj, 2021). This is part of the marketing activities the agency carries out with the support of the National Council of Rectors (CNR).

The Romanian government has been promoting institutional and legislative efforts to facilitate the recruitment of foreign students in recent years. As a founding member of both the Bologna Process and the EHEA, Romania has committed to developing and consolidating higher education at the European level (Budapest-Vienna Declaration, 2010).

The Education Law 1/2011 reflected the implementation of the Bologna three-cycle system (Egron-Polak et al., 2015a), while Law 247/2018 modernized immigration regulations, simplified related restrictions according to European legislation, and expanded post-study opportunities in the country (Santa & Haj, 2020). In 2023, a new law on higher education was adopted, including an entire chapter dedicated to the internationalization of the higher education system (Legea învăţământului superior, 2023, ch. XV).

In terms of scholarships, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Scholarships is the largest funding scheme sponsored by the Romanian state for non-EU/EEA citizens (Egron-Polak et al., 2015b). The scholarship provides free tuition, visa, and administrative fees, a monthly stipend during the study cycle, and subsidized accommodation in student dormitories, among other facilities (Study in Romania, n.d.).

Despite numerous initiatives and efforts, Romania has not yet emerged as one of the most highly desired study destinations compared to other European countries, states within its surrounding region, or even its neighbors. According to the most recent complete data available, Romania ranks 18th among EHEA members in terms of international enrollments (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2021). Regionally, more students chose to study either in Russia, Türkiye, Poland, Ukraine, Czechia, or Hungary than in Romania.

4 The Role of Study-In Initiatives in International Student Recruitment

Different research papers, analyzing the behavior of international students, concluded that the image and reputation of a country are decisive factors that directly influence their decision when choosing a place to study abroad (Krauze & Sloka, 2021; Phang, 2013; Srikatanyoo & Gnoth, 2002). Within this context, the study of national higher education brands is an emerging sub-sector of place branding (Lomer et al., 2018; Sataøen, 2019). This branding concept relies on the reputation of the country, as it involves promoting national values and symbols in the marketing activities of the universities (Lomer et al., 2018; Sataøen, 2019). National brands for higher education promote the institutions of a country while promoting the competitive advantages and the soft power of the host nation itself (Lomer et al., 2018).

To facilitate the promotion of national higher education brands, government agencies globally have developed "study-in" initiatives, whose purpose is to inform and convince foreign citizens to study in the respective country (Helms et al., 2015; Jokila, 2019). Although some are part of larger communication campaigns or umbrella organizations, most *study-in* programs are online platforms (Helms et al., 2015; Minaeva et al., 2021; Urbanovič et al., 2016).

This paper sustains the premise that official study-in portals are the most important digital mediator in promoting national brands for higher education, considering these websites are normally the first point of contact between prospective students and study destinations (Jokila, 2019; Phang, 2013). Non-traditional destinations for international higher education, like Romania, need to promote official websites that reflect the expectations of incoming students (Jokila, 2019). Therefore, the way these digital channels communicate and market the potential host country is critical in influencing the decision foreign citizens will make about attending or not the respective educational institutions abroad (Krauze & Sloka, 2021; Phang, 2013).

The study-in websites provide centralized information about life in the country and the student experience, reasons for studying at its universities, the available educational programs, admission and bureaucratic process, funding options, and scholarship opportunities, among other elements (Helms et al., 2015; Satagen, 2019). The present investigation conducts a comparative analysis of all study-in platforms among EHEA member states. They are the first connection point for accessing information on studying abroad and are, thus, the digital entry doors to the European Higher Education Area. This idea supports their relevance as the main object of analysis of this paper.

4.1 Comparative Analysis of Study-In Portals in the EHEA

Within the EHEA, 39 of the 49 countries have study-in websites (79.59%). In total, there are 42 European study-abroad platforms. There are more portals than countries because the United Kingdom has three initiatives (*Study UK*, *Study in Scotland*, and *Study in Wales*), and Belgium has two (*Study in Flanders* and *Study in Belgium, Wallonie-Bruxelles Campus*) (Fig. 1).

Four of the ten EHEA countries that do not have study-in initiatives are microstates (Liechtenstein¸ San Marino, Andorra, and the Holy See). Other EHEA members without national higher education brands are four Western Balkan countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Albania, and Montenegro), Armenia, and the Republic of Moldova (Fig. 1).

The first two portals were released in 2000 (*Study in Germany* and *Education UK*), while the most recent ones were launched in 2021 (*MengStudien* from Luxembourg and *Study in Kazakhstan*). Dividing this timespan into two periods, more portals began to operate in the second half (26 portals between 2011 and 2021) than in the first (16 portals between 2000 and 2010). In 2013, five study-in websites were

Country		Study-in Portal	Portal	Since
Albania	-	No	-	-
Andorra	-	No	-	-
Armenia	-	No	-	-
Austria	-	Yes	studyinaustria.at	2013
Azerbaijan	-	Yes	studyinazerbaijan.edu.az	2019
Belarus	-	Yes	studyinby.com	2018
Belgium	*Flanders*	Yes	studyinflanders.be	2007
	Wallonie - Brussels	Yes	studyinbelgium.be	2005
Bosnia and Herzegovina	-	No	-	-
Bulgaria	-	Yes	studyinbulgaria.bg	2019
Croatia	-	Yes	studyincroatia.hr	2010
Cyprus	-	Yes	**studyincyprus.org.cy** studycyprus.eu	**2019** 2014
Czechia	-	Yes	studyin.cz	2008
Denmark	-	Yes	studyindenmark.dk	2005
Estonia	-	Yes	studyinestonia.ee	2010
Finland	-	Yes	studyinfinland.fi	2011
France	-	Yes	campusfrance.org	2010
Georgia	-	Yes	studyingeorgia.ge	2017
Germany	-	Yes	study-in-germany.de	2000
Greece	-	Yes	studyingreece.edu.gr	2013
Holy See	-	No	-	-
Hungary	-	Yes	**studyinhungary.hu** campushungary.hu	**2015** 2004 - 2021
Iceland	-	Yes	study.iceland.is	2017
Ireland	-	Yes	educationinireland.com	2011
Italy	-	Yes	**universitaly.it** studyinitaly.esteri.it	**2012** 2018
Kazakhstan	-	Yes	studyinkazakhstan.edu.kz	2021
Latvia	-	Yes	studyinlatvia.lv	2010
Liechtenstein	-	No	-	-
Lithuania	-	Yes	studyin.lt	2012
Luxembourg	-	Yes	mengstudien.public.lu	2021
Malta	-	Yes	educationmalta.org	2017
Moldova	-	No	-	-
Montenegro	-	No	-	-
Netherlands	-	Yes	**studyinnl.org** studyinholland.nl	**2022** 2008 - 2022
North Macedonia	-	No	-	-
Norway	-	Yes	studyinnorway.no	2005
Poland	-	Yes	study.gov.pl	2012
Portugal	-	Yes	**study-research.pt** studyinportugal.edu.pt	**2017** 2014 - 2018
Romania	-	Yes	**studyinromania.gov.ro** study-in-romania.ro	**2015** 2002 - 2021
Russia	-	Yes	studyinrussia.ru	2003
San Marino	-	No	-	-
Serbia	-	Yes	studyinserbia.rs	2013
Slovakia	-	Yes	studyinslovakia.saia.sk	2019
Slovenia	-	Yes	studyinslovenia.si	2015
Spain	-	Yes	**campusspain.es** studyinspain.info	**2018** 2013
Sweden	-	Yes	studyinsweden.se	2003
Switzerland	-	Yes	**studyinswitzerland.plus** studyinginswitzerland.ch	**2018** 2014 - 2018
Türkiye	-	Yes	studyinturkiye.gov.tr	2013
Ukraine	-	Yes	studyinukraine.gov.ua	2016
United Kingdom	*United Kingdom*	Yes	**study-uk.britishcouncil.org** educationuk.org	**2016** 2000 - 2016
	Scotland	Yes	**scotland.org/study** studyinscotland.org	**2007** 2002 - 2020
	Wales	Yes	studyinwales.ac.uk	2015

Fig. 1 Mapping of study-in websites among EHEA countries. *Source* Elaborated by the author, based on manual data collection

released (*Study in Austria*, *Study in Greece*, *Study in Serbia*, *Study in Spain*, and *Study in Turkey*), the highest rate so far (Fig. 1).

At the level of website content analysis, 11 main categories were investigated during the present data collection. Overall, the website with the most features was *Campus France*, while the fewest were in *Education Malta* (Fig. 2). Curiously, France is fourth in Europe in terms of inbound degree-seeking student numbers, whereas Malta ranks among the very lowest (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2021).

Most EHEA study-in websites (88.10%) display reasons for prospective students to study in the respective countries (Fig. 2). To provide a glimpse of life in the potential study destination, 69.05% of the 42 platforms had sections about lifestyle and student experience in the country. On the other hand, almost all EHEA members with portals presented information related to tuition fees and scholarship offers (95,24%), the steps required for application and admission (92.86%), and bureaucratic procedures (90.48%) such as obtaining a study visa (Fig. 2).

Another common aspect was employing search tools to find universities and their programs (study finder mechanism), present in 80.95% of the portals. Further, absolutely all study-in platforms had information about their respective higher education systems and institutions, representing the only consensus among all analyzed websites (Fig. 2).

Some interactive elements were found in comparing these online channels. For instance, 76.19% of all 42 websites gave at least one form of contact for queries. Moreover, testimonials or stories from alumni were shared by 66.67% of all EHEA portals. Curiously, the least common feature was a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) page, with only 40.48% of the websites having one (Fig. 2).

Other elements appeared on a smaller scale during collection. Few study-in portals had communication channels like newsletters, spaces for sending technical feedback about the website, mobile apps, and even automatic or live interactive chats for answering questions from prospective students. In the case of *Study in Wales* and *Study in Finland*, for instance, users can chat directly with student ambassadors.[2]

The languages in which study-in websites are available deserve particular attention. It stands out from the comparative data collection that all 42 websites were available in English. In total, the platforms combined promoted information in 26 languages. After English, the majority could be accessed in French (ten portals), Chinese (nine), Spanish (seven), and Russian (seven) (Fig. 2).

Despite only three European nations being anglophone, data shows that more than half of the study-in portals within the EHEA (54.76%) were available in no other language than English (Fig. 2). This relates to the premise that offering tertiary education programs in foreign languages, especially English, is an essential factor for attracting incoming mobility (European Migration Network, 2019; Eurydice, 2020).

Having the comparative data analysis in mind, the next section explores the *Study in Romania* program as well as its website content.

[2] Study in Wales. (n.d.) *Chat to our ambassadors*. https://www.studyinwales.ac.uk/chat-our-ambassadors. Study in Finland. (n.d.) *Ambassador Chat*. https://www.studyinfinland.fi/chat.

Portal	Why this Country / Country description	Life in the country / Student Experience	Study options / Higher Education System	Application process	Financing the studies / Scholarships	Logistics / Bureaucracy	Study finder	Languages	Testimonials	FAQ	Contact
Study in **Austria** - studyinaustria.at	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	German, English	No	Yes	Yes
Study in **Azerbaijan** - studyinazerbaijan.edu.az	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	English	Yes	Yes	Yes
Study in **Belarus** - studyinby.com	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Russian, English, Spanish, French, Arabic, Chinese	Yes	No	Yes
Study in Flanders (**Belgium**) - studyinflanders.be	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	English	Yes	No	Yes
Study in **Belgium** (Wallonie-Bruxelles) - studyinbelgium.be	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	French, English	Yes	Yes	Yes
Study in **Bulgaria** - studyinbulgaria.bg	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	English	No	No	Yes
Study in **Croatia** - studyincroatia.hr	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	English	Yes	Yes	Yes
Study in **Cyprus** - studyincyprus.org.cy	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	English	No	No	Yes
Study in **Czech Republic** - studyin.cz	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Czech, English	Yes	Yes	Yes
Study in **Denmark** - studyindenmark.dk	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	English	Yes	No	Yes
Study in **Estonia** - studyinestonia.ee	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	English	Yes	Yes	Yes
Study in **Finland** - studyinfinland.fi	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	English	Yes	No	Yes
Campus **France** - campusfrance.org	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	French, English, Spanish	Yes	Yes	Yes
Study in **Georgia** - studyingeorgia.ge	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	English	No	No	No
Study in **Germany** - study-in-germany.de	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	German, English	Yes	Yes	Yes
Study in **Greece** - studyingreece.edu.gr	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Greek, English	Yes	Yes	Yes
Study in **Hungary** - studyinhungary.hu	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	English, Russian, Chinese, Arabic, Spanish	Yes	No	Yes
Study in **Iceland** - study.iceland.is	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	English	No	No	No
Education in **Ireland** - educationinireland.com	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	English	Yes	Yes	Yes
Universitaly (**Italy**) - universitaly.it	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Italian, English, Chinese	No	No	No
Study in **Kazakhstan** - studyinkazakhstan.edu.kz	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Kazakh, Russian, English	No	No	Yes
Study in **Latvia** - studyinlatvia.lv	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	English	Yes	Yes	Yes
Study in **Lithuania** - studyin.lt	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	English, Armenian, Azerbaijani, Belarusian, German, Spanish, French, Georgian, Hindi, Turkish, Russian, Ukrainian, Chinese	Yes	Yes	Yes
MengStudien (**Luxembourg**) - mengstudien.public.lu	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	French, German, English	No	Yes	Yes
Education **Malta** - educationmalta.org	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	English	No	No	Yes
Study in NL (**Netherlands**) - studyinnl.org	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	English	Yes	No	Yes
Study in **Norway** - studyinnorway.no	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	English	Yes	No	No
Study in **Poland** - study.gov.pl	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Polish, English, Chinese	No	No	No
Study & Research in **Portugal** - study-research.pt	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Portuguese, Spanish, English, French, German, Chinese	Yes	No	Yes
Study in **Romania** - studyinromania.gov.ro	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	English	No	Yes	Yes
Study in **Russia** - studyinrussia.ru	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Russian, English, Chinese, Spanish, French, Arabic, Portuguese, Vietnamese, Turkish, Mongolian, Malay	Yes	Yes	Yes
Study in **Scotland** (UK) - scotland.org/study	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	English	No	No	Yes
Study in **Serbia** - studyinserbia.rs	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Serbian, Russian, English, French	No	No	No
Study in **Slovakia** - studyinslovakia.saia.sk	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	English	Yes	No	Yes
Study in **Slovenia** - studyinslovenia.si	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	English	Yes	No	Yes
Campus **Spain** - campusspain.es	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	English	Yes	No	Yes
Study in **Sweden** - studyinsweden.se	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	English	Yes	No	No
Study in **Switzerland** - studyinswitzerland.plus	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	English	No	No	No
Study in **Turkey** - studyinturkiye.gov.tr	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Turkish, Arabic, English	Yes	Yes	Yes
Study in **Ukraine** - studyinukraine.gov.ua	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Ukrainian, English, French	Yes	Yes	Yes
Study **UK** - study-uk.britishcouncil.org	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	English, Chinese, Indonesian, French, Thai	Yes	No	No
Study in **Wales** (UK) - studyinwales.ac.uk	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	English	Yes	No	No

Fig. 2 Data collection about the content of the 42 study-in websites within the EHEA. *Source* Elaborated by the author, based on manual data collection

4.2 Analysis of the Study in Romania Program

In June 2015, UEFISCDI launched the *Study in Romania* promotion umbrella (studyinromania.gov.ro), developed in the framework of the project "Internationalization, Equity and Institutional Management for a Quality Higher Education" (IEMU) (Fiţ & Haj, 2021).

According to the agency, the official objectives of the platform are to promote Romanian higher education globally; raise awareness of Romania's status as a study destination in the European Union; increase visibility and promote the educational offer of Romanian universities in the international environment; attract international students to study programs offered by Romanian universities; and better inform Romanian students about the Romanian educational offer (UEFISCDI, n.d.).

The website was rebranded in 2021, featuring a new visual layout, more information about how to study in the country, and a new institutional video to promote Romania as a study destination. Moreover, in 2022, the portal incorporated the application system for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Scholarships (scholarships.studyinromania.gov.ro) and launched two mobile applications (Study in Romania, n.d.).

In 2023, the new Romanian Law on Higher Education attributed, for the first time, legal status to *Study in Romania* as an official National Program. The government established it aiming to strengthen the internationalization process of the higher education system, which is organized and financed by the Romanian Ministry of Education (Legea învăţământului superior, 2023, art. 120).

According to the legislation, some of the official objectives of the program are: supporting higher education institutions by promoting the educational offer at the international level; supporting the development and promotion of the studyinromania.gov.ro platform; supporting the digitalization of admission processes and administrative procedures at the level of higher education institutions; and identification of strategic geographical areas and fields of study for the priority attraction of international students; among many others (Ibid.).

4.2.1 Content Analysis of Studyinromania.gov.ro

Study-in portals need to be distinguishable and unique in order to effectively differentiate one destination country from the others (Jokila, 2019). In this sense, Romania still needs to work significantly on enhancing the competitiveness of its higher education offer in the world market (Fiţ & Haj, 2021).

In *Study in Romania*, seven main aspects of the country are promoted for international audiences, including the quality of Romanian Higher Education and the possibility to study in foreign languages, among other reasons (Study in Romania, n.d.). Three of the seven focus on the tourist aspects of the country. Moreover, this narrative for promoting the Romanian higher education brand has not changed since the platform was launched in 2015,[3] despite its rebranding in 2021.

Besides updating the original narrative, another area that requires improvement is regarding accessing study programs taught in foreign languages. Although foreign citizens can attend programs in five languages, the *Study in Romania* portal is not available in languages other than English (Study in Romania, n.d.). The sub-portal for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs scholarships, *scholarships.studyinromania.gov.ro*, is available at least in English and French.

In terms of content, *Study in Romania* provides most of the categories of information and communication tools that are employed by other portals of EHEA members. The main framework of the website is based on "Why", "Where", "What", and "Procedures" (Ibid.).

The *Why* section portrays the general aspects of the country ("Discover Romania"), explaining what "Living in Romania" and "Working in Romania" look like. The next presents cities and universities *Where* prospective students can study. Visitors can understand *What* programs are available by learning about the Romanian "Higher education system" and "choose a study program" through the study finder tool. Finally, *Procedures* represent the required steps and criteria for succeeding in the admission, visa, scholarship, and recognition processes to study in Romania (Ibid.). Other informative resources include the *Catalogue of Higher Education Institutions in Romania* (Brochure) with 106 pages and social media profiles on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube.

On the other hand, a closer look at studyinromania.gov.ro indicates that the portal lacks sharing testimonials from international students. Although rare among the studied EHEA portals, the Romanian portal also lacks space for providing technical feedback and a live interaction mechanism for questions from prospective students (Ibid.). Finally, although the initiative has released two mobile apps and a newsletter, the former was not available for download from the Google Play Store during the development of this paper (December 2023), and the latter seems to be obsolete or discontinued.[4]

At the content level, a few improvements are required on the website. The study finder tool is partially dysfunctional, as some filter options do not work when applied.[5] Many pages have incomplete or missing information, such as "Welcome to Romania" (studyinromania.gov.ro/welcome-to-romania) and the pages of the universities, for example, *studyinromania.gov.ro/uaic*.

Beyond analyzing comparative data and website content, it is equally important to collect the perspectives of those running the study-in initiatives. It was possible to

[3] According to the previous website version (old.studyinromania.gov.ro) and the first institutional video on YouTube (youtu.be/EadPFNylvqc).

[4] The author subscribed to the *Study in Romania* newsletter in 2022 and December 2023 but has never received any messages.

[5] After testing different filter options and combinations during the analysis of the website by the author.

identify through an interview[6] that most of the challenges for the *Study in Romania* platform come from human resources constraints within UEFISCDI. One respondent mentioned that:

> Having a small team is, definitely, by far, the greatest challenge because the more *Study in Romania* becomes visible, the more questions we get, so it's more difficult to address them in time and to make sure they're relevant (UEFISCDI member).

In sum, the team behind *Study in Romania* is overloaded, with a limited staff to deal with the growing visibility of the portal, particularly due to the Romanian government scholarships offer. Additionally, managing the portal is only one activity they conduct as national agency for higher education (UEFISCDI member). Therefore, this paper provides an outsider perspective that can shape future policies and strategies in the area and support their operational work as the executive entity of the Romanian international higher education.

Addressing the above-mentioned issues will enhance the communication of the Romanian higher education brand for international audiences. The next section provides recommendations for how study-in portals, especially the one analyzed by this paper, should better market the competitive advantages of their country and its educational system to obtain gains in international student recruitment (Urbanovič et al., 2016).

5 Recommendations for Improving Study-in Portals in the EHEA

Seeking to make study-in portals in the EHEA more distinct, this paper proposes a series of recommendations based on the lessons learned from the specialized literature and data analysis. Particularly, most proposals are addressed at *Study in Romania*. The main guiding perspective is to modernize the technical, communicative, and narrative elements of the websites, supporting the promotion of national higher education brands globally.

5.1 Access to Information in the Languages of the Students

For non-anglophone countries like Romania, language-related policies concerning international admission should be developed based on the target audience. Communicating in the languages of target student markets is a strategic investment (De Wit et al., 2021). Romanian universities offer programs taught in five languages, given historical, linguistic, and regional factors (Ibid.). However, the *Study in Romania* portal is available only in English, as demonstrated in the data analysis.

[6] An interview was conducted with one member of the UEFISCDI staff by video call on 13/12/2022.

Websites for international student recruitment should be available in different languages based on the majority of inbound students. Such linguistic diversity within the portals leads to effective communication that demonstrates respect for their countries of origin (Phang, 2013).

Although the Romanian portal uses the Google Translate automatic widget, this tool is not reliable for translating website content (Benaida et al., 2018). For the English-Romanian pair, for instance, Google Translate provides a low-quality translation standard (Pungă et al., 2023).

This study, similar to suggestions made by Krauze and Sloka (2021), recommends that the *Study in Romania* platform should also be available in Romanian, French, German, and Hungarian, considering the main countries of origin, recognized ethnic minorities present in the country, and languages of study available at Romanian universities. For instance, Moldovan students should not need to access information solely in English when they seek to pursue a degree in their native language, Romanian.

Such changes would take quite a long time to happen. For this reason, this study recommends that the team responsible for the portal publishes, for the short term, at least the official brochure and the subtitles for the institutional videos in the mentioned languages, while the complete linguistic adaptation of the website takes place in the long term.

5.2 *Website Updates and Upgrades*

The UEFISCDI team is recommended to map all duplicated, vague, outdated, or incomplete information and data in studyinromania.gov.ro and make the necessary upgrades. As mentioned earlier, sections such as the study finder tool and university pages require improvements. Students will benefit from these adjustments by accessing accurate, complete information and data about the admission process to study in Romanian universities.

International admissions channels should be aware of the satisfaction level of prospective students with the provided information (Phang, 2013). In this sense, the interviewed informant expressed that:

> It would be useful if we had more perspective from students – what works well, what doesn't, what the prospective students expect to find on our website or any of our channels, what kind of other needs they have that have not been met, and so on (UEFISCDI member).

Therefore, another recommended solution is to implement mechanisms for receiving direct suggestions or messages from the users, such as customer satisfaction pop-ups or exit intent surveys. Not only could this be applied to receiving technical feedback about the quality of the website, but the agency could also benefit from collecting stories from prospective or current students about studying in Romania. The portal, then, would have instant insights about content improvement areas.

5.3 Reduced Workload Through Interactive Communication Channels

Naturally, the recommendations made by this paper, if implemented, would represent an additional workload to the entities responsible for the study-in portals. In the case of the UEFISCDI, it was identified that their small team is overloaded with the many duties they oversee, including the management of studyinromania.gov.ro.

Within this context, this paper also aims to contribute to reducing their operational workload. As suggested by Senci et al. (2018), the hypothesis is that by improving website quality, the workload of international officers should be decreased. By implementing technological improvements, they can avoid wasting time on operational, repetitive tasks and gain time to focus on important projects and strategic activities. Such changes may take time but, in the long run, it could also result in reducing the number of enquiries they have to deal with. These solutions, if implemented, are valuable not only for the UEFISCDI team but also for the experience of international students.

When investigating the Swedish example in international higher education, Phang (2013) found that both academic staff and students expressed their need to access interactive communication channels, especially through synchronous mechanisms. With this perspective in mind, the current study recommends the implementation of a live interaction feature to facilitate contact with prospective students.

Such improvements do not necessarily require human interaction. Inspired by the cases of *Study in Wales* and *Study in Finland*, this study suggests that the portal implements a simulated interaction tool through automated software, such as a chatbot or virtual assistant, powered by artificial intelligence. It should facilitate the process of answering questions from online visitors, referring them to reliable resources and links before contacting the UEFISCDI team directly. The information architecture for this technology could be based on the content already available in the portal (which is another reason why updating the content is important).

Moreover, the platform should also guarantee that existing communication channels work, are user-friendly, and are effectively employed, i.e., the newsletter of the website and the official *Study in Romania* mobile applications.

5.4 Promoting Study Destinations Through Effective Messages

There are several content areas in which the Romanian higher education brand could be improved. The first recommended recalibration concerns the navigation framework levels, based on digital marketing techniques (Krauze & Sloka, 2021). Particularly, studyinromania.gov.ro lacks the application of fundamental Search Engine Optimization (SEO) practices.

The title categories of “Where”, “What”, and “Why” should contain supplementary words like “Romania” or “study in Romania”, e.g., “What to study in Romania” or “Why Romania”. Additionally, the “Procedures” section should be changed to “How to study in Romania”. In this way, the website will reflect the keywords prospective students use while looking for information online about studying in Romania. This can increase the traffic to the website and, consequently, draw the attention of more foreign citizens to study in this country.

The use of testimonials from current or former students provides a relatable picture of studying in the institution and country of destination, influencing the decision-making process of prospective students (Jokila, 2019; Phang, 2013). *Study in Romania* has no statements published on the website. Study-in portals are advised to promote real stories from international students graduating from their national universities, especially those sharing the same cultural background as the target audience.

The last recommendation involves highlighting the competitive advantages of Romania as a study destination. In the post-pandemic (COVID-19) context, the costs of tuition fees have risen while scholarship programs have become scarcer. Hence, international students from underprivileged backgrounds are likely to seek more affordable study-abroad destinations (De Wit et al., 2021). Given that most of the incoming mobility to Romania comprises students from low-income nations (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2021), the country holds a comparative advantage over expensive study-abroad destinations (De Wit et al., 2021).

This advantage can be combined with “European” narrative elements. While Romania has not yet entered the Eurozone, it can still leverage the opportunity to become known as an affordable European study destination. Similar to the arguments of Urbanovič et al. (2016) for promoting Lithuania as “Europe on the cheap”, Romania has the opportunity to brand the offer of a high-quality, European level of higher education for lower tuition fees while having a national currency that is cheaper than the Euro.

The diversity of study fields and geographic regions should also be leveraged for branding, emphasizing the unique assets of Romania for study purposes supported by touristic reasons. For instance, *Study in Romania* could persuade foreign citizens to pursue an Information Technology (IT) degree in Cluj-Napoca, a city considered the “Silicon Valley of Eastern Europe” (McElroy, 2024), located in the heart of the historical Transylvania region.

Such approaches can improve the Romanian national higher education brand in the long term while helping to increase inbound mobility to the country. As demonstrated previously, Romania is highly dependent on Moldovans (over one-third of all international students) and on students who pursue degrees in medical fields (almost half of international students). This current concentration poses a threat to the higher education sector in Romania. If one of these markets starts moving massively to other study destinations, Romanian universities that rely on these groups could face severe challenges.

Promoting a stronger higher education branding narrative, that promotes multiple and coexistent competitive advantages of the country as a study destination, can mitigate these sorts of issues in the future. Besides increasing the number of international enrollments, it would also contribute to diversifying countries of origin, target study fields, and geographical regions for study.

International students should find Romania appealing as a study destination, being able to distinguish it from other European countries. From the comparative analysis, certain platforms emerged as excellent examples of effectively conveying the unique identity of a country in its educational branding. *Study in Finland* promotes "happy studying" associating the image of the "happiest country in the world" with the student experience. *Study in Sweden* encourages one to "Learn the Swedish way", while *Study in Estonia* offers the opportunity to study in the digital Estonian "e-society". Romania should also focus on developing a distinctive national higher education brand that accurately represents the image of the country worldwide.

6 Conclusions

This paper has investigated the main trends, policies, and practices in the European higher education landscape. Promoting higher education abroad is a priority both for the European Commission and the members of the European Higher Education Area.

In this context, the case of Romania was explored, analyzing its context of incoming mobility, policies in the field, and its position as a study-abroad destination. Like other non-anglophone EHEA nations, Romania must develop international student recruitment strategies based on its competitive advantages.

Regarding attracting foreign students, this study used the place branding literature concerning the international higher education sector. "Study-in" initiatives, in the form of platforms, were identified as essential elements of promoting national higher education brands abroad.

These websites, as entrance door to studying at universities within the EHEA, were analyzed comparatively. The results showed that more portals were developed in the last decade, which can reflect not only the advance of digital technologies employed by national governments but also their effort to contribute to the European frameworks of higher education. Prospective foreign students are usually more familiar with anglophone educational systems (De Wit et al., 2021; Minaeva et al., 2021). In this context, the frequent adoption of multiple branding strategies among European nations is crucial for increasing their visibility and reputation globally, especially when almost all EHEA members are non-anglophone.

The data analysis also indicated that the European portals focused more on displaying their study options, funding possibilities, higher education systems, and bureaucratic and admission procedures to study in their countries. A moderate emphasis was given to reasons for choosing their countries as study destinations, study finder tools, and making contact information available. Only a few websites shared student testimonials, explained about lifestyle and student experience in the country, and had FAQ pages. This analysis indicates that most European initiatives prioritize the practical aspects of studying abroad over narrative branding or interactive communication elements. They aim to facilitate the enrollment process for prospective students who are already convinced to study in their respective countries.

Grounded on the literature review and comparative analysis, this investigation examined Romanian legislation and policy developments in the field, as well as the content of the *Study in Romania* website. Finally, it made a set of recommendations for improving platforms that promote European higher education brands, especially for studyinromania.gov.ro—the official platform for communicating the Romanian higher education brand and promoting national universities to international audiences.

The data analysis, case study, and recommendations presented in this paper can be applied or adapted to enhance other study-abroad websites seeking to improve their national higher education brands. This includes platforms that feature few of the examined categories or have low inbound mobility.

Although this study contributed to filling some gaps in the literature of the field, it also recognizes its limited scope. For instance, it did not cover the promotion of alumni as student ambassadors, the role of university websites in international student recruitment, and the discussion about branding cities as study destinations. It might also be valuable to broaden the sample of analysis and compare the European portals to successful study-in websites outside the EHEA, such as *Study Australia* and *EducationUSA*. These and other unexplored topics remain possibilities for future research in the area.

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The Role of Language Preparatory Programme in Increasing the Participation of International Students in Higher Education in Romania

Cristina-Ramona Fit and Cezar Mihai Hâj

Abstract In the past 40 years, the rationales for implementing internationalisation of Higher Education policies have evolved, with "economic rationales more dominant" (De Wit & Deca, 2020). In the case of Romania, the decrease in student population over the last 15 years due to low demographics, migration, and a high drop-out rate (Alexe-Cotet et al., 2022) has changed the way in which internationalisation of HE is perceived and used, to tackle issues like brain circulation and the decrease in the student population. This paper aims to explore the role of Romanian Language Preparatory Programme (RLPP) for international students as a tool to enhance the internationalisation of HE. The paper analyses the effects of RLPP, including the role governmental scholarships had on international students' access to the Romanian higher education system. The main research questions are: Does this programme have an influence on student participation in higher education? Are scholarships a mechanism that impacts the success/transition rate of international students in their academic path? The paper will answer the research questions by following international students' educational paths from enrolment in Romanian Language Preparatory Programme, graduation and transition towards BA, MA or Ph.D. programmes. The analysis is based on the available data from the national platform for collecting statistical data for higher education (ANS) and the Romanian National Student Enrolment Registry (RMUR).

Keywords International student mobility (ISM) · Language preparatory programme · Internationalisation of higher education · Access · Participation · Graduation · Success rate

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background and Context of Internationalisation in Higher Education (HE)

Over the last decade, the landscape of internationalisation of higher education has undergone significant transformation, influenced by numerous global factors. These include demographic declines in Europe, evolving political landscapes, crucial geopolitical events, the disruptive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ongoing challenges posed by global warming (De Wit & Altbach, 2021). As a result, the objectives and strategies underpinning the internationalisation of higher education have dynamically evolved, reflecting the diverse needs and goals at international, national, and institutional levels. This evolution has been shaped by various global imperatives, including the European Higher Education Area's educational policies, regional dynamics, the European Universities Initiative (EUI), digitalisation and specific national agendas, leading to a redefined approach to internationalising higher education (De Wit et al., 2023). Globally, there are more than 6,387,000 mobile students worldwide (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2021), an important increase from around 5,400,000 international students in 2017.

1.2 Internationalisation of Higher Education in Romania

In the context of Romania, the internationalisation of higher education has gained particular prominence against a backdrop of demographic challenges, including a declining domestic student population (Santa & Fierascu, 2022) exacerbated by migration and high dropout rates (Alexe-Cotet et al., 2022).

The substantial demographic decline in Romania over the last 25–30 years has resulted in a notable reduction in the number of schoolchildren between 1995 and 2018 (Fit & Haj, 2022). As well, a low Baccalaureate promotion rate (UEFISCDI, 2018) and the high dropout rate, as observed by Alexe-Cotet et al. (2022), have contributed to a "40% drop between 2010 and 2018 for students enrolled in bachelor's programmes" (Fit & Haj, 2022, p. 104).

As traditional student pools diminish, Romanian higher education institutions, like many others worldwide, are increasingly turning towards international students not only to supplement these numbers but also to enrich the educational experience and enhance the global competitiveness of their programmes. This approach aligns with broader global trends and strategies where international students are seen as crucial for strengthening research, academic networks, contributing to economic growth (Hegarty, 2014), fostering reputation, diversity, and cross-cultural understanding.

Over the past decade, Romania has made significant steps towards enhancing the internationalisation of higher education and attracting international students. The

Governmental specific funding schemes for internationalisation and the establishment of the Study in Romania initiative united universities and facilitated the development of internationalisation strategies for over 25 institutions, thus leading to a rise in international student numbers. Specific public policies such as the Romanian Language Preparatory Programme[1] (RLPP) and Governmental scholarships have been instrumental in this push towards internationalisation. These policies reflect a strategic approach to attract a diverse student body, offering them linguistic and financial support as a means to integrate into the Romanian educational system. This is particularly relevant in a context where language barriers and financial constraints can significantly impact a student's decision to study abroad. Moreover, these policies underscore a dual objective: firstly, to leverage internationalisation as a means to counter the effects of brain circulation by creating a more dynamic and globally connected academic environment, and secondly, to enhance the appeal of Romanian higher education on the international stage.

In 2021–2022, additional steps towards internationalisation of HE were made when various promotional tools were launched by UEFISCDI in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and with the endorsement of the National Council of Rectors. These included the first professional video to promote Romanian higher education (Fit et al., 2022), a mobile application and a Virtual Reality application for #StudyinRomania aiming to promote Romanian higher education and attract international students. Moreover, UEFISCDI, together with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and with the support of the Ministry of Education, digitalised the application procedure for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs scholarships programme and made it part of the #StudyinRomania brand.

In 2023, the new higher education law introduced crucial changes in the legal framework of the internationalisation of higher education, including the National Programme for Internationalisation of Higher Education "Study in Romania", provisions for Joint/Double/Multiple degree programmes, and recognition of international baccalaureates. These new provisions within the 2023 legislation serve as the framework for a national strategy that is expected to be elaborated and implemented through secondary legislation. By setting defined objectives, this programme raises the significance of the internationalisation of higher education on the public agenda.

In the 2022/2023 academic year, Romania had 457,393[2] students enrolled in 46 public universities at bachelor, master, and doctorate levels. Out of the total student population, 31,949 (7%) were international students enrolled for a full cycle, an increase of 12% since 2019/2020 when international students represented 6%. In 2022/2023, 29% of the international students were from EU/ EEA, and 71% were from non-EU countries (out of which 52% were from the Republic of Moldova, and 48% were from other non-EU countries).

[1] Initiated at the end of 2016 through Ministerial Order no. 6156/2016.

[2] Data from the national platform for collecting statistical data for higher education (ANS), authors' calculations.

1.3 Overview of the Romanian Language Preparatory Programme

In line with the various initiatives developed by countries across the world, since 2016, Romania has implemented a new policy aiming at increasing internationalisation of higher education by providing potential international students with a one-year Romanian Language Preparatory Programme[3] that would increase the opportunities such students have in accessing programmes taught in the Romanian language.

The RLPP policy aims not only to facilitate improved access for international students to higher education in Romanian but also to facilitate a smoother cultural integration that could grant them better access to employment opportunities and increase the stay rate. In the long term, RLPP may significantly contribute to the enhancement of soft power.

According to the legislation[4] for master, Ph.D. and postgraduate programmes including those in the health field, the RLPP must have a minimum duration of six months.

This type of programme can be organised by universities accredited by the Romanian National Quality Assurance Agency and validated by the Ministry of Education through a Ministerial Order that also includes the main study domains associated with the Romanian Language Preparatory Programme. The one-year (60 ECTS) programme is finalised with an assessment exam of Romanian language skills conducted by a committee that includes institutional evaluators and evaluators from the Romanian Language Institute. The minimum requirement for a graduate to finalise the preparatory programme is to score B1[5] as this is the minimum level required for enrolment in Romanian-taught programmes. Certain universities require a B2 level as a prerequisite.

To enrol in an RLPP programme, students seeking tuition fee-paying places must fulfil the admission criteria set by their chosen university, typically involving the submission of a list of required documents, upon which the Ministry of Education issues the letter of acceptance. Students enrolled in RLPP have to pay a specific tuition fee unless they receive a Governmental scholarship covering these expenses. The tuition fees for the RLPP range from 1,980 euros to 2,700 euros per year, which is approximately equivalent to the tuition fees for one year of bachelor's or master's studies for non-EU citizens.

Foreign citizens with Romanian language skills acquired informally or non-formally can obtain certification through an assessment for a linguistic competence certificate (minimum level B1). This assessment can also be conducted online by accredited universities in the country offering the RLPP or through the Romanian language lectureships of the Romanian Language Institute or the Romanian Cultural Institute abroad (ME,6156/2016).

[3] Ministerial Order no. 6156/2016.

[4] Ministerial Order no. 3855/26 May 2016.

[5] According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

1.4 Relevance and Research Questions

The relevance of this research lies in its comprehensive examination of the Romanian Language Preparatory Programme policy for international students—which has been operational for almost a decade. Despite its long-term implementation, there is a noticeable gap in research concerning its effectiveness in attracting international students and its contribution to the internationalisation of higher education. Particularly, this analysis is relevant in understanding how this policy influences not only the enrolment of international students but also its impact on compensating brain circulation, especially given the fact that the programme aims at providing Romanian language skills that would increase the further employment of these students in Romania.

Hence, the primary objective of this analysis is to critically assess whether this national policy serves as an effective instrument in improving the internationalisation of higher education. Additionally, the paper seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on strategies to counter brain circulation, proposing that targeted educational policies can play a significant role in retaining and attracting global academic talent.

The main research questions are:

1. Does the Romanian Language Preparatory Programme have an influence on the international student participation rate in higher education?
2. Are scholarships a mechanism that impacts the success/transition rate of international students in their academic path?

The paper will answer the research questions by following international students' educational path from enrolment in Romanian Language Preparatory Programmes, graduation and transition towards BA, MA, or Ph.D. programmes. The analysis is based on the available data from the national platform for collecting statistical data for higher education (ANS) and the Romanian National Student Enrolment Registry (RMUR).

By focusing on these elements, the present research aims to provide concrete, data-driven insights into the efficacy of these programmes, which is essential for informed policymaking and understanding the broader landscape of global higher education. Overall, this research can provide relevant insights into the field of international higher education by providing empirical evidence on the impact of language and scholarship policies on international student success.

2 Literature Review

2.1 *Short Description of the Evolution of Internationalisation in HE*

Over the last decade, the landscape of internationalisation in higher education has been characterised by greater speed and complexity. There has been a notable shift towards a more inclusive, differentiated, and comprehensive approach that goes beyond purely market-oriented aspects. However, there continues to be a trend toward the homogenisation of activities, approaches, policies, and strategies. The influence of rankings and numerical indicators for measuring internationalisation also plays an important role, pushing low- and middle-income countries to emulate Western internationalisation strategies. This approach often prioritises quantitative goals, such as the number of international students and staff, which can overshadow more innovative, local and institutionally specific ideas about internationalisation (Jones & De Wit, 2021). Furthermore, the drivers of change in this area are diverse, including challenges to international cooperation approaches due to the global rise of "populism, nationalism, xenophobia and parochial politics" (Jones & De Wit, 2021, p. 83).

The Bologna Process through the Ministerial Communiques (EHEA, 2007, 2009, 2012a, 2012b, 2015, 2018, 2020) called for increasing internationalisation of higher education, mobility, research and innovation through a more collaborative approach. In the last five years, new joint initiatives such as the European Universities Initiative (EUI) and Study in Europe have emerged. Through the extent of collaborations between European Alliances, the EUI aims at "developing an innovative model of transnational cooperation" (Craciun et al., 2023, p. 7), transforming the participating institutions and the academic community involved and fulfilling the purpose of creating internationalised campuses. The EUI is considered one of the four flagship initiatives of the European strategy for universities, together with a legal status for European Universities alliances, a joint European degree, and a European Student Card European initiative (European Commission, 2022) and "a key pillar of the European Education Area" (European Commission, 2023). In addition, the Study in Europe project initiated by the European Commission explores a new way of cooperation aiming to develop the "Study in Europe" brand, promote the EHEA and attract international students to European countries (European Commission, n.d.).

2.2 *Changes in Economic Rationales for Internationalisation in HE*

The evolving rationales for recruiting international students, as discussed by De Wit et al. (2022), mark a notable shift in priorities: previously driven by solidarity and collaboration, institutions, and governments now prioritise revenue, reputation, soft power, talent competition, and global learning. This shift is evident not only in HEIs but also among local, national, and regional entities. However, the rationales behind non-anglophone countries' recruitment strategies remain varied, encompassing income generation, cultural identity, soft power, and human capital development. English-speaking nations prioritise income, while high-income non-anglophone countries like Germany and France focus on soft power and talent attraction. Mid-income non-anglophone nations emphasise national identity, soft power, and human capital (De Wit et al., 2022).

Institutions with a strong economic motivation are more and more interested in attracting international students (Marinoni, 2019) and thus strive for "revenue and reputation/branding" (De Wit & Deca, 2020, p. 5). In this spirit, institutions need not only to focus on increasing the number of international students but also to ensure they provide adequate support services and contribute to the students' success and meet their career and employability expectations (Choudaha, 2017). In line with this, studies show that the decision making and motivation of prospective students to study abroad takes into consideration not only the academic experience but also the long-term immigration opportunities (ICEF, 2013), which can be reflected in the national legislation that eases access to work opportunities. Ammigan and Jones show in a study (2018) that international students' satisfaction with the support services provided by institutions is more varied in comparison with their arrival experiences.

A recent study (KEG, 2023) shows that career reasons are the top motivators for students who want to study abroad in Europe. While searching for study opportunities abroad, prospective international students seek information related to scholarships and funding, work opportunities, visa and immigration information, housing and cost of living. This means that these are the issues they are most concerned about, and which could have an impact on their decision to study and remain in that country.

While international student mobility offers advantages, it also presents challenges, and accurate data on study success is frequently not available (Teichler, 2017). As observed by Teichler (2017), there is a growth in various initiatives, financial support programmes, and service frameworks that are being developed at both national and institutional levels to enhance and support international activities.

Owing to demographic issues, the ageing population, and brain circulation, European countries have adopted various legislation or policies meant to attract international students, for their need to recruit highly skilled and educated professionals and increase the stay rate. Romania joined this trend by revising immigration legislation according to European practices (Santa & Haj, 2020). The legislation[6] allows foreign graduates from Romanian universities to pursue employment for a duration of up to nine months post-graduation instead of the standard six-month period allocated for addressing administrative matters after completing their studies.

In terms of recruiting, English-speaking countries indeed have an advantage in attracting international students due to language familiarity, unlike non-Anglophone nations that must implement comprehensive measures like language preparatory programmes and cultural integration initiatives. To effectively recruit international

[6] Law 247/2018 available online: https://lege5.ro/Gratuit/gmydqobqgeza/legea-nr-247-2018-pentru-modificarea-si-completarea-unor-acte-normative-privind-regimul-strainilor-in-romania.

students, it is important for countries to remove language barriers with strategies including language courses, scholarships, and educational resources, accompanied by specialised training for language teachers, as implemented in Germany and elsewhere (De Wit et al., 2022).

This research aims to explore whether the Romanian Language Preparatory Programme policy impacts international student participation rates in higher education and whether scholarships play a role in students' success and transition rates. Romania has adopted key policies that resonate with worldwide efforts to attract international talent and improve educational access and integration. These policies are particularly essential in non-English speaking areas, where language barriers can hinder student integration and academic progression. Countries like France, The Netherlands, and Belgium, which advance national languages to diminish English dependency, use these efforts as tools for attracting international students and enriching the linguistic diversity of higher education (De Wit et al., 2022).

Language preparatory programmes are designed not only to help overcome linguistic obstacles, thereby facilitating international students' access to higher education, but also to assist them in adjusting to new educational and social environments, which can significantly vary from their home countries. Scholarships stand out as the most predominant strategy to attract talented students (De Wit et al., 2022) since these aim at reducing the financial burden and unlocking educational opportunities that might otherwise be inaccessible, thereby increasing diversity and fostering a global perspective within educational institutions. Research focused on Romania's social scholarships indicates their role in enhancing academic performance and increasing the chances of graduation rates (Cismaru et al., 2022).

2.3 Role of Internationalisation in Addressing Challenges like Brain Circulation

Considering the difficulties presented by demographic changes, migration, or brain circulation, the internationalisation of higher education can be a powerful tool in mitigating the effects of brain circulation (Deca, 2020). Through a particular emphasis on attracting international degree-seeking students (Sin et al., 2019), countries can compensate for the loss of local talent (Knight, 2008). International students bring diverse perspectives and skills, contributing to the host country's academic, social capital and cultural landscape (Deca, 2015; Mosneaga & Agergaard, 2012). This can also lead to an infusion of global talent which can foster a vibrant academic community and fill gaps in the local workforce.

By enhancing the quality of higher education, fostering global networks, attracting, and retaining talent, and promoting cultural and economic development, internationalisation can reduce the impact of unbalanced brain circulation. Internationalisation strategies can include programmes or policies specifically designed to attract international students or nationals living abroad back to their home country, either temporarily or permanently. This might involve offering scholarships, research opportunities, and favourable working conditions.

3 Methodology

The methodology consists of desk research, legal documents analysis and analysis of data retrieved from the national platform for collecting statistical data for higher education (ANS) and the National Student Enrolment Registry (RMU). Both platforms include data provided by higher education institutions and are used by the Ministry of Education for data reporting and funding.

As not all universities have provided information on graduation rates, the authors have used a sample of universities (sample 1) that have provided the necessary statistical data (in terms of enrolments and graduates). Sample 1 covers more than 80% of the student population as declared by higher education institutions in the national platform for collecting statistical data for higher education (ANS).

In order to track the academic path of graduates of the Romanian Language Preparatory Programme (RLPP), the authors have tracked the individual graduates of the RLPP after their graduation. For this, a sample of universities (Sample 2) was selected in order to evaluate the academic track of RLPP graduates. As the National Student Enrolment Registry (RMU) does not make mandatory the registration of RLPP students, in order to ensure data reliability, the sample was selected by using the national platform for collecting statistical data for higher education (ANS) as an indicator for universities that have provided reliable information on enrolments and graduation from RLPP. Sample 2 covers 33,6% of the student population as declared by higher education institutions in the national platform for collecting statistical data for higher education (ANS).

3.1 Limits of the Analysis

Given the decentralised data entry model, which requires the data to be introduced by higher education institutions, information for certain programmes or students was not entered. This potential error has been taken into account. In the cases where this error has been identified, input data have been eliminated to avoid negatively impacting the analysis, and subsamples are used. However, given the large number of cases at the level of the entire student population that was analysed, the authors considered that the missing data are mostly randomly distributed and do not affect the validity of the conclusions at this level.

4 The Role of the Romanian Language Preparatory Programme

For the 2023/2024 academic year, the Romanian Language Preparatory Programme is offered by 28 public and private HEIs (Ministerial Order 6156/2026 updated in 2023) (Table 1).

Table 1 Number of HEIs that can offer the Romanian Language Preparatory Programme and have enrolled students

	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020	2020/2021	2021/2022
Number of HEIs (public and private)	21	23	25	25	25
Number of students enrolled	969	1,156	1,266	1,227	1,485

Source: National platform for collecting statistical data for higher education (ANS)

The Romanian Language Preparatory Programme is primarily available in public higher education institutions, with only three private higher education institutions offering this programme, covering 5.9% of the total RLPP student population.

4.1 Enrolment in the RLPP

Between 2017/2018 and 2021/2022, Romanian universities enrolled over 6,103 students. Most enrolled students paid tuition fees (61%), while the rest were either recipients of the state scholarship that covered their tuition expenses (33%) or did not have to pay tuition fees (6%).

Looking at the evolution within the analysed timeframe, the number of enrolled students paying tuition fees increased by more than 67.4%, while the number of scholarship recipients and students with no tuition fees increased by an average of 32.7% (Fig. 1).

The number of enrolled students represented over 124 countries, with 16 countries having over 100 students enrolled. Half of the countries were from the Middle East region. The top ten countries in terms of student enrolment were Morocco, Syria, Jordan, Serbia, Israel, Albania, Ukraine, Lebanon, Algeria, and Iraq. Recent trends indicate a decline in student numbers from Serbia, Israel, Ukraine, Iraq, Occupied Palestinian Territories, and Turkmenistan. Conversely, there has been an increase in student enrolments from Morocco, Syria, Algeria, Iran, Turkey, France, and Guinea (Table 2).

In terms of higher education institutions, more than 50% of students were enrolled in six public higher education institutions. Concerning the fundamental field of study associated with the Romanian Language Preparatory Programme (RLPP), most of

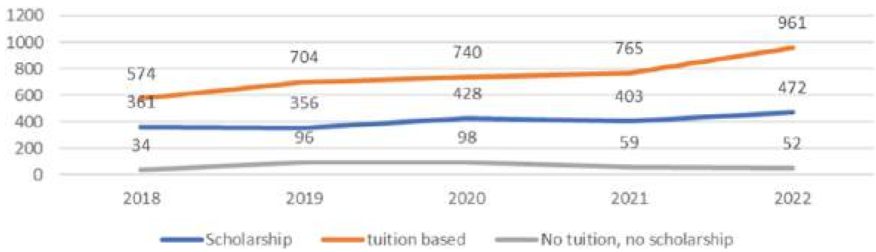

Fig. 1 Number of enrolled students in Romanian preparatory language programme by type of funding

Table 2 Top countries of students enrolled in the Romanian language preparatory year

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Total
Morocco	84	75	139	167	197	662
Syria	62	84	97	167	172	582
Jordan	49	57	73	64	56	299
Serbia	59	69	75	63	31	297
Israel	109	77	19	47	38	290
Albania	52	59	68	51	58	288
Ukraine	69	57	85	26	14	251
Lebanon	55	42	51	47	50	245
Algeria	23	44	52	27	84	230
Iraq	34	53	63	47	22	219
Iran	20	32	21	47	62	182
Occupied Palestinian territories	37	39	43	30	25	174
Turkmenistan	36	46	46	33	5	166
Turkey	21	29	16	28	54	148
France	14	33	15	19	32	113
Guinea	3	29	17	23	41	113

the students (63.9%) were enrolled in humanities and arts, especially in Language and Literature, followed by Social Sciences (17.4%) with a more even distribution between specific domains like Education and Communication as well as Economics and International Business. Regarding the general biological and biomedical sciences (10.4%), most students were enrolled in a RLPP associated with medicine (Fig. 2).

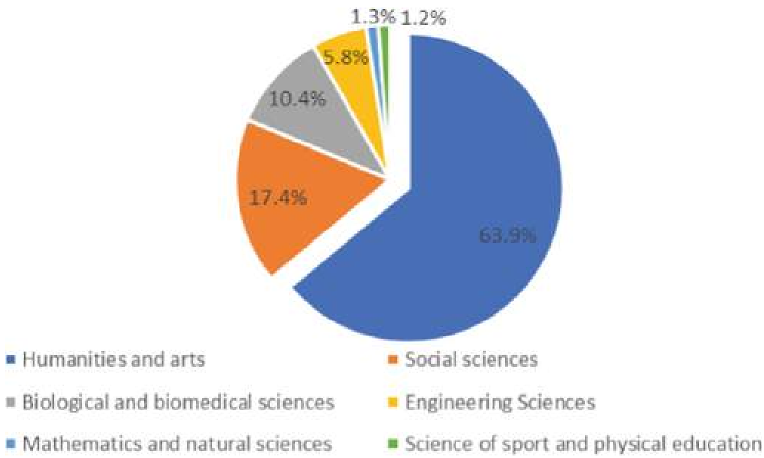

Fig. 2 Distribution of students enrolled in the Romanian language preparatory programme (RLPP) by fundamental field of study

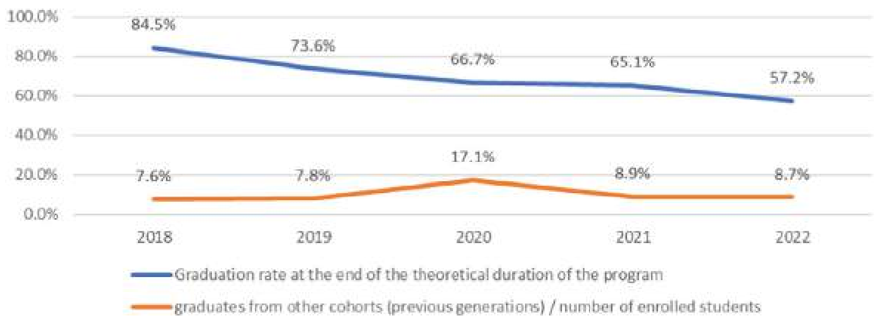

Fig. 3 Graduation rate at the end of the theoretical duration of the programme (1 year) and the proportion of other generation graduates relative to the number of enrolled students

4.2 Graduation in the RLPP

Looking at the sample universities that also provided data on graduation, from a total of 4,895 students enrolled through 2017/2018–2021/2022, 3,290 students graduated at the end of their one-year programme (current graduation cohort[7]) with an additional 497 students that graduated in the following years (as previous generation). This data shows an average success rate of 67.21% with an additional 10.15% if we take into account the students from previous generations who have graduated in the analysed timeframe.

Nevertheless, looking at how the data has evolved, the graduation rate for the sample universities has steadily decreased between 2018 and 2022 (Fig. 3).

It is clear that Albania, Occupied Palestinian Territories, Ukraine, Lebanon, Turkmenistan, Turkey, Serbia, Jordan, and France have the highest graduation rate, ranging from 71% to 84.6%. In contrast, despite having the largest enrolment figures, Morocco and Syria reveal the lowest graduation rates at 54.4% and 45.2%, respectively (Fig. 4).

Looking at the graduation rate at the end of the theoretical duration of the programme by fundamental field of study, the data shows important differences. The Humanities and Arts field of study has the highest graduation rate at 72.3%, suggesting that students in this field are more likely to complete the RLPP programme within its theoretical one-year duration. On the other hand, the Engineering Sciences field of study has the lowest graduation rate at 51.1%, similar to the graduation rate for engineering bachelor programmes (Alexe-Cotet et al., 2022). The other fundamental fields of study—Social Sciences, Biological and Biomedical Sciences, Mathematics and Natural Sciences, and Science of Sport and Physical Education—have graduation rates ranging from 52.2 to 64.4% (Fig. 5).

[7] The current graduation cohort includes students who graduated within their programme's set timeline (theoretical duration of the programme), did not experience delayed academic progress, and completed all graduation requirements in their final study year.

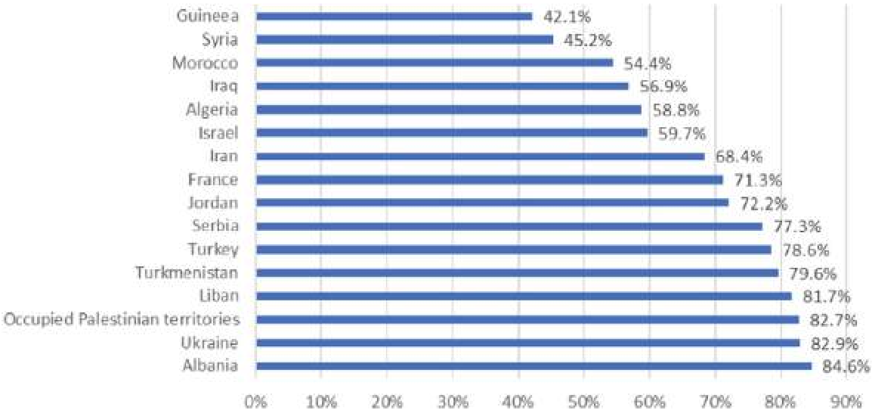

Fig. 4 Graduation rate at the end of the theoretical duration of the programme (1 year) by country of origin

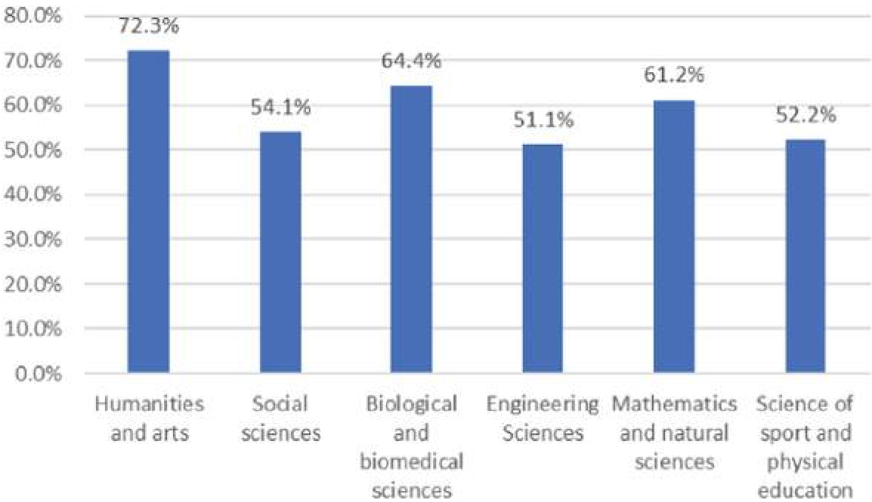

Fig. 5 Graduation rate at the end of the theoretical duration of the programme (1 year) by fundamental field of study

4.3 Academic Path of RLPP Graduates

Using the second data base, the Student Enrolment Registry (RMU), a sample of universities was selected, and using the graduates of the Romanian Language Preparatory Programme (RLPP), an in-depth analysis has been made to track individual academic paths towards other study programmes. From the 1,536 RLPP graduates in the sample, 515 were identified as enrolled after the completion of the RLPP programme in a bachelor (91,5%) master (8.2%) or Ph.D. programme (0.4%). This shows a transition towards other study programmes of 33.52%.

Looking at the language of the study programme, 447 were identified as being enrolled in a Romanian (full or partial) taught programme indicating a progression rate towards Romanian-taught programmes of 29.1%. The other 4,42% of RLPP graduates were identified as enrolled in programmes taught in foreign languages.

Analysing the funding sources among 1,536 RLPP graduates from the sample, 598 received scholarships, 86 had tuition fees waived, while 852 had to pay tuition fees. Notably, those with waived tuition (53.5%) and scholarship recipients (46.7%) had higher progression rates to Romanian-taught programmes compared to tuition-paying students (14.1%).

In the context of gender, among the 1,536 RLPP graduates, 39.3% (604) were women, while 60.7% (932) were men. Among the 515 students enrolled in bachelor, master, or Ph.D. programmes, 237 were women, indicating a progression rate toward continuing their studies of 39.2%. In comparison, the progression rate toward continuing studies for men was 29.8% (Table 3).

Table 3 Academic path of RLPP graduates' sample

	Total	Scholarship funded	Tuition fee paying student	No tuition fee
Number of RLPP (unique) graduates in the sample	1,536	598	852	86
Number of students (unique) identified as enrolled in a programme (Ba/Ma/Ph.D.) after graduating RLPP	515	287	176	52
Number of students (unique) identified as enrolled in programmes taught in the Romanian language (total or partial), (Ba/Ma/Ph.D.) after graduating RLPP	446	279	120	46
Progression rate of RLPP programmes graduates to programmes taught in the Romanian language (total or partial), (Ba/Ma/Ph.D.) (%)	29.0	46.7	14.1	53.5

5 Discussion and Conclusions

Over time, there has been a notable rise in the number of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) willing to offer the Romanian Language Preparatory Programme (RLPP) and an increase in enrolments. This uptrend suggests a growing institutional interest, reflecting a strategic drive towards enhancing the attractiveness of these programmes to international students, aiming to diversify their student body and further attract international students into programmes taught in Romanian language.

Between 2017/2018 and 2021/2022, RLPP has successfully attracted 6,103 international students, with more than half of these enrolments centralised within six public higher education institutions (HEIs). This indicates a strong preference among international students for certain institutions, which may be due to their reputation, quality of the language programme, or other factors that appeal to international learners. Looking at the six higher education institutions, it is clear that the number of international students enrolled in RLPP programmes is connected with the overall number of international students studying in those universities, highlighting the role of these programmes in attracting foreign students towards ¨traditional" bachelor, masters or Ph.D. programmes.

Financially, a majority of the RLPP students (61%) were tuition-paying, while over a third (39%) benefitted from state scholarships (that covered their tuition expenses) or did not incur tuition fees. Looking at how this distribution has evolved in the analysed timeframe, data show a substantial increase (67.4%) in the number of tuition-paying students. This highlights that the policy is becoming more attractive to HEI's, as the number of tuition fee-paying places is decided by the university, as opposed to the number of scholarships that are decided and funded by the state.

Looking at the countries of origin for RLPP, the data shows that this policy is strongly connected to other internationalisation policies. The representation of eight countries from the Middle East in the top origin countries is similar to the top countries for international degree-seeking students (Fit et al., 2022; Haj et al., 2020), further suggesting that RLPP may be particularly aligned with the educational goals of students from this region who might find it a solution to overcome language barriers before embarking on their primary academic pursuits. Traditionally, students from non-EU countries prefer studying (BA or MA) in medical and engineering study domains.

The graduation rate of the RLPP programme (67.21% at the end of the one-year programme, with an additional 10.15% of students from previous cohorts also completing their studies within this timeframe) is greater on average than the graduation rate of students in Bachelor/MA programmes, calculated as the population that did not drop out (Alexe-Cotet et al., 2022). Looking at the last year (2022), the graduation rate was similar to that in bachelor and master programmes. However, the overarching trend across the sample universities indicates a decline in graduation rates over the years, which justifies further investigation to understand the underlying causes and develop strategies to counteract this decline.

The issue of programme misuse also needs to be addressed as during the analysis there were cases, albeit limited, where students were enrolled in multiple RLPP programmes (in consecutive years, or at the same time) or students already studying in Romanian-taught programmes. This is especially important as the requirements for non-EU students to enrol in such programmes are low (based on a specific list of documents).

There is a pronounced geographic disparity in graduation success, with students from countries like Albania, Occupied Palestinian Territories, Ukraine, Lebanon, Turkmenistan, Turkey, Serbia, Jordan, and France achieving high graduation rates between 77 and 91.5%. Instead, countries with the most substantial enrolment numbers, namely Morocco (54.4%) and Syria (45.2%), have the lowest graduation rates. This suggests that the RLPP's effectiveness varies significantly across different national groups, which may be influenced by factors such as migration intentions, prior educational experiences, cultural adaptability, or the level of support provided to students from these regions.

The fundamental field of study of Humanities and Arts stands out with the highest graduation rate at 72.3% (as well as enrolment). This may reflect a closer alignment between the RLPP and the academic demands of these fields or perhaps a greater linguistic affinity that students in these areas possess. In contrast, Engineering Sciences show the lowest graduation rate at 51.1%, possibly indicating a higher degree of difficulty in meeting language demands for technical subjects or the need for a more extended period of language acquisition for students in these disciplines. The moderate completion rates in Social Sciences, Biological and Biomedical Sciences, Mathematics and Natural Sciences, and Science of Sport and Physical Education (ranging from 52.2 to 64.4%) point to a varied level of challenge and preparedness among students in these fields, suggesting that these domains may require tailored language support to improve graduation rates.

Approximately one-third (33.5%) of the RLPP graduates continue their academic journey in Romanian higher education institutions in BA, MA or Ph.D. programmes, suggesting a significant impact of the RLPP on students' academic paths. Nevertheless, the impact of the RLPP might be considered limited since only 29% continued their studies in programmes taught in Romanian language (full or partially taught programmes) and around 4.4% in programmes taught in foreign languages. It is important to mention that graduation from an RLPP programme does not guarantee enrolment in a bachelor, master or Ph.D. programme, as these graduates need to compete with other students in order to be admitted to these programmes. The difficulty level of the admission process can play a role in the academic path of RLPP graduates.

Scholarships can have a significant role in supporting international students through the RLPP and beyond. In terms of transition, approximately 46.6% of the RLPP graduates who benefitted from a scholarship and 53.5% with waived tuition continued their study in Romanian-taught programmes, compared to 14.1% of the tuition fee-paying students.

While the RLPP provides a strong foundation for international students, particularly in facilitating the transition to programmes taught in Romanian, there is room for enhancement, especially in terms of supporting students from regions with lower graduation rates and addressing the overall declining trend in graduation rates. In terms of policy and practical implications, fluency in the host country's language may facilitate smoother integration for immigrants and grant them improved access to employment opportunities, thereby potentially mitigating unbalanced brain circulation effects. Additionally, in the long term, RLPP can contribute to soft power diplomacy by providing a deeper understanding and appreciation of the Romanian culture, traditions, and societal values among international communities. This fosters a global network of alumni who, equipped with language skills and cultural insights gained during their studies, can serve as informal/brand ambassadors for Romania, promoting its interests and encouraging and supporting positive international relations.

Further research is necessary to examine an entire cohort and assess drop-out rates of RLPP graduates in bachelor's, master's, and Ph.D. programmes. In addition, establishing an accurate and robust database is crucial to support public policies like the RLPP, enabling comprehensive impact assessment, foresight, and informed decision making for future policy analyses.

In conclusion, the current analysis provided strong arguments for the important role RLPP plays in increasing the participation of international students in Romanian higher education. This is underlined by the opportunity offered to international students to enrol in Romanian-taught programmes, as only a limited number of study programmes are also taught in a foreign language.

Furthermore, the present analysis highlights the importance of support policies in improving the success rate and the transition rate to higher education, showing that support through scholarships and covering tuition fees for international students influence the transition rate from RLPP to a bachelor, master or Ph.D. programme.

By focusing on this policy tool, Romania contributes to a wider international discourse on how targeted educational strategies can address demographic shifts and global educational trends, positioning itself as a proactive participant in the global education arena.

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Higher Education Spaces as Immigration Sites: A Critical Examination

Aisling Tiernan

Abstract Higher education spaces are increasingly becoming sites of immigration management, reflecting the complex interplay between internationalisation and immigration policies within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Using the UK as a primary example, this analysis highlights the impact of immigration regulations on universities and international students, illustrating how institutions are increasingly tasked with visa oversight responsibilities. This shift, driven by stringent national policies, has transformed universities into de facto agents of border control, creating ethical dilemmas and administrative burdens while altering the academic ethos. Drawing on qualitative data, the discussion explores the socio-political implications for students, including financial and emotional challenges, as well as broader equity concerns. The analysis extends to other contexts, such as Australia, the US, and Canada, offering a comparative perspective on immigration frameworks and their integration into education systems. Concluding with actionable recommendations, the study advocates for harmonising visa policies within the EHEA, streamlining application processes, and reconsidering the delegation of immigration duties to academic institutions to foster inclusivity and equitable internationalisation.

Keywords Internationalisation · European Higher Education Area · Immigration Processes · Higher Education

1 Introduction

As we approach the 25th anniversary of the Bologna Process, it presents an opportune moment for reflection. This initiative has driven significant changes across Europe, leading to a re-evaluation of the dynamics between governments and universities. It has reshaped both the concept and practice of internationalisation in higher education. The integration of these changes into national policies has varied considerably, deeply influenced by the unique circumstances in each European country (Papatsiba, 2006).

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In parallel, the European Union has endeavoured to simplify and streamline visa procedures for non-EU students and researchers, aligning with these educational reforms. However, despite these efforts, the intended outcomes are yet to be fully realised and immigration regulations for incoming international students still vary according to individual national policies (EU Immigration Portal, 2023).

At the same time, the trend of internationalisation continues to rise, with the number of globally mobile students in higher education growing dramatically from 0.3 million in 1963 to over 6.4 million international students globally in 2021 (UIS, 2024). 1.46 million students from abroad, who completed their secondary education in another country, undertook tertiary-level studies across the EU in 2020 (Eurostat, 2022). Economically, these students play a vital role; they invigorate local economies and serve as cultural ambassadors within educational spaces, enriching the academic experience (Tight, 2022). Geopolitically, students often act as informal diplomats, shape the image of countries, and potentially influence foreign policy (Walker, 2014). Moreover, in many Western countries with ageing populations, international students represent a potential workforce to counteract demographic challenges (Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007). Yet, xenophobia and tightened immigration policies, such as challenging visa processes, lead to social and administrative obstacles and increased inequality within student populations (Bartram, 2018; Harrison & Peacock, 2009). Accordingly, only a select number of students have the resources or capabilities to apply for and navigate the challenges associated with often complex visa application and registration procedures (Tiernan, 2023).

Understanding immigration requirements is crucial for facilitating international student mobility and academic collaboration and yet is often overlooked in the wider conversation about internationalisation. The interplay between immigration policy and education is complex, requiring an in-depth understanding of immigrant challenges (Turner & Mangual Figueroa, 2019). In this chapter, using the UK as an example, I examine higher educational spaces as immigration sites. I explore how immigration activities are increasingly integrated into university operations, concluding that the impact of varied and increasingly stringent immigration policies is at odds with the harmonisation goals of the Bologna Process. Specifically, I trace new responsibilities for universities finding themselves in the role of visa managers. Drawing on previously collected qualitative data (Tiernan, 2023), I then outline conflicts in bordering spaces and impacts on students. Finally, I consider how other countries manage international student compliance with immigration regulations, concluding with recommendations for how the EHEA might include student visa considerations in future policy planning.

2 The UK and the EHEA

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was formalised with the Bologna Declaration of 1999, a collective effort by European countries to standardise and enhance their higher education systems. As a cornerstone of the Bologna Process, the EHEA aims to facilitate comparability and compatibility across European higher education systems. Its goals are manifold, emphasising the enhancement of learning quality, fostering employability and academic mobility, and strengthening global competitiveness (Papatsiba, 2006). Internationalisation represents a key facet of the EHEA's mission. It encompasses efforts to promote academic mobility, international collaboration, and intercultural understanding. According to the European University Association (EUA), the internationalisation agenda is pivotal in creating a more inclusive and interconnected European education landscape (EUA, 2020). However, this agenda presents challenges, particularly in maintaining educational equity and ensuring that internationalisation benefits all stakeholders equitably.

The UK, a full and founding member of the EHEA, is renowned for its academic reputation and high rates of international student enrolment. In 2021/2022, the UK hosted 679,970 international students (HESA, 2023). This record high not only reflects a 12% annual growth but also represents ongoing changes in the countries from which international students are originating, particularly influenced by the introduction of full fees for EU students after Brexit (HESA, 2023). The growth in 2021/22 was driven entirely by students coming from non-EU countries, including China, India, and Nigeria (ICEF Monitor, 2023). In recent years, there has been a paradigm shift in the role of UK universities, extending beyond education to encompass elements of immigration control. This shift is evident in policies that mandate universities to monitor international students' compliance with visa regulations (Home Office, 2011). Such policies have profound implications, potentially impacting academic freedom and altering the traditional ethos of university education.

Post-Brexit, the UK faces the challenge of redefining its educational ties with EHEA countries. Brexit has led to changes in tuition fees, visa regulations, and funding opportunities for EU students, which were previously governed by EU laws and agreements (Universities UK, 2023). These changes potentially affect the UK's attractiveness as a study destination and its ability to maintain academic and student mobility. The enrolment of EU students in UK universities has undergone significant changes, reflecting both the shifting attractiveness of UK institutions and the altered enrolment conditions for EU students. Concurrently, student mobility has been affected through the recalibration of the UK's involvement in the EU's flagship Erasmus + programme and the establishment of alternative UK-based exchange schemes. After Brexit, this mobility, a cornerstone of educational exchange, has experienced disruptions in the flow of students between the UK and EU—a disruption which perhaps exacerbates previous imbalances of incoming versus outgoing students in the UK, attributed to the UK students' reliance on English language (Leahy, 2018).

Furthermore, the dynamics of research funding and collaboration have been altered, especially through the UK's departure and subsequent readmission to the EU's Horizon programme. Historically, this programme not only provided essential funding and project opportunities but also facilitated the entry and employment of numerous EU citizen researchers in the UK, a process that was greatly aided by the EU's policy of free labour movement (Highman et al., 2023). In September 2023, the

UK re-joined Horizon Europe, the EU's €95-billion research funding programme, after a two-year exclusion due to Brexit-related disagreements. This deal, costing the UK €2.6 billion annually as an associate member until 2027, was welcomed by UK researchers but also underscored the significant losses in funding, collaborations, and contact with EU universities during the hiatus (Sanderson & Naddaf, 2023).

Finally, the post-Brexit era presents both challenges and opportunities for the UK to innovate and adapt its higher education strategies, ensuring that it continues to play a significant role in the evolving narrative of the EHEA. Brexit has necessitated a re-evaluation of the UK's higher education policies, particularly those related to internationalisation and immigration. While the UK remains committed to attracting global talent, its exit from the EU has introduced new complexities in aligning its immigration policies with the broader goals of the EHEA. In the next two sections, I discuss how immigration policies and higher education have become intertwined in the UK, resulting in role changes and problems for international students. After that, I elaborate on how EHEA countries face similar issues.

3 New Responsibilities and Risks for Universities

Since the introduction of the Tier 4 visa, now known as the Student visa, in 2012, a regulatory role has been conferred on UK universities through what was originally known as a Highly Trusted Status (HTS) (UKBA, 2011). This visa allows students from outside the European Economic Area (EEA) and Switzerland to study at a UK institution, provided they meet certain criteria, including being offered a place on a course and being able to support themselves financially. HTS has since been renamed the Register of Student Sponsors and continues to confer sponsor responsibilities on universities.

As visa sponsors, UK universities are required to engage in visa management activities if they wish to enrol international students at their institutions. These responsibilities are extensive, substantial, (Home Office, 2021, p. 8, 9) and are ongoing from the time an international student makes an application to that university and throughout a student's study period. Initially, and before a student can apply for their visa, a university must provide a Confirmation of Acceptance for Studies (CAS) (Home Office, 2021, p. 12). Through the generation of a CAS, a university is obliged to ensure a student's English language ability has been adequately assessed and be able to state how this was assessed when required. The university must also be able to explain how the student's ability to follow the course has been assessed and how the course represents academic progression for the student. Additional information requirements encompass records of course fees, proportions of fees paid, and further details about the sponsors of sponsored students. If a student is considered 'gifted', the English language requirements may be waived, provided there is confirmation of why the student is being treated as gifted. This must be authorised by the institution's registrar or an equivalent authority. These obligations include the university assessing and being satisfied that students have the necessary funds to support themselves and pay for their courses. Once a student has arrived in the UK, they are required to register their address with their university. The university is then responsible for maintaining the records of a student's contact information and must provide this information to UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) when requested. Universities must report any changes in the students' circumstances, such as a change of address or course. Critically, universities are required to notify the UKVI if a student fails to attend classes or otherwise breaches the conditions of their visa. Furthermore, universities are expected to comply with regular compliance visits by the UKVI.

The regulations dictated by the UKVI are mandatory and must be adhered to for a university to be listed on the Register of Student Sponsors. Furthermore, the regulations state the rate at which applicants to their university can be denied a visa. If visa denial rates for applicants to an individual university rise above 10%, a review of that university will be conducted, and the university's licence is at risk of being revoked (Smith, 2014). This particular regulation plays out in uncomfortable ways in university student recruitment strategies. UK universities have at times stopped recruiting international students from certain regions deemed high-risk by the Home Office, leading to accusations of racial discrimination and concerns over visa refusal rates impacting the institutions' sponsorship licences (Havergal, 2015). Furthermore, universities risk losing their licence if they are found not to be compliant with their responsibilities.

In 2012, the UK higher education sector was starkly reminded of the consequences of non-compliance when London Metropolitan University's licence to sponsor international students was revoked following an audit by the UK Border Agency (UKBA), the predecessor of UKVI. This unprecedented event sent shock waves throughout the sector, causing turmoil among international students at London Metropolitan and within the broader UK higher education system (Walker, 2014). Announced on 29 August 2012, the revocation impacted up to 2,600 continuing international students, who were required to find an alternative sponsor by 1 December 2012 or face deportation, a threat that was later overturned by a High Court ruling (Baker, 2013; Morgan, 2012). The incident not only affected current and prospective students but also raised serious concerns about the integrity and oversight of university visa processes nationwide. Subsequent issues at other institutions, such as temporary licence suspensions at the University of Bedfordshire, the University of West London, and Glyndwr University in 2013, underscored the sector's ongoing challenges and highlighted the stringent compliance requirements set by the UKBA (Grove, 2014). These events have led to heightened awareness and a more cautious approach among UK universities towards immigration compliance. The new responsibilities bestowed upon universities to oversee and administer student visas reflect a paradigm shift, viewing borders not only as external territorial demarcations but also as internal constructs, integrating everyday bordering technologies that require ordinary citizens to act as de facto border guards (Yuval-Davis et al., 2018).

4 Increased Workload and Ethical Concerns

In response to their role as visa sponsors, UK universities have been adopting more robust systems for monitoring and reporting the status of their international students. This is critical to ensure that accurate data collection, regular attendance tracking, timely reporting of any changes in student circumstances, and students' meeting the necessary visa criteria are carried out accurately and effectively (Tiernan, 2023). The strict enforcement of these regulations has had a significant impact on university policies and practices, with institutions investing more resources in compliance to avoid similar repercussions. Advising on student visas is also a notable new responsibility for universities. The British Council recommends that students seeking visa assistance should consult their respective universities (British Council, 2024). Accordingly, UK universities are now actively providing visa application support and guidance as advertised on their individual websites.

While international offices and admissions offices at universities find themselves with new immigration roles, other actors within universities are affected as well. Academics are now required to monitor attendance and report student absences (Home Office, 2021). This is not a simple administrative task, as it carries the weighty implication that a student's academic performance, or lack thereof, could directly lead to the revocation of their visa. Such activities place academics in precarious and uncomfortable positions, as they must balance their duty to the institution's immigration compliance with their commitment to student welfare and academic integrity (Tiernan, 2023). Academics, who traditionally focus on teaching and research, find themselves in new managerial roles (Deem, 2004) which now also include a complex web of immigration compliance. They are inadvertently turned into 'co-conspirators' in the immigration process, a role that is often at odds with their professional objectives. This activity can lead to ethical dilemmas for academics. The pressure to report on student attendance and engagement can conflict with their role as educators and mentors, potentially creating a sense of mistrust between students and faculty. Additionally, this new dimension of academic responsibility could have implications for the dynamics within the classroom. Students may perceive their professors not only as educators but also as agents of immigration enforcement, which could affect their willingness to engage openly in the academic environment. Such a dynamic can create an atmosphere of surveillance and caution rather than learning and intellectual exploration.

In the expansive literature on the internationalisation of higher education, a significant debate contrasts the marketised and financialised imperatives that often drive universities' involvement in recruiting international students (Walker, 2014). This is particularly relevant in the UK, where universities have become increasingly reliant on revenue from international students' tuition fees. In the 2021/22 academic year, these international student fees accounted for approximately £10bn, or over 21% of British universities' total income (Cuibus & Walsh, 2024). The increasing commercialisation of universities brings about significant ethical dilemmas, as this trend shifts the focus from educational values to financial objectives. Viewing students as consumers alters their educational journey, potentially reducing it to a mere transaction rather than a participatory and developmental process (Brooks, 2017). This marketisation risks the quality of education, diverting attention from a pedagogically sound experience to commercial interests (Tannock, 2013). Relationships within higher education are transforming into more transactional dynamics due to this consumer model, challenging the traditional values and responsibilities of academic institutions. Educational professionals are caught in a quandary, as their role in this market-driven approach could perpetuate a system prioritising economic gains over educational integrity. However, an ethical commitment to caring for students remains an important, albeit diminishing, aspect of higher education (Coate & Rathnayake, 2012). Meanwhile, there is a striking lack of previous research investigating the positioning of international students as immigrants, yet it has become a significant feature of UK higher education. In the next section, I discuss the impact that immigration legislation has on international students before going on to discuss the issue in other countries.

5 Conflicts in Bordering Spaces and the Impact on Students

Borders have transcended their traditional confinement to country entry points, and increasingly, new spaces within society are evolving into zones of bordering practices (Villegas, 2018). Responsibilities thrust upon UK universities by UK government policies result in the "reconstruction of the university as a border space" (Jenkins, 2014, p. 266). Borders are sites of surveillance where individuals are designated as either authorised or unauthorised to enter a specific area (Broeders & Hamshire, 2013). The idea of bordering spaces as places of surveillance is critical in understanding the migrant experience. As borders metaphorically move into the interior aspects of lives, they bring with them the pervasive nature of surveillance. This surveillance is not just a matter of state security; it is a continuous presence that shapes the daily experiences and personal narratives of migrants (Foucault, 2007). It affects how they interact in social settings, alters their sense of belonging, and can have profound implications on their mental health and identity formation.

From the viewpoint of a student, the expanding role of universities in overseeing and managing aspects of student visas results in a confusion of roles between academic institutions and governmental responsibilities. Students find it challenging to discern the boundary between the duties of their university and government authorities. Drawing on interview data from a previous study (Tiernan, 2023), participants raised concerns about the possibility that their universities might have intentionally delayed issuing their CAS, consequently compelling them to opt for and finance expedited visa services. This blurring of lines between the university and the government leads students to doubt and distrust the relationship with their university. Fear around visas and migration issues follows students into their university experiences, leading them to feel like risky individuals who could be considered a threat to their communities. The perception of immigrants as a threat within the UK has been growing (Baker & McEnery, 2005), and this feeling was reinforced by students (Tiernan, 2023). The UK government describes the motivation for student visa rules as employing systems measures to "weed out bogus colleges and students seeking to abuse the student route" (TSO, 2006, p. 32). Policy documents on the rationale for the UK student visa, along with policy guidance for the implementation of the visa rules, are heavily embedded with ideas of risk management (Home Office, 2011, 2021). Furthermore, the language of threat and risk is interwoven throughout government debates and media discussions on international students (Brooks, 2017). This discourse and categorisations by authorities make students feel "like these dirty little things" (Tiernan, 2023, p. 74). The concept of a stranger is relative not just to other individuals but also to boundaries around places and communities (Ahmed, 2000). The act of moving across borders encompasses far more than a physical journey; it is an affective activity laden with emotional and psychological nuances where "bodies stretch and contort as they move across the borders that mark out familiar and strange places" (Ahmed, 2000, p. 92). This stretching and contracting signify the adaptative processes migrants undergo, navigating between the known and the unknown, the familiar and the unfamiliar. Furthermore, with increased emphases on reducing net migration and keeping people out, borders appear more constrained than ever before, where "an ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor leads to greater insecurity and instability." (Giroux, 2005, p. 2).

The financial burden that the visa process imposes on students is significant and represents an under-researched aspect of international student experiences. International students are required to pay tuition fees that are more expensive than those charged to home students. UK student visas also carry a high cost, including the price of the visa application, required TB tests, and healthcare surcharge, and students are often obliged to pay for fast-tracked options to ensure their studies commence on time. In addition to these costs, applicants must also demonstrate the presence of a substantial sum of money in a bank account for 28 days. In a neoliberal political environment, both individuals and states are modelled on modern enterprises. They are expected to behave in a way that maximises their current capital value and enhances their future value through entrepreneurialism, self-investment, and the attraction of investors (Brown, 2015, p. 22). The high cost of tuition fees in the UK has been discussed by many higher education researchers (Tannock, 2013), but none acknowledges the additional financial burden that the student visa process entails. The visa cost constitutes a barrier to UK higher education and, akin to the high tuition fees for international students, keeps an indeterminable number of potential students away from UK universities.

Visas turn into tools for categorising and controlling the movements of international students. They serve as a tangible representation of the invisible boundaries that international students navigate daily, impacting not only their mobility but also their social interactions and identity. Thus, understanding the socio-political implications of visas and bordering practices is crucial in comprehending the broader dynamics of international migration and its effects on individual lives. In the next section, I look beyond the UK and discuss where higher education and immigration legislation have become in other contexts.

6 Looking Beyond the UK and Recommendations for the EHEA

The UK is not the first country to introduce a student visa system that involves responsibilities and activities directed at universities. Australia introduced a novel student visa system in 2012 under its Streamlined Visa Processing (SV) which streamlined the process but also delegated certain monitoring and reporting duties to educational institutions (Australia Government, 2015). This system and further iterations aimed at simplifying the visa application process for genuine students, enhancing the competitiveness of Australia's education sector globally while ensuring compliance with immigration regulations. Within this system, Australian universities are required to play a crucial role in the visa process, from issuing the Confirmation of Enrolment (CoE) necessary for visa applications to monitoring international students' compliance with visa conditions (Australia Government, 2015). The US also introduced an intensified monitoring of international students called the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) in response to immigration concerns following the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Urias & Yeakey, 2008). This system requires universities to collect and report detailed information on international students, challenging their ability to attract and protect the rights of these students amidst stringent security measures and visa regulations (Gopal, 2016).

International student visas and post-study work visas are often designed to increase the number of international students interested in a particular destination. Both Canada and Australia have adjusted their student visa policies in the past in a bid to attract more international students (Gopal, 2016). These visas are often tailored to increase international student interest by providing opportunities for post-graduation work or pathways to permanent residency (Trần et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted international student enrolments in North America, with Canada swiftly adjusting federal policies to support international students and ensure their eligibility for post-graduate work permits, thereby maintaining Canada's attractiveness as a study destination (Buckner et al., 2022).

Within the EU, immigration requirements for international students are set at a national level. However, over the past two decades, the EU has implemented visa policies that facilitate free movement within the EU/Schengen zone. As part of aligning migration controls and eliminating internal borders, Schengen countries have adopted a unified list of nations whose residents must obtain visas to enter the EU/Schengen external borders (Laube, 2019). This harmonisation of the Schengen visa policy has been designed to offer a full-scale standardisation of chances for visa-free travel for non-EU citizens. Yet, the physical border practices of the EU have grown increasingly more repressive, and the possibilities for migrants to access asylum processes have been reduced considerably in the past years (Frelick et al., 2016). Access to the Schengen Area in the EU is strikingly asymmetrically distributed globally, where access to free movement through travel has expanded for citizens of OECD countries while citizens of non-OECD countries have not had the same expansion of privileges (Hansen & Pettersson, 2022).

As European Higher Education Area (EHEA) countries continue to navigate the complex landscape of integrating international students within their higher education systems, several recommendations emerge. These suggestions aim to enhance the experiences of international students while aligning with the broader goals of the EHEA.

1. Reassess immigration responsibilities assigned to universities: In light of the evidence discussed earlier in this chapter, it is crucial for policymakers to understand the implications of entrusting universities with the oversight of student visas. A thorough evaluation of this practice is necessary to mitigate any unintended consequences. It is particularly important to avoid situations where academic staff are required to monitor and report the attendance of international students.
2. Mitigate financial obstacles linked to student visas: In order to foster inclusive and equitable higher education environments, it is essential to minimise the financial disparities between international and domestic students, ensuring that international students are not unduly burdened by additional costs.
3. Harmonise immigration policies in accordance with the Bologna Process: EHEA member states are encouraged to seek greater consistency in their immigration policies affecting international students. As EU student visa requirements currently vary by country, harmonisation could offer a more uniform and stable framework, simplifying the application process for students and providing them with clearer expectations.
4. Simplify visa application procedures: Enhancing the visa application experience for international students is paramount. The complexity and duration of the visa process, as highlighted in recent studies (e.g., Tiernan, 2023), can be overwhelming. Streamlining procedures, ensuring clear guidelines, and maintaining open lines of communication are essential steps towards a more accessible and less stressful process.
5. Invest in research and data collection: A deeper understanding of international students' experiences and outcomes is essential for informed policymaking. EHEA countries should prioritise investment in research and data-gathering efforts to enhance the educational and social climate for international students, thereby enriching their academic journey and overall experience.

These recommendations were formulated in response to the complex challenges identified in the UK, particularly the involvement of UK universities in immigration management. Furthermore, they are designed to assist EHEA countries in fostering a more welcoming, supportive, and enriching environment for international students. Adopting these measures has the potential to substantially improve the quality of higher education throughout Europe, thereby making a valuable contribution to the academic and cultural landscape of EHEA nations.

7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I show how the student visa system in the UK is implemented not only through border agents but also through activities undertaken by UK universities (UKBA, 2011), illustrating how a growing number of non-state actors can become involved in the management of migration control (López-Sala & Godenau, 2022). In this situation, universities face a challenging dichotomy. On the one hand, they are actively engaging in efforts to attract international students by setting up specialised international offices (Deschamps & Lee, 2015), participating in international education fairs (Missaghian & Pizarro Milian, 2019), and employing the services of global education agents (Raimo et al., 2023). On the other hand, they are concurrently involved in the direct administration of student visas which are designed to keep some students out (Home Office, 2021).

Simultaneously and globally, fears of immigration and efforts to reduce migration have profound impacts. Nationalism and a focus on national priorities result in problematic outcomes, such as the rise of nationalist-populist movements, heightened concerns over immigration, assaults on academic liberty, and opposition to integration efforts (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). However, often, perceptions of immigration do not match the actual situation, highlighting the effects of misinformation and fear-mongering on policy discussions (Donadelli et al., 2019). Restrictive policies create fear and uncertainty among immigrants, affecting their well-being and societal cohesion. UK government policies, specifically the requirement for some students to obtain a student visa, along with differentiated rules, are responsible for positioning international students as immigrants. There are several consequences of this. Immigrants are regarded as the ultimate 'foreigners'. They are foreigners in national space, whose behaviour is feared to be unpredictable and beyond control (Ahmed, 2010, p. 36). Due to differentiated visa rules, international students are exposed to structurally different experiences. These experiences play out on students' individual bodies and create racist and 'othering' narratives (Brown & Jones, 2013). As immigrants, international students are affected by two different national regulatory systems: one in their home country and one where they are studying—resulting in ambiguity around students' rights as citizens (Marginson, 2012). There is a tension between how the UK government and UK universities view international students and how international students view themselves through "government policies which construct them as 'not good enough', establishing a binary category which opposes 'the brightest and the best' against undesirable, risky immigrants" (Lomer, 2018 p.13).

Furthermore, academic communities have grown increasingly critical of internationalisation (Brandenburg & de Wit, 2011; Stein, 2019). Detriments of internationalisation are often hidden and may be encountered by those involved in internationalisation through precarious experiences, second-class citizenship, or feelings of displacement (Morley et al., 2019). The attraction of recruiting more international students can be driven by financial goals. However, internationalisation metrics are also important in rankings and promoting a university's reputation.

This chapter aims to reveal the multifaceted ways in which immigration policies and practices related to student visas have become institutionalised within university settings. This institutionalisation, characterised by heightened surveillance, complex administrative procedures, and a market-driven approach, imposes significant emotional and financial burdens on international students as well as on the institution itself. To the author's knowledge, there are no previous studies that compare and contrast the existing and differing immigration rules for non-EU students transiting into the EU. Such research would be a first and integral step in understanding how universities engage with national immigration regulations. As the EHEA continues to evolve, it is imperative to critically re-examine how immigration processes are integrated into educational spaces. Ignoring this crucial dimension risks undermining the foundational principles of the EHEA, perpetuating systems that are discriminatory and exclusionary. This chapter aims to contribute to this vital discourse, offering insights and recommendations that could guide future policies and practices towards a more inclusive and equitable higher education landscape.

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Exploring Academics' Views Regarding Erasmus Teaching Mobility

Elena Marin and Donatella Donato

Abstract Erasmus mobility for teachers has a long history, and although there are studies (Kafarski & Kazak, 2022; Vlad, 2021; Zajadacz et al., 2021) that provide data and information on its impact on the educational community, it is important to follow up on the topic. In general, teaching abroad presents a myriad of advantages for university teachers across the globe, encompassing both personal and professional growth (Enders, 1998; Enders & Teichler, 2005; Kreitz, & Teichler, 1997). This article aims to thoroughly assess the influence of Erasmus mobility on teachers, drawing from the experiences of university teachers at various points in their academic careers. This was accomplished through semi-structured interviews, which delved into the effects on personal and professional development, including adjustments to different educational systems, teaching methods, and curriculum. Additionally, the study examined how this experience altered their teaching philosophies and broadened their global perspectives on education.

Keywords Internationalisation · Higher education · Erasmus programme · Professional development · International professional network

1 Introduction

Higher education institutions around the world are increasingly recognising the importance of internationalisation. Programmes such as Erasmus educational exchanges play a key role in this regard, which is why we believe it is important to delve into the aspects that make this experience effective, as well as its limitations, by listening directly to the voices of some of its protagonists.

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Lourenço (2018) noted that it is important for university teachers to (re)construct knowledge in a collaborative way, and this is the purpose of this teaching exchange: enabling academic staff to teach in foreign countries, fostering cross-cultural understanding and enriching teaching practices. This experience improves, in general, the learning environment, and several related aspects have been investigated both in groups of students and teachers (Breznik & Skrbinjek, 2020; Gonçalves et al., 2022; Reimann et al., 2021). In this article, we will focus on the perceptions, motivations and feelings of teachers who participated in the programme.

In addition, international networks and collaborations are promoted, leading to joint research projects and conferences that transcend country boundaries (Bracht et al., 2006). Overall, the program is instrumental in creating a more globally connected and culturally sensitive academic community that not only broadens academic horizons, but also nurtures a spirit of openness and tolerance (Enders, 1998). Overall, Erasmus educational exchanges significantly influence professional development, provide research opportunities and have exposed academic staff to the observation of different organisational systems, improving their understanding of education, training and youth work practices, policies and systems, boosting the creation of an interconnected, culturally aware and globally engaged academic community.

2 Erasmus Teaching Exchanges as a Cornerstone of Internationalising Higher Education

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has set ambitious goals to foster internationalisation among its member states. A central focus of its work is to foster mobility, encouraging students, faculty and staff to participate in cross-border experiences, both internally and externally. Another major objective is the establishment of dual degree programs facilitating cooperation in EHEA countries. These programs enable students to earn degrees from multiple institutions, fostering deeper international cooperation. In addition, EHEA places great emphasis on maintaining high standards for joint degree programmes, ensuring recognition and credibility across Member States (Bergan & Matei, 2020). International and intercultural perspectives in curriculum and research activities are being pushed to enhance educational outcomes. One important aspect when it comes to international exchanges of teachers is the promotion of inclusion and diversity that is strongly supported, Erasmus programmes offering additional support for teachers with special needs. Therefore, the European Higher Education Area supports international research collaboration, promotes networking, publications and knowledge that foster transfer, change, and development. In addition, the EHEA prioritises the international recognition of academic qualifications, allowing graduates to move within the community (Bergan, 2019).

Higher education worldwide is increasingly recognising the importance of internationalisation.

Overall, academic exchange programmes are fundamental to building a body of people who are highly globally connected and culturally sensitive, attentive to the inherent differences of different contexts and interested in analysing and experiencing first-hand the different educational systems present in different countries.

3 A Short Overview of the Erasmus+ Programme

Erasmus+ is the European Union's programme for education, training, youth, and sport. Since 1 January 2014, it has amalgamated seven previous EU initiatives: Lifelong Learning Programme (Comenius, Erasmus, Leonardo da Vinci, Grundtvig), Youth in Action, Erasmus Mundus, Tempus, Alfa, Edulink, and bilateral collaborations with industrialised countries. For the period between 2021 and 2027, it has a budget of EUR 26.51 billion.

EU Member States engage in the program alongside associated third countries, participating selectively in specific actions. Core themes such as social inclusivity, environmental sustainability, digital advancement, and the encouragement of democratic participation take pivotal roles. Currently, the program is structured around three Key Activities:

1. **Key Action 1**: Promoting individual mobility for the improvement of learning performance and, consequently, career prospects and employability through the acquisition and improvement of some key competencies such as digital skills, foreign languages, intercultural awareness and a more active participation in society.
2. **Key Action 2 (KA2)**: Facilitating cooperation among organisations and institutions to foster innovation and best practices in education, training, and youth sectors. This includes Strategic Partnerships aimed at supporting innovative practices, joint initiatives, mutual learning, and exchange of experiences, and Knowledge Alliances fostering innovation in higher education in collaboration with businesses, promoting new teaching and learning approaches, and modernising higher education systems in Europe.
3. **Key Action 3 (KA3)**: Centred on Policy Reform, aimed at enhancing youth participation in democratic life, particularly in policymaking dialogues, and advancing knowledge in education, training, and youth domains.

Key Action 1 (KA1) aims to promote the mobility of students, staff, youth workers, and young people, encouraging a deeper understanding of other cultures, languages, histories, and traditions. Organisations may plan exchanges or educational, training, and volunteering activities between participating countries, both sending and welcoming students and staff. Specifically, the Erasmus+ Staff Mobility for Training—Europe programme (KA131) accompanies educational development at the various stages of life in support of a more equitable, inclusive society in step with the transformations of the present. It thus contributes to the construction of the European educational area, promotes the quality of teaching and training, the development of key competencies, access to quality education for all, and the development of a European identity through professional development, language learning, the sharing and transfer of best teaching practices (Nixon, 2021). The programme makes grants available for mobility periods at Higher Education Institutions in participating European countries, provided that the home university has signed an inter-institutional agreement with the foreign host institution for the year in question. As far as staff mobility for teaching purposes is concerned, the activity must comprise at least 8 h of teaching per week and may take place in more than one host organisation in the same country, respecting the minimum length of stay.

Considering the diversity of practices currently applied in different universities, international mobility should support the quality of teaching, learning and research practices through knowledge exchange, international networking, and joint projects. As far as the individuals and organisations involved are concerned, mobility should help create an attitude of respect for each other's cultural values and develop academic solidarity (Golovushkina et al., 2021). Not least, intercultural learning should be activated and understood as an experience in which linguistic diversity, identity, motivations, opportunities, circumstances, and reactions are deeply intertwined (Mocanu & Llurda, 2020). International exchange and collaboration allow for the creation of teaching and learning situations in a diverse environment and focus on reflections that allow for rethinking the way of being in the classroom. Therefore, the mobility experience has an important professional spin-off for the improvement of language skills, the development of a sense of initiative, the strengthening of career possibilities, the acquisition of the ability to cooperate with people from different backgrounds and cultures, the broadening of knowledge sharing and transfer, and the appreciation of varied educational systems and approaches (Turnea et al., 2022), but it is above all the personal dimension that makes this experience particularly significant.

It is therefore necessary to explore the impact that contact with the landscape, people, music, literature, food, environment, and that dialogue at the basis of relationships has on us and how all this has a close and stimulating relationship with our educational, training and research. In this paper, we explore through qualitative research the point of view of academics regarding Erasmus educational mobility.

4 The Erasmus Program as Seen Through University Teachers' Perspectives

Erasmus offers an excellent platform for promoting intellectual cooperation among European institutions, according to university professors (Cairns et al., 2018). Teachers can contribute to the global academic community and increase their knowledge base by taking part in cooperative research projects, teaching exchanges, and seminars (Verloop et al., 2001). Additionally, taking part in Erasmus fosters a greater comprehension of various teaching modalities and cultural quirks, boosting instructors' global perspectives and educational approaches (Atabong et al., 2015; Mede &

Tuzun, 2016). By providing opportunities for teachers to pick up new abilities, adjust to different learning situations, and build global networks, this programme also promotes professional growth (Fumasoli & Rossi, 2021; Villegas-Reimers, 2003). Ultimately, university teachers involved in Erasmus play a pivotal role in influencing students by integrating their international experiences into teaching practices, encouraging students to pursue global opportunities, and fostering a more culturally aware learning environment (Asoodar et al., 2017; Biasutti et al., 2021; Pedro & Franco, 2016).

What this chapter tries to bring into discussion is the interaction between the professional and personal growth of university teachers through the Erasmus grants. The starting idea that guides this study relies on the assumption that university teachers travel, meet, build, and rebuild together, creating those tools to enrich not only professional growth but also personal qualities because educating is always an act based on reciprocity, reflecting also on what these different lives have in common. Therefore, the aim is to analyse the relationship between the idea that we have of the quality of the educational process to address contemporary educational challenges and the opportunities for deepening, reflection, and exchange that the journey allows. Another important aspect is to explore what remains in us from these encounters during which we rethink and expand the meaning of our teaching practices, reformulate, when necessary, those principles that guide our daily actions in the classroom, sharing difficulties, positive experiences, and also operational tools.

5 Research Methodology

5.1 Method and Sample

This research relies on semi-structured interviews designed around an interview guide that explores the impact of Erasmus mobility on teachers. It delves into the experiences of university teachers at different stages of their academic journey and the effects on their personal development and professional development, including adjustments to different educational systems, teaching methods, and curriculum. Additionally, the study examined how this experience altered their teaching philosophies and broadened their global perspectives on education. Another focal point was the potential for establishing an international professional network through such experiences, which could lead to future career opportunities, collaborations, and professional growth while simultaneously propelling university teachers on a transformative journey of personal fulfilment and career advancement. Ultimately, this research seeks to closely examine how teaching abroad can have a positive impact on the second-level beneficiaries, such as students/colleagues/the learning institution.

Interviews were conducted, followed by grounded theory analysis, aiming to qualitatively explore the teachers' perspectives on their tenure as Erasmus visiting academics. Qualitative research explores people's personal experiences, perspectives, and behaviours to gain an in-depth understanding of a particular topic. As Morcom (2014) puts it, qualitative research methodology seeks to comprehend the participant's world by immersing the researcher, with all their values and assumptions, into that environment.

The interview guide was developed by the authors, and then two pilot interviews were conducted to pre-test it. Each interview lasted approximately 30 min and was recorded. Subsequently, the interviews were transcribed and analysed collaboratively by the researchers. The analysis followed the framework of Qualitative Content Analysis (Mayring, 2004), which is a cyclical process involving open coding of all interview data. The codes were then organised and iteratively refined into broader categories. The identification of potential codes and the formation of categories were guided by the interview questions and the theoretical foundation of the study. The categories underwent continuous refinement until they adequately represented the data and provided a clear understanding of it. The data was categorised under these five topics: the effects on professional development, including adjustments to different educational systems, teaching methods, and curriculum; the effects on their teaching philosophies and how it helps broaden global perspectives on education; the potential for establishing an international professional network through such experiences, which could lead to future career opportunities, collaborations, and professional growth while simultaneously propelling university teachers on a transformative journey of personal fulfilment and career advancement; the impact on second level beneficiaries such as students/colleagues/the learning institution; the effects of Erasmus exchange in enhancing university teachers‘ personal growth and leading to transformative learning.

Both researchers were involved in every stage of coding and category refinement, ensuring a consistently high agreement rate (above 80%). Final decisions regarding coding and categorisation were made through a search for intersubjective agreement, as outlined by Swanborn (1996).

5.2 Participants

Six professors (five women and one man) were interviewed with a range of 8 to 19 years of teaching experience, working in Spanish and Romanian universities. An open sampling procedure was adopted to recruit the teachers, as we sought to maximise variations in experiences and descriptions by using participants from contrasting backgrounds and environments, as indicated by Hallberg (2006). In line with this author, we wanted to discover and categorise common phenomena among participants from a wide range of contexts. The participating professors taught at four different universities. Some worked at research-oriented universities, and others at applied-oriented universities. Participation in the study was voluntary, and the research protocol was approved by the institutional review board to ensure the protection of human subjects. Although the sample size is limited, it is possible to draw some initial general conclusions, and further research is strongly recommended.

6 Findings and Discussion

6.1 The Effects on Professional Development, Including Adjustments to Different Educational Systems, Teaching Methods, and Curriculum

Participating in the Erasmus Teaching Mobility Program, university teachers undergo a transformative experience that significantly impacts their professional development. This initiative, nestled within the broader Erasmus+ framework, facilitates the exchange of university teachers among European higher education institutions, fostering a range of positive outcomes. The program exposes participants to diverse cultural and educational settings, promoting a broadened perspective and a heightened understanding of varied teaching methodologies and practices, as one interviewer pinpointed:

> In my case, more than learning to use methodologies considered innovative (for which I am already trained in my institution through teacher training courses), the fact of having repeated postings for several years has allowed me to gradually and deeply consolidate my relationship with the host institution and, above all, with the teaching staff of the host institution. This has led me to participate in many classes, not only as a guest lecturer with a "master class" but also as another lecturer who enters into dialogue with the regular lecturer and, between the two, "weaves" a joint class. Having two teachers from the same area and different countries, cultures, languages, and curricula, sharing a classroom in a horizontal dialogue of knowledge, methods, activities … improves learning (improves motivation, effort, processes …) and, therefore, in my opinion, this is innovation. (I1_Es)

University teachers find themselves adapting to different educational systems, conducting a comparative analysis that enhances their teaching skills within diverse academic environments. This exposure inspires the incorporation of innovative and effective teaching methods, as scholars observe and adopt best practices from host institutions, fostering interactive and student-centred approaches. One interviewed professor states:

> In classes at the host institution, I have learned in practice and not just in theory, for example, how to introduce art into training (music, painting, collages …). The host institution shared its facilities with the Academy of Fine Arts which greatly enriched the teaching practice and the possibilities of promoting the creative skills of students and teachers. (I1_Es)

Additionally, the experience encourages the development of interdisciplinary perspectives, leading to the integration of new topics, teaching materials, and assessment methods into their own courses with a specific focus on curriculum adaptation and internationalisation.

> This international exposure often sparks the adoption of innovative teaching approaches within my classes, incorporating novel methods for engaging students, assessing learning outcomes, and structuring courses (…). But mostly, teaching in an international context means for me nurturing a heightened sensitivity to inclusivity and diversity, encouraging me to adapt their methods to cater to a varied student need. (I2-Ro)

When it comes to curriculum adaptation, when teachers participate in Erasmus exchanges, they often bring back new perspectives that can enrich the learning environment in their home institutions due to the raising of cultural awareness that can influence how they interact with students from diverse backgrounds and can help create a more inclusive classroom environment. Also, being exposed to other cultures, both societal cultures and organisational cultures, university teachers may find it appropriate to start classroom discussions encouraging students to think critically about international issues and their interconnectedness. All these changes could be part of the hidden curriculum and also the informal curriculum, providing students with the opportunity to witness activities that transmit unspoken or implicit lessons that go beyond the formal curriculum (Leask, 2015).

Collaborating with colleagues from various academic backgrounds fosters international networking, paving the way for collaborative research projects and joint initiatives. The Erasmus program also plays a pivotal role in building professional relationships and creating opportunities for future academic collaborations and partnerships, as can also be seen from the following extracts from the interviews:

> Interactions with international colleagues may inspire the integration of global perspectives into the curriculum, offering students a broader understanding of the subject matter. The experience might also introduce innovative technologies and tools, encouraging the adoption of interactive digital platforms, virtual reality simulations, and collaborative online resources. (I2_Ro)

Collaboration among university teachers and researchers across diverse backgrounds is integral for fostering innovative pedagogical approaches, addressing shared challenges, and facilitating the dissemination of best practices. Such collaborative endeavours cultivate a rich environment wherein professionals engage in dialogues, exchange insights, and offer assistance during periods of adversity. Amidst the perpetual evolution of society, inter-teacher collaboration assumes heightened significance in confronting forthcoming educational exigencies. For instance, in navigating the ecological transition and surmounting future hurdles, the cultivation of transdisciplinary research is imperative. Moreover, the cultivation of university teachers who are adept at instilling a zeal for knowledge within students is essential for effectively navigating these challenges.

The Erasmus program also plays a pivotal role in building professional relationships and creating opportunities for future academic collaborations and partnerships.

> I consider it important to share experiences and different responses to the same challenges and to keep the relationship between institutions alive. For example, I have also made my Erasmus stay to coincide with the stay of other European working groups with which I participate (or have participated), in order to continue this collaboration and this dialogue so enriching. (I3_Es)

The challenges posed by adapting to new educational environments contribute to personal and professional growth, instilling university teachers with increased confidence, resilience, and adaptability and have an impact on language proficiency, as underlined by one professor who agrees that:

> For me, it is important that it is an opportunity to enhance my language proficiency because I find this as a particularly valuable skill in regions where English may not be the primary language. (I1_Ro)

Apart from the language barrier presented above, university teachers participating in Erasmus teaching assignments signalled that they encountered various other barriers throughout the process. These challenges include cultural adjustment that may also be problematic, with differences in social norms and educational practices potentially leading to feelings of isolation or culture shock. Also, logistical issues, such as securing accommodation and navigating bureaucratic procedures, add complexity to the experience and require careful consideration and planning. Not least, balancing workload between the home and host institutions or managing family and personal obligations can further contribute to the challenges of participating in Erasmus exchanges.

Ultimately, the program provides a global perspective on education, preparing university teachers to navigate an interconnected academic landscape with enriched teaching practices and a heightened awareness of diverse educational systems. Let us read a textual excerpt below:

> Beyond personal growth, what is mostly important for me is the dissemination of newfound best practices with my colleagues, catalysing positive shifts in the educational culture of my institutions. I am convinced that this, in turn, has a ripple effect, and what I mean by this is that is the fact that our initiatives can inspire students through the narratives of their own teachers' global experiences and can empower them to start their own journey to achieve their potential for international education. (I2-Ro)

6.2 The Effects on Their Teaching Philosophies and How It Helps Broaden Global Perspectives on Education

The Erasmus Teaching Scholarship Program supports teaching stays at universities abroad and enables university teachers to overcome current teaching challenges. Teachers engage with diverse student groups to promote cross-cultural understanding and integrative teaching methods and also learn strategies for adapting teaching styles and materials to students from different cultural backgrounds. Through this program, teachers will be able to gain a broader perspective on education, exchange knowledge with colleagues from other countries, and learn best practices in areas such as inclusion and multiculturalism, as one respondent stated:

> The Erasmus teaching scholarships address multiculturalism due to the mix of students with different ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. Inclusivity is addressed by educational practices and sustainability by topics. (I3_Ro)

Also, the Erasmus Program offers university teachers a valuable opportunity to address current educational challenges in terms of digitalisation. Through this program, university teachers will be able to innovate their teaching activities by learning about modern teaching methods, digital tools, and more. Exchanging ideas and best practices with colleagues from different countries who have different approaches to integrating technology into education is also an important key aspect that can contribute to the professional development of teachers.

Another aspect that arose from teachers' interviews was the importance of integrating sustainable practices through their exposure to different education systems that can show, for instance, how sustainability is integrated into curriculum and research in different countries. Adding to this, collaboration with international colleagues can lead to discussions and initiatives focused on sustainable education and practices, as one professor stated:

> For example, I have sometimes made my Erasmus stay to coincide with the stay in the same institution of other European working groups (research, training …) with which I participate (or have participated) on topics such as sustainability, in which there have been debates, conferences, walks around the environment (urban environment, urban design, vegetable gardens, local agriculture …), visits to schools or institutions that were working in this direction, etc. (I2-ES)

Overall, the Erasmus Program is seen as a process through which they can connect, learn, collaborate, and implement new approaches to address evolving challenges in education, and this will have a direct effect on the improvement of their teaching practices according to current educational needs. Dialogue between different realities enriches society and the individual. Thanks to the encounter between perspectives, it is possible to structure common territories of analysis and action. Interconnectedness, interdependence, social justice, and environmental responsibility are dimensions of living that require the employment of transformative and actionable teaching and learning practices that take into account the connection between theory, practice, and context, as one interviewer acknowledges:

> In my opinion, one of the main benefits is the open-mindedness it gives to all those involved. Today's problems, educational and otherwise, are global and require coordinated responses. Overcoming the nation-state makes us rethink international current affairs (political, economic, scientific …) from a supranational viewpoint and the viewpoint of large world regions. A shared European outlook is necessary, and a shared critical outlook is necessary, but without forgetting the necessary respect for diversity (cultural, linguistic, religious …) which enriches us. (I1_Es)

6.3 Enhancing the European Identity Through the Erasmus Programmes

An important question that arises is that of the constituent elements of European identity, which is undoubtedly a political as well as a cultural question and, therefore, a question of educational integration. In fact, the process of building the European

Union as an open, flexible, and multilevel system structured in a complex of supranational institutions has also been able to take place by virtue of a common cultural heritage and shared values. As a colleague shares:

> I believe that the programme makes a significant contribution to raising awareness and bringing European sentiment closer to the construction of the much-desired "European citizenship" because there are many aspects that differentiate us among the countries that make up the Union, but we also share many things, and that is what should prevail in exchanges. (I1_Es)

Alongside other policy measures, fostering the consolidation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Research Area (ERA) is imperative. Additionally, the incorporation of cultural, linguistic, and other forms of diversity significantly enriches the internationalisation process.

6.4 The Potential for Establishing an International Professional Network Through Such Experiences, Which Could Lead to Future Career Opportunities, Collaborations, and Professional Growth While Simultaneously Propelling University Teachers on a Transformative Journey of Personal Fulfilment and Career Advancement

The different experiences show how much the teaching–learning process can improve thanks to comparison and collaboration with other colleagues. Furthermore, there is the possibility of forming partnerships by encouraging collaboration for future projects, developing new theoretical coordinates, rethinking university teaching between innovation and tradition, with a careful eye on structural and psycho-social well-being:

> The Erasmus experience, in relation to the teaching staff, allows them to get to know and, in some cases, to initiate and consolidate common training and research and reflections and debates on education in different contexts. (I1_Es)

The Erasmus program plays a fundamental role in structuring networks and partnerships between educational institutions across Europe. Through the exchange of university teachers, direct interaction and the exchange of good practices are promoted, allowing the creation of personal bonds and the sharing of pedagogical skills, as some interviewers underlined:

> The Erasmus scholarship programme, as I see it, acts as a catalyst for building strong networks and partnerships between educational institutions across Europe, contributing to a more integrated and interconnected European educational landscape. (I1_Ro)

> Thanks to this experience, it was possible to create spaces for exchange and reflection with other colleagues. This offers the opportunity to form international working groups and participate in projects where synergies are channelled towards topics of common interest.

> In my case, the Erasmus experience made me see the need for what has been and continues to be my priority research area, linked to the development of the mathematics curriculum in early childhood, in particular from 0 to 3 years. I was thus able to develop my interest by comparing different educational systems and observing and analysing practices to initiate mathematical thinking. (I2_Es)

As presented above, the Erasmus exchange programme can facilitate the establishment of platforms for dialogue and introspection among peers. Such avenues afford the prospect of forging international collaborative networks and engaging in initiatives directed towards shared thematic concerns.

Therefore, it is possible to organise moments of discussion on multidimensional teaching and educational interventions, to structure activities and practices with the aim of facilitating conversation and interactions between colleagues, universities and institutions, as an interviewee pointed out:

> It allowed me, together with other teachers from my institution and several teachers from the host institution, to form a working and research group that led us to compare relevant aspects of the training given in our area in both countries with a view to reflection and improvement. This later resulted in several joint publications and lectures given at conferences, seminars, and workshops. (I1_Es)

6.5 *The Impact on Second-Level Beneficiaries Such as Students/Colleagues/The Learning Institution*

An important contribution to the international approach to education is the interaction between students and university professors from different countries who can get to know each other, explore the advantages of intercultural learning as a possibility to enrich their own point of view on contents, perspectives, and prospects regarding the training paths of teachers and students. Overall, this experience of exchange and dialogue can constitute a powerful tool for implementing significant intercultural training courses, bridging cultural divisions, and promoting mutual respect and dialogue, as an interviewed teacher testifies:

> The Erasmus scholarship fosters cross-cultural exchange and understanding in profound ways. During my time abroad, I had the privilege of interacting with students and colleagues from diverse cultural backgrounds. These interactions provided a platform for meaningful discussions and the sharing of perspectives on various academic and societal issues. One memorable moment was when my students and I organised a cultural exchange event showcasing traditions, cuisine, and art from our respective countries. (I2-Ro)

6.6 The Effects of Erasmus Exchange in Enhancing University Teachers' Personal Growth and Leading to Transformative Learning

The Erasmus scholarship serves as a powerful catalyst for cross-cultural exchange and mutual understanding among university professors and students. By offering the opportunity to teach or study in a foreign country, it immerses participants in a new cultural milieu, exposing them to different customs, traditions, and ways of life as one respondent recalled:

> moreover, the linguistic diversity inherent in this experience facilitates language acquisition, enhancing both communication skills and cultural appreciation. Interacting with a foreign educational system provides a unique vantage point for comparing teaching methodologies, assessment approaches, and academic expectations. This engagement fosters cultural sensitivity and empathy, nurturing a deeper appreciation for the diverse perspectives that shape individuals' experiences. (I1-Ro)

In many views, one of the primary long-term benefits of the Erasmus teaching scholarship for the broader educational community, such as students, colleagues, the university as a learning organisation, is the cultivation of open-mindedness among all involved parties. Contemporary issues, especially in education and other domains, have a global scope, necessitating coordinated solutions. By transcending national boundaries, there is a re-evaluation of international current affairs through a more global perspective, having as a final goal creating a shared European outlook and a collective critical approach while maintaining a deep respect for the diverse cultural, linguistic, and religious elements that contribute to our enrichment, as one respondent remarked:

> In my opinion, one of the main benefits is the open-mindedness it gives to all those involved. Today's problems (educational and otherwise) are global and require coordinated responses. Overcoming the nation-state makes us rethink international current affairs (political, economic, scientific …) from a supranational viewpoint and the viewpoint of large world regions. We need a shared European outlook and a shared critical outlook, but without forgetting the necessary respect for the diversity (cultural, linguistic, religious …) that enriches us. (I3_Es)

We can conclude that the Erasmus scholarship is therefore a useful learning and exchange experience with a view to continuous training and active citizenship.

7 Conclusions and Implications

This study is intended to be an invitation to continue networking, meet to start a common process of investigation, discovery, creation, self-reflection, and self-evaluation which are the basis of knowledge. The main objective was to share the views of some colleagues who participated in the Erasmus scholarship programme, and a very positive picture of the experiences presented emerged. At this point, therefore, we can hope for an ever-greater promotion of training courses, with a view to consolidating the European area of higher education and research.

In terms of internationalisation of EHEA countries, the interest in facilitating Erasmus teaching exchanges is visible through supporting transnational mobility of university teachers, whose aims are to enrich pedagogical methodologies with diverse perspectives, promoting intercultural understanding and respect for different educational paradigms. These exchanges act as conduits for pedagogical innovation, facilitating the sharing of best practices and the development of international scholarly networks.

One first aspect that this research emphasises is related to the possibility of establishing an international professional network, which, in many cases, boosts future career opportunities, collaborations, and professional growth and, at the same time, pushes university professors on a transformative journey of personal fulfilment and career advancement. This view goes hand in hand with Janson et al.'s (2009) findings that state that it is essential to establish an international professional network that can enhance future career opportunities, collaborations, and professional growth.

Also, promoting cultural and knowledge exchange, the acquisition of new theoretical, linguistic, practical and relational expertise has an important impact on second-level beneficiaries, students and the entire educational community, as pinpointed in this study but also underlined in other studies such as Kuhn (2012) that concurs with the idea that the promotion of cultural and knowledge exchange, coupled with acquiring new theoretical, linguistic, practical, and relational expertise, holds considerable significance for secondary beneficiaries like students and the broader educational community.

The point that exchange motivates, dynamizes, generates change, produces openness, and is therefore an opportunity for the advancement of an education that aspires to a more supportive, just, and equitable society is another topic that has been greatly brought into discussion by respondents. In his studies, Ball et al. (2017) acknowledges that engagement in exchanges sparks motivation, dynamism and instigates change, fostering openness. It serves as a gateway to advancing an educational system that aims for a more nurturing, fair, and equitable society. However, the effects of the Erasmus exchange are seen also in the enhancement of university teachers' personal growth because travelling and meeting new cultures can be a stimulating personal experience for creativity and curiosity, reflection, and self-evaluation.

Erasmus teaching mobility can be seen as a catalyst for change as we will increasingly be faced with a series of major challenges. These include the defence and increase in the quality of democracy, the conscious use of rapidly evolving digital technologies, the adoption of the lifestyle and care of the landscape necessary to ensure the good liveability of the planet for us, for other species, and future generations. Dialogue, interchange, and mutual acquaintance, which are at the basis of the Erasmus programmes, are actions that allow us to broaden the spaces for research and reflection, personal growth, and professional training (Murugova et al., 2019).

Lastly, the study delves into the personal and professional growth experienced by participants, highlighting the transformative aspects of the Erasmus scholarship program. It emphasises the program's role in broadening pedagogical horizons, fostering cultural sensitivity, and enabling unexpected opportunities for research collaboration and personal development.

In envisioning future steps for Erasmus teacher exchanges, several key directions emerge to enhance the program's efficacy and accessibility. Firstly, the integration of virtual mobility presents a promising avenue, using digital platforms to facilitate exchanges without physical relocation, thereby broadening the participation of those for whom physical mobility poses challenges and reducing logistical barriers. Secondly, a stronger emphasis on digital skills is crucial, reflecting the evolving educational landscape's demand for digital literacy and proficiency among teachers, equipping them to effectively navigate and utilise digital tools in their teaching practices. Also, forging global-scale partnerships expands opportunities for collaboration beyond European borders, fostering cross-cultural exchange and enriching pedagogical approaches through diverse perspectives. Furthermore, enabling flexible mobility models offers adaptable options tailored to teachers' diverse needs, including blended mobility combining physical and virtual elements and part-time mobility to accommodate concurrent commitments, promoting greater flexibility and inclusivity. Another key aspect that can be seen as a future step for Erasmus teachers' exchanges is to influence formal curricula. And by this, we refer to integrating the insights, methodologies, and perspectives gained during Erasmus teaching assignments into the formal curricula of participating institutions. At this level, Erasmus-experienced teachers can enrich the content and delivery of courses within their home institutions while enhancing the quality of education through the promotion of internationalisation and cross-cultural understanding. Lastly, prioritising Enhanced Support Services, such as improved access to language training, comprehensive cultural orientation programs, and streamlined assistance with administrative processes, enhances the overall experience, ensuring teachers are well-equipped and supported throughout their Erasmus exchanges. These strategic advancements collectively aim to optimise the impact and accessibility of Erasmus teacher exchanges in an increasingly interconnected and digitalised world.

Overall, the study could be seen as a comprehensive overview of the diverse and far-reaching impact of the Erasmus teaching scholarship program firstly on students who may be exposed to a more internationalised curriculum as a result of teachers' Erasmus exchanges, but also it has an impact on university teachers, institutions, and the wider educational community, showcasing its contributions to fostering a globally-oriented, innovative, and inclusive educational environment.

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The European Universities Initiative (EUI): Accomplishments and Challenges

Andrew Gunn

Abstract Launched by the European Commission in 2018, The European Universities Initiative (EUI) now stands at a more mature stage in its development. This provides an opportunity to acknowledge the accomplishments of the EUI, as well as consider the challenges facing the initiative. This chapter explores the incremental implementation of the EUI through five rounds of expansion alongside the need to consolidate the alliances created to ensure they have a sustainable future. Following this, it considers how the network of networks structure—a series of self-contained, unique alliances developed using a bottom-up approach, which are united through their membership of a top-down strategic scheme with common overarching aims and objectives—adopted for the EUI has worked in practice and continues to evolve. The achievements of the EUI are then considered by the three missions of the university: teaching, research, and externally orientated. This reveals how the alliances have delivered a wide range of activities that align with the original ambitions of the scheme, such as seamless and virtual mobility and the commitment to 'a challenge approach'—where education and research respond to real-world challenges. Progress has also been made on the complex issues of the European degree and a legal identity of the alliances. However, as the chapter notes, it will take time for the full impact of the EUI to be known. Moreover, the long-term financial sustainability of all the alliances created by the EUI remains in question.

Keywords European University Initiative (EUI) · European degree · Co-tutelle model · Micro-credentials · Virtual mobility

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1 Introduction

The impetus for the European Universities Initiative (EUI) came from a speech by French President Emmanuel Macron in 2017 calling for the creation of "European Universities—a network of universities across Europe" (Macron, 2017). This ambition was realised by swift policy action on the part of EU institutions, resulting in the first funding call being announced in 2018 (For the background story of the EUI, see Gunn, 2020). The European Commission billed the EUI as an "unparalleled initiative" (EU Commission, 2018, p. 125) requiring "a quantum leap in cooperation between all types of higher education institutions from all regions in Europe" (ibid.) with the mandate of achieving two objectives: first, promoting common European values and strengthening European identity, and second, triggering "a substantial leap in quality, performance, attractiveness and international competitiveness of European higher education" (ibid.).

The EUI, and the alliances it has fostered, now stand at a more mature stage of their evolution. This provides an opportune moment to revisit and reflect on some of the issues set out in Gunn (2020) considering four years of developments. This paper seeks to take stock of the EUI, primarily through a review of academic literature and policy documents, supplemented by sources such as news reports, reputable blog entries, and press releases. It is set out as follows: Sect. 1 considers the incremental implementation of the EUI and its future trajectory. Section 2 analyses the benefits of the 'network of networks' structure and how it continues to evolve. Section 3 illustrates some of the activities of the EUI alliances by the three missions of the university. A final section provides a conclusion addressing some of the challenges that lie ahead.

1.1 Policy Learning Through an Expansion in Five Acts

The first EUI call, also known as the pilot, produced 17 alliances in 2018, which became operational in 2019. Subsequent calls in 2020, 2022 and 2023 saw the number of alliances increase to 41, 44 and 50, respectively. A fifth round of expansion took place in 2024. The volume of submissions to the various calls shows the initial enthusiasm towards the EUI did not diminish. Lambrechts et al. (2024) observe that "*the uptake* of the EUI has been considerable, with several hundreds of HEIs [Higher Education Institutions] from across Europe working together to prepare submissions for the scheme—some resubmitting to a later call if not initially successful" (p. xx).

This incremental rollout across a time frame of several years has shaped the nature of alliances. The multiple rounds of essentially the same schemes allowed for policy learning on the part of both the Commission and the higher education sector. Cino Pagliarello (2022) identifies a clear example of policy learning on the part of the Commission with it "changing its approach to higher education by acting as a policy developer for the actors of the alliances, with funding becoming one of the key mechanisms for enhancing joint cooperation" (Cino Pagliarello, 2022, p. 159). Here, the Commission was able to combine its "ideational, organisational and financial 'power of the purse'" (ibid.). Moreover, in nurturing the EUI, Cino Pagliarello (2022) notes the political entrepreneurship of the Commission and how it provides both "soft coordination and funding support" (p. 150).

We can also see policy learning on the part of the actors and organisations who constituted potential members of prospective alliances. This is evident in how submissions in later funding calls learnt from the experiences of earlier ones. Moreover, the multiple funding rounds enabled repeat attempts with revisions from alliance bids that were unsuccessful in the first-time round. This process provided opportunities for benchmarking and feedback learning. The prolonged timescale across numerous rounds also allowed those developing new alliance bids to see not only what had been funded but also what worked in practice.

We can see some policy entrepreneurship on the part of the actors responding to the calls. Institutions, and key players within them, sought out partners and novel alliance forms. This involved coalescing universities around a theme and obtaining agreements for future collaboration. These alliance-building entrepreneurs align with an early definition of policy entrepreneurs by Kingdon (1984) in how they invested their "resources—time, energy, reputation, and sometimes money—in the hope of a future return" (Kingdon, 1984, p. 122). We can see how alliance-building entrepreneurs exploited opportunities and worked with others to deliver what they could not achieve working alone, another attribute of policy entrepreneurship (Gunn, 2017). On this basis, we can argue the EUI would have looked very different if it had been introduced through one funding call or across a shorter time frame with fewer calls. The incremental implementation has been a crucial factor in the rollout of the EUI and, in part, accounts for its current character and form.

1.2 Reviewing the EUI

To ensure the EUI was delivering its objectives, the EU commissioned research into its achievements and performance. A key example is the January 2023 report entitled *The European Universities Initiative: First lessons, main challenges and perspectives*, requested by the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education (Craciun et al., 2023).

This report showed the selection process had been effective. How alliances had been selected for the EUI complied with the objectives of the funder, meaning that the HEIs that were selected had the relevant operational capacity and resources to deliver the intended "innovative model of transnational cooperation at the institutional level" (Craciun et al., 2023, p. 7). However, this did result in a process that "initially favoured older, larger, comprehensive universities because these institutions had experience in managing international collaborations and could comply with the list of criteria and expected impacts" (ibid.). Moreover, the need for each alliance to feature members from at least three EU countries was effective in ensuring the desired geographical balance of the EUI so the scheme could contribute to European integration. In this respect, the EUI was largely on track.

However, the report by Craciun et al. (2023) also flagged some problems to the European Parliament. Most notably, the "current model of operation of the alliances is unsustainable and the alliances face serious obstacles in realising the ambitions of the EUI" (p. 8). This statement rests on the fact that "funding from the EUI does not cover actual transaction costs and the options to use other funds are unclear. Transaction costs are unnecessarily high due to incompatible regulatory frameworks" (ibid.). Based on these factors, the report signals that "alliances face serious obstacles in realising the ambitions of the EUI. The challenges include finding an appropriate governance structure, ensuring long-term funding, having clarity about awarding credits and degrees, and removing the legal and administrative barriers" (ibid.). Several of these issues are revisited in later sections of this chapter.

1.3 Between Expansion and Consolidation

In January 2022, the Commission displayed their continued commitment to the EUI, noting it to be "a vivid example of deep institutional transnational cooperation" (European Commission, 2022 p. 7). Further expansion was also confirmed, with the Commission announcing they wished to see "60 European Universities with more than 500 universities by mid-2024" (ibid., p. 10).

The EUI continued to grow with the addition of new alliances as well as renewed funding for existing players; in 2022, 16 out of the 17 original alliances obtained follow-up funding. The EUI was now to be at a larger scale than many commentators envisaged. President Macron, in his speech at the Sorbonne University in September 2017, said "I believe we should create European Universities. … We should set for ourselves the goal of creating at least 20 of them by 2024" (Macron, 2017). The expansion to 60 alliances meant there would be three times more than President Macron's initial ambition.

The continued growth of the EUI raises the issue of balancing expansion with consolidation. Phelan and Claeys-Kulik (2022) argue: "Expansion and consolidation are both tools that should ultimately serve the overall academic vision. Choosing which of these is most appropriate at which stage is an important strategic question for alliances" (n.p.).

The expansion of the EUI to 60 alliances needs to be juxtaposed with the challenges alliances face in consolidating their activities, the largest challenge being obtaining sufficient funding from a limited number of sources.

In a report on EUI funding streams, Jongbloed et al. (2022) flagged their long-term financial sustainability, noting the "full cost of the alliance's activities exceeds the combined support from EU and national sources, the difference being covered by HEIs own resources" (p. vii). Moreover, Craciun et al. (2023) report that alliances are struggling "to ensure funding sustainability in the long-term" (p. 47) and that to "secure financial stability after EU funding has stopped, alliances have been encouraged to develop sustainable business models" (ibid.).

The issue of financial sustainability is not merely being highlighted in reports; rather, it is articulated by the alliances themselves (Magee, 2023). On the 8th March 2022, all the 41 EUI alliances operating at that time issued a joint statement calling "on the Member States to urgently support the establishment of holistic and sustainable long-term funding to deepen transnational cooperation of European University alliances across all their missions in a coherent way" (Alliances Joint Statement, 2023, n.p.). The alliances wished to move on from a "short-term project approach" (ibid.) to future-proof their activities. Sustainability would require a "long-term funding instrument" (ibid.). that would integrate all university's missions and combine resources from different streams (such as Erasmus+, Horizon, nation state funding, etc.). The alliances spoke with one united voice again, on 29th September 2023, issuing another joint statement renewing their message of March 2022 and requesting funding should have a "clear vision for a long-term and holistic financial sustainable future" (ibid.).

Some may argue this situation indicates that money is being spread widely but too thinly, i.e., a breadth versus depth issue. This is where a smaller number of alliances with more funding would be more desirable. Others may argue that EU funding was only ever intended to initiate the alliances, not to fund them forever. In this case, the EU were only providing 'training wheels'—a government intervention that is provided for a finite period to nurture a new policy initiative. Here financial support is provided to 'kickstart' an 'infant industry' and get it operational. Then, when sufficiently developed, government funding is withdrawn (in other words, the training wheels are removed) (The Economist, 2015). A problem arises at this point if some, or even all, of the new industry cannot operate without government subsidies. The point at which the training wheels are removed is a key concern for alliances as their future remains uncertain.

2 The Network of Networks in Practice

Gunn (2020) described the model adopted for the EUI as being:

> a unique structure of alliances which can be described as a 'network of networks'—a series of self-contained, unique alliances developed using a bottom-up approach, which are united through their membership of a top-down strategic scheme with common overarching aims and objectives. This is a novel organisational form for a university alliance, as it differs from established multilateral structures. (p. 18)

The network of networks structure is depicted in Fig. 1.

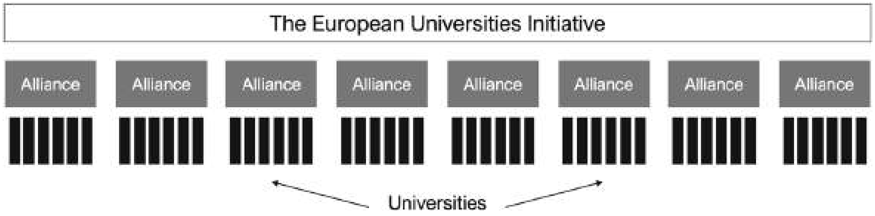

Fig. 1 The network of networks

2.1 Benefits of the Network of Networks

After several rounds of expansion, we can conclude this structure has served the EUI well, with research revealing the benefits derived from the ‘top-down’ meets ‘bottom-up’ hybrid nature of the network of networks model. For example, Frame and Curyło (2024) talk of the “bottom-up adoption of ‘Everyday Europeanhood’” and see the EUI as being “in phase with bottom-up ‘everyday’ processes of identity development”. This, the authors argue, contrasts with “previous top-down European initiatives designed to symbolically reinforce a sense of shared European identity” (ibid.). It is the space for freedom and creativity within the bottom-up part of the network of networks structure that enables the EUI to nurture European identity in this way. As Frame and Curyło (2024) note:

> setting up a ‘European University’ requires an unprecedented level of bottom-up actions.... These factors thus create a ‘new quality’ not only in the realm of the Higher Education Area in Europe but also in terms of giving a new impulse to bottom-up *everyday* processes of developing European identity. (p. 336–7)

The network of networks model has enabled the bottom-up expression of European identity, including multiple European identities across numerous alliances, all under a common European umbrella, that is, the EUI. It has, therefore, facilitated the scheme in delivering one of the two objectives mandated to the EUI at launch: “a strengthened European identity” (EU Commission, 2018, p. 125).

The value of the network of networks approach can also be seen in the research findings of Cino Pagliarello (2022) on the ‘governance architectures’ of the EUI. Here we can see how the alliances within the EUI “include policy goals and strategies that emphasise a certain set of ideas and priorities” (Cino Pagliarello, 2022, p. 156)—this is the ‘top-down’ aspect. Sophie Beernaerts, head of Erasmus+ at the European Education and Culture Executive Agency, said: “We give you the frame—it’s up to you to design the European Universities” (quoted in ibid.). Cino Pagliarello (2022) argues that “the Commission is advancing a shared discourse that is based on common problems that require common solutions, with the EU level presenting itself as the appropriate arena for hosting it” (p. 156). This is evident in how the “‘European’ leitmotiv of overarching integration is often stated in the mission statements of the different alliances” (ibid.). Alongside this, “the alliances are also characterised by heterogeneous actors’ constellations” (ibid.)—this is the variety and inclusiveness created by the 'bottom-up' aspect. This has resulted in alliances including "high-ranking and elite universities and many regional and smaller universities, thus providing much broader participation" (ibid.). The network of networks appears to have been effective in organising the activities of the EUI. The dynamics and component parts within this structure continue to evolve, as considered below.

2.2 The Alliances and Their Members

The network of networks model would not have worked without the grassroots enthusiasm on the part of universities to respond to the calls for EUI funding through seeking partners and developing distinctive proposals for new alliances. Here, as Lambrechts et al. (2024) note, universities were motivated by the "tangible resources available now and in the future" and "not less important is the competition for intangible resources—access to policymakers and a 'place at the table' when decisions about the future of European HE are made, but also status and social recognition" (p. xx). The opportunity to join not just an alliance but one that is part of a wider European scheme was, therefore, part of the attraction.

This also explains the interest in the EUI among existing alliances in the European higher education space. Research into the EUI by Stensaker et al. (2023) found that "the alliance formation process was strongly influenced by previous partnerships, networks, and institutional connections of the participating universities" (p. 234). However, the study notes "this does not imply that these new alliances are merely an extension of already existing networks and shared activities—new partners and areas for collaboration have been introduced" (ibid., p. 236).

Once an alliance is operational, its ability to deliver the desired transformational change rests on the willingness of members to work together. As is explained in Sect. 3, there are examples of universities pooling resources, sharing ideas, and developing joint provisions. All these activities contribute to making each alliance a more substantial entity; however, some alliances have sought to go beyond this. For example, in September 2023, the ten rectors representing the universities of the EUTOPIA Alliance signed the Statutes of EUTOPIA, thereby establishing the alliance into an international legal entity under Belgian law, thus granting it legal existence and administrative autonomy (EUTOPIA, 2023). This move displays the high level of commitment the members have towards alliance membership and provides a firm legal basis for more substantial future collaboration.

At the level of individual universities, greater collaboration across an alliance can produce harmonisation among its members. Some speculate this is a pathway to university mergers. However, we should note there is a difference between a university aligning with others in an alliance that has its own legal status and a university entering a full-scale merger with several other universities. The latter being complex and resulting in a potential loss of autonomy and identity for member universities. In future, we may see some tension between further alliance-level collaboration and member autonomy.

It is also worth acknowledging the potential longevity of each alliance. Research on the EUI by Maassen et al. (2023) produced four dimensions—organisational coordination, mechanisms for conflict resolution, commitment from the membership, shared norms and values—which shape the features of alliances and their long-term persistence. In this study, Maassen et al. (2023) note that "many of the selected European university alliances have been set up after the EUI call by the EC [European Commission], there is a risk that the commitment to engage in the alliance will be reduced if the EC funding stops" (p. 959). This highlights the issue of sustainable funding, as considered in Sect. 1.3. It is possible to see the number of alliances within the EUI scheme, after years of expansion, start to contract. For example, one alliance funded in the first round did not receive subsequent funding from the Commission and, looking to a longer time frame, not all the alliances created may survive, at least not in their current form.

2.3 *The EUI and the Governance Context*

The overarching network of the EUI is not a single legal entity. However, it can be viewed as one network, as all the alliances that are the result of EUI funding share common characteristics. This is evident in the European nature of the alliances and the importance they placed on the main features of the EUI scheme. A key feature being the challenge-based approach where students, academics, and external actors collaborate to address real-world other challenges in a multi-disciplinary way. We can see how the required attributes of alliances set by the Commission, which informed the selection criteria which proposed alliances needed meet to be selected for funding, have now been carried over into practice. For example, research by Marques and Graf (2024) finds the "challenge-based approach" permeates the rationale of the entire partnerships' population, not only seen in the conception and designing of the curriculum, … but also in the research and third missions of universities" (p. xx). Furthermore, a study of EUI alliance mission statements by Hartzell et al. (2023) revealed alliances "displayed fairly homogeneous statements around the EU identity in terms of values and multilingualism; cooperation within the alliance and the region; competition relating to the individual and globally, and the EU degree in terms of mobility and pedagogy" (p. 252). Moreover, many alliances are proud to badge their funded European University credentials, and there are occasions where alliances work together, such as when calling for more funding (as in Sect. 1.3) or piloting models for the European Degree (see Sect. 3.1).

From the pilot stage onwards, EUI policy activity remained focused on nurturing new alliances. However, this changed in 2023 when the European Commission decided to turn its attention to strengthening the overarching network. A funding call was opened inviting proposals to create "a Community of Practice of European Universities alliances" (EACEA, 2023, p. 5). The intention being to facilitate the sharing of best practices and experiences within the EUI community and "support closer cooperation between the alliances by facilitating learning, collaboration, and dissemination of results" (ibid., p. 8). The Community of Practice would be a hub for sharing knowledge on academic, pedagogical, and administrative matters as well as housing "a knowledge repository where members can contribute and access valuable resources" (ibid., p. 10). This was with the aim of "ensuring closer cooperation between the existing and future European Universities alliances" (ibid., p. 9). Moreover, the Community of Practice provides direct input into the services of the Commission, enabling it to flag possible solutions to challenges encountered by the alliances. The Community of Practice has the potential to make the central network in the network of networks structure more substantial, thus making the whole EUI more connected and cohesive as one scheme.

We also need to consider the regulatory governance context within which the network of networks structure operates. Some of the challenges the EUI experiences emanate from a familiar set of issues which arise from running a pan-European scheme across nations with different rules and funding arrangements. For example, how a group of universities can come together to form an organisation with its own legal personality varies considerably between nation states (see EC2U, 2023). Some of these governance issues may be resolved within individual nation states, whereas others may require new European-level solutions. However, delivering Europe-wide change will be a challenge as higher education remains primarily a member-state competence.

The report by Craciun et al. (2023) finds "more coordination is needed to develop a coherent regulatory framework" to realise the EUIs' ambitions across "higher education, research, innovation and community engagement" (p. 7). Here, a pressing issue is the absence of the European statute. The European Commission (2022) addressed this in January 2022 when they confirmed "work towards a legal statute for alliances of universities" would be forthcoming.

The absence of such a statute is often cited as a barrier to harmonious interactions—such as the desired 'seamless mobility' between universities achieving substantive collaboration. For example, eight members of the Una Europa alliance developed a bachelor programme in European studies that spoke directly to the European nature of the EUI. The new joint degree involves the study of the "fundamental aspects and values of the European Union, as well as European states and societies, in a multilingual environment" (Una Europa, 2022a, n.p.). Una Europa partners sought to build a "fully integrated curricula and jointly award the degrees. In practice, this means that on successful completion of their studies, students will receive one single degree document that is officially recognised by the countries in which the Una Europa partners are active" (Una Europa, 2022b, n.p.). However, at launch, owing to legal and administrative barriers, only four of its 11 members could award the new joint degree (Naujokaitytė, 2022).

We can see the Commission acknowledging and seeking to address the issue, where they saw a statute as enabling universities:

> to mutualise their strengths together, make common strategic decisions, act together with a legal personality, and facilitate pooling together resources, activities and data. Such statute would facilitate deeper, long-term and flexible transnational cooperation, allowing the sharing of capacities, exchange of staff and the implementation of joint programmes,

> with the aim to award at the level of the alliance joint degrees, including a joint European degree. (European Commission, 2022, n.p.).

The regulatory context within which the alliances, and their community of practice, operate appears to require reform. How this is undertaken may determine EUI's ability to deliver transformative change. The European Degree is an example of a new European solution, as considered in Sect. 3.1.

3 Activities by Mission

Alliance membership yields benefits for members and some illustrations of these are introduced below, broken down by the three missions of the university: teaching, research, and the third external-facing mission.

3.1 Teaching

A majority of the activities that take place within alliances fall within the teaching mission of the university. Achievements include the co-creation of new services for students (ECIU, 2024) and developing alliance-level quality assurance (QA) through the *EUniQ project—Developing a European approach for comprehensive QA of European University networks* (Frederiks et al., 2023). As introduced above, a key theme of EUI is the challenge-based approach. In education, this typically involves interdisciplinary and problem-based learning which is applied to real examples (see Gallagher & Savage, 2023 for an overview of challenge-based learning). Studies have emerged showing how the challenge-based approach has manifested itself in the education provision within alliances (see Daunorienė & Ellinger, 2023; Loohuis & Chapel, 2021; Martínez & Crusat, 2020, for example).

Challenge-based education requires that there is a scope for innovation in teaching and learning. Evidence of this can be found in Craciun et al. (2023) who find universities perceive alliance participation "as an opportunity to innovate education, increase the attractiveness and quality of their educational offers, and improve transnational collaboration. Activities foster mutual learning, sharing best practices and experiencing new educational approaches" (p.8).

Another important teaching issue is the use of online delivery. Perhaps the most serendipitous feature of the EUI was the use of virtual mobility long before pandemic lockdowns and border closures were imposed. The original EUI calls placed great importance on 'embedded mobility' where at "least 50% of the students within the alliance should benefit from such mobility, be it physical, virtual or blended" (EU Commission, 2018, p. 126), and this is reflected in the operations of the new alliances. This was fortuitous, considering the early years of the EUI took place alongside the Covid-19 pandemic.

This issue of strengthening university resilience was identified by the Craciun et al. (2023) report, which finds: "being part of an alliance increases institutional resilience in times of crisis. This is done for instance by developing and sharing good practices and measures" (p. 43) and how the pandemic forced alliances "to develop new forms of blended mobility. These new forms are more inclusive, fit better to regular programmes and thus attract a larger student population" (ibid., p. 8).

A further teaching mission issue is the development of the European Degree. Alliances had reported the absence of such a formal qualification was hampering collaboration (Craciun et al., 2023, p. 68–9). In March 2023, the Commission published the report *The road towards a possible joint European Degree* (Burneikaite et al., 2022). This set out two potential ways forward: one, a joint European Degree "as a label" and two, a joint degree "based on common European criteria" This could be done in a way where the former facilitates the implementation of the latter (Burneikaite et al., 2022). Following this, ten pilot projects were funded, involving the participation of higher education institutions from 21 EUI alliances (EU Commission, 2023). Here, groups of alliances formed consortia to develop practical ways forward for a European degree. For example, Una Europa, 4EU+, CHARM-EU, EC2U, EU-CONEXUS and Unite! worked together to form ED-AFFICHE (Una Europa, 2023). Meanwhile, CIVIS, EUTOPIA, NEUROTECHEU, and UNITA collaborated on a project called SMARTT (acronym for Screening, Mapping, Analysing, Recommending, Transferring, and Transforming higher education international programmes). Testing criteria were developed for a pilot one central joint degree programme delivered by four CIVIS universities. This was followed by an extended testing phase of over 50 joint, multiple, double degree programmes and micro-credentials delivered across consortium (CIVIS, 2023). These pilots were notable for two reasons: first, in how they addressed the practicality of the European degree; second, in how these consortia provided an additional dynamic of collaboration, both within and between alliances, driving the EUI agenda through new forms of EUI collaborative efforts.

These activities went onto inform the *Blueprint for a European degree* which was published by the European Commission in March 2024. This provides the basis for delivering a new type of degree which is recognised across the EU to be awarded jointly and on a voluntary basis by universities based on a common set of criteria (European Commission, 2024). Following the publication of the blueprint, the consortium projects continued to be engaged with the process. For example, ED-AFFICHE welcomed the blueprint but cautioned that "significant questions remain over how the Commission will take up and support the collaboration," and it is also "unclear how the knowledge and expertise gained through these projects will be utilised and implemented moving forward" (Charm, 2024, n.p.). This highlights the continued complexity surrounding the creation of the European degree.

Another teaching activity is the shorter and more flexible form of learning that are micro-credentials. This is an area of growing importance, reflected in the fact that in June 2022, the Council of the European Union (2022) adopted a *Recommendation* *on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability.* Some EUI alliances have had success in this area. For example, the ECIU University alliance was the first to issue "e-sealed micro-credentials". The alliance developed their own centralised platform, called *Engage*, to streamline the process of issuing "non-forgeable and tamper-proof micro-credentials that meet European standards for digital credentials" (ECIU, 2023, n.p.). These short, industry and society-relevant courses are credit-bearing, with their quality assured by alliance members. Responding to the need for alliances to diversify their income streams, Jongbloed et al. (2022) present "fees for online and blended micro-credential certificates" (p. 60) as a potential means to do this. However, how much money alliances can make from this remains to be seen.

3.2 Research

Craciun et al. (2023) find the alliances "cooperate mainly in the field of education" (p. 67). This was to be expected, considering the initial design of the EUI and it being a part of Erasmus+. However, there is also Horizon funding in the EUI alliances. Craciun et al. (2023) also found the alliances were beginning to strengthen collaboration in research. The report interestingly notes:

> initiating cooperation in research can sometimes be artificial. In most cases, EUA [European University Alliance] member institutions were already involved in international research collaborations before the EUA began its work. These collaborations are mostly bi- or multilateral relationships between researchers with cooperation based on a common research interest. Therefore, establishing new relationships that emphasise institutional research collaboration appears to be a major challenge for the EUAs (Craciun et al., 2023, p. 67–8).

This 'artificiality' relates to the long-standing difficulty of instigating research collaboration within the confines of a limited list of partners that fall within a particular alliance. Researchers prefer a more 'organic' origin to collaboration, typically where they choose to coalesce around common interests driven by their curiosity. For this reason, creating meaningful research collaborations within the confines of an alliance can be difficult.

However, there are numerous examples of successful research within alliances. For example, the Unite! alliance, which originated from the Consortium Linking Universities of Science and Technology for Education and Research (CLUSTER) network founded in 1990, has a significant focus on research and a record of involvement with Horizon 2020. Moreover, Craciun et al.'s (2023) report finds potential scope for research collaboration through the high profile of challenge-based education in the EUI.

> Nevertheless, the EUAs see some opportunities for collaboration. Challenge-based learning, in particular, is seen as a lever that can link teaching, research and innovation in the EUAs. This collaboration may also eventually lead to more organic forms of research collaboration or community engagement. (p. 68)

A noteworthy innovation from an alliance is a new multiple co-tutelle model developed by the alliance Unite!. Co-tutelles are a model of doctoral education involving the cooperation of at least two universities, typically from different countries, jointly supervising one research degree. Söderqvist et al. (2024) show how Unite! developed a standardised and permanent co-tutelle model which streamlines the traditionally laborious case-specific process, facilitating supervision between more than two universities within the alliance. This example highlights how universities working together within an alliance can make a practical change. Söderqvist et al. (2024) regard this as an important development in the Europeanisation of doctoral student mobility, doctoral education, and researcher development. This achievement is noteworthy in how it delivers on one of the initial objectives of the EUI, namely the creation of an "inter-university 'campus' where students, doctoral candidates and staff can move seamlessly (physically or virtually) to study, train, teach, do research, work, or share services in any of the partner institutions" (EU Commission, 2018, p. 125).

3.3 Third Mission

From the outset of the EUI, a high priority has been placed on the alliances to deliver solutions to pressing societal problems. Their engagement with the world outside the higher education sphere matters. As the Commission stated at the time: "'European Universities' will be key drivers to boost the quality of higher education and where possible to strengthen its link to the research and innovation landscape in Europe and its outreach towards the society and economy" (EU Commission, 2018, p. 125).

The rising importance and formalisation of the third mission are a trend in higher education policy more widely (see Gunn & Mintrom, 2022), and the EUI is no exception.

A significant societal challenge is climate change, and Felder (2024) looks at how this has been addressed by the EUI alliances. The research finds the "issues of climate change and sustainability feature in collaborative endeavours not only because of the profiles of the involved HEIs but also because of societal demands and funding stipulations". Here, we can see the funding criteria of the EUI being carried forward in the activities of the alliances. Felder (2024) also finds the "alliances are primarily successful in incorporating climate change mitigation in delivering short-term joint teaching formats and bringing researchers with shared agendas and interests together". Moreover, the study finds that alliances serve to make campuses more sustainable in how they facilitate mobility.

In another study, Fuchs et al. (2023) focused on the EuroTeQ Engineering University alliance and found that alliances are particularly effective in assisting universities address "grand societal challenges and reforms in the European innovation ecosystem" (p. 263). This occurs through a process whereby alliances are 'learning networks'. As Fuchs et al. (2023) explain:

> alliances are likely to contribute to a process of joining up agency between universities because they allow them to share knowledge and align on strategy and values (learning networks). Heterogenous universities with different historical, social and political contexts may learn more from each other than universities from the same country. (p. 274)

This study suggests the learning that takes place within alliances has the potential to create synergies, a form of additional value not achieved when universities work in isolation. Moreover, these synergies are particularly relevant to activities that fall within the third mission, such as technology transfer or addressing big societal problems. For this reason, Fuchs et al. (2023) believe identifying the value of "learning networks and inter-university collaboration aids our understanding of the role that alliance formation can play in helping universities re-orient in the face of new demands, especially concerning societal orientation" (p. 265).

4 Conclusion

The EUI has continued to expand and deliver achievements across all three missions of the university. For policymakers, there are things to learn from the EUI, namely, the incremental rollout in five rounds and the network of networks structure.

The initiative has fostered new forms of collaboration between universities and across alliances working in consortium under the EUI umbrella. Now, at a more mature stage, we can see some of the same issues emerging in the EUI that have been observed by scholars of other university networks, namely, artificial research collaboration, administrative and governance compatibility issues, and the challenge of finding additional income as a network. However, the extent to which the EUI can deliver the desired substantial leap forward in European higher education remains to be seen. The alliances created by the later rounds are still in their infancy, and more studies are needed of the overall impact of the initiative.

The long-term sustainability of the EUI alliances beyond 2027 remains in question. We can discern two sets of major challenges. The first are regulatory. Some of these challenges derive from placing structures flowing from a supranational agenda into an environment that remains largely a nation-state responsibility. This shows the difficulties of building a region-wide network with universities that have not just national characteristics but their own distinct institutional profiles. These factors could frustrate the EUI going forward. One major challenge here is the European degree which will require moving a step beyond the harmonisation achieved through the Bologna Process. Another is the need for the EUI alliances to have their own legal personality.

The second set of major challenges is financial. A key question is this: Could the EUI alliances survive merely on contributions from their membership? Or do they need supranational and/ or national funding to continue? There are long-running global university alliances which do survive solely on the financial contributions of their own members (see the alliances in Gunn & Mintrom, 2013). Furthermore, university alliances existed in Europe before the EUI (see Vukasovic & Stensaker, 2018).

Some would argue that a balance has not been struck between consolidation and expansion, as the alliances created have not been able to secure sustainable financial futures. Alliances may be able to generate some income from sources such as micro-credentials. The efficacy of the 'network of networks' model in practice does not guarantee a future for the alliances. The achievements of the EUI may be overshadowed if enthusiasm for the alliances outlasts the resources required to keep them operational.

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Access, Inclusion, Completion and Employability—Responding to the Needs of Students and Society (Coordinated by Jamil Salmi)

Access, Inclusion, Completion, and Employability—Responding to the Needs of Students and Society

Jamil Salmi

Abstract Many youths face challenging circumstances due to financial barriers, discrimination, lack of social capital, insufficient academic preparation, low motivation, and lack of access to information about labour market prospects. These obstacles drastically affect their opportunities to access and complete higher education. The eight articles included in this section on access, inclusion, completion, and employability explore equity policy interventions at the national and institutional levels. These include support programs and alternative pathways for specific equity target groups (non-binary students, displaced students, long-term students, delayed students, university dropouts), the intersection of quality assurance and equity, and enhanced employability prospects. Clear definitions and comprehensive approaches are necessary to ensure a thorough understanding of the characteristics and needs of equity target groups, especially those which have not been frequently analysed in the European context, such as long-term students, delayed-entry students, dropouts, students with special needs, migrant students, and non-binary students. Research yields better policy results when it relies on a combination of quantitative surveys and data sets, on the one hand, and qualitative investigations through interviews and focus group meetings, on the other hand.

Keywords Equity · Adult learners · Equity target groups · Dropouts · Employability · Inclusion · Social dimension

1 Introduction

Around the world, many children and youths face challenging circumstances beyond their control—due to discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, sexual orientation, geographical origin, socioeconomic background, or other attributes—that drastically affect their opportunities to go to school, stay in school, complete secondary education, and access higher education. This has a particularly strong impact on

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young people in developing countries and disadvantaged groups across the world. At the tertiary level, young people encounter barriers reflecting the cost of studying, lack of social capital, insufficient academic preparation, low motivation, and lack of access to information about labour market prospects. The need to achieve greater inclusion and promote pluralism in higher education responds to a strong social justice imperative, as reflected in target 4.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Europe has fully embraced this equity and inclusion agenda. Even though the social dimension was not specifically mentioned in the 1999 Bologna declaration, the ministers of education realised soon after that the construction of the European higher education space would not be complete without explicit efforts to design and implement equity promotion policies in a harmonised manner. Thus, this aspect was explicitly highlighted in the 2001 Prague communiqué as an important area that merited further attention. The 2007 London communiqué defined the social dimension in the following way:

> Higher education should play a strong role in fostering social cohesion, reducing inequalities, and raising the level of knowledge, skills, and competences in society. Policy should therefore aim to maximise the potential of individuals in terms of their personal development and their contribution to a sustainable and democratic knowledge-based society. We share the societal aspiration that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations. We reaffirm the importance of students being able to complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background. We therefore continue our efforts to provide adequate student services, create more flexible learning pathways into and within higher education, and to widen participation at all levels on the basis of equal opportunity. (Bologna Process, 2007, p. 5).

Since the London summit, European governments have sought to widen the scope of their efforts in support of higher education by ensuring that they would not aim only to raise the quality of teaching and learning and strengthen research systems but would also focus on overcoming social exclusion and raising opportunities for access and success for under-represented groups. The commitment to making higher education more socially inclusive was firmly inscribed in the 2015 Yerevan communiqué announcing the implementation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA social dimension strategy).

> Making our systems more inclusive is an essential aim for the EHEA as populations become more and more diversified, also due to immigration and demographic changes. We undertake to widen participation in higher education and support institutions that provide relevant learning activities in appropriate contexts for different types of learners, including lifelong learning. We will improve permeability and articulation between different education sectors. We will enhance the social dimension of higher education, improve gender balance, and widen opportunities for access and completion, including international mobility, for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. We will provide mobility opportunities for students and staff from conflict areas, while working to make it possible for them to return home once conditions allow… (Bologna Process, 2015)

Recent studies have shown that, to achieve substantial results, equity promotion policies must be defined in a comprehensive way (Salmi, 2018, 2019). This implies, first, coordinating national and institutional actions in a complementary manner. Providing national targets and resources is an important step to encourage higher education institutions to take equity and inclusion seriously. At the same time, national authorities can help disseminate initiatives that are successful at the institutional level to share, replicate, and scale up good practices, and make funding available to other institutions keen on implementing equity promotion programs that have shown promising results. Second, both governments and higher education institutions must work on removing financial and non-monetary barriers faced by traditionally under-served students. Third, it is essential to put as much emphasis on completion as on access, which has traditionally received more attention. Finally, a long-term view is key to guaranteeing continuity and consistency in designing adequate equity promotion policies and implementing them in an effective manner.

Equity promotion policies must be guided by well-established information systems to identify all equity target groups, measure equity gaps, and assess progress in terms of access and graduation. As observed in the next pages, several papers among the studies highlighted in this section make important contributions in that respect by examining the characteristics of equity target groups that have not been sufficiently investigated so far, conducting and analysing surveys that provide new data on the impact of various equity measures, and suggesting policy options inspired by practices that seem to have a positive impact on the ground.

A recent book which explores innovative equity initiatives at the institutional level underscores the importance of three additional success factors (Salmi, 2023). First, no single measure is sufficient to take care of the needs of traditionally under-represented students. The expression "string of pearls" can be used to describe the combination and range of interventions necessary to address the needs of equity target groups, and this combination varies depending on the context and the situation of each individual student. Some of the papers reviewed in this section offer similar conclusions.

Second, adequate resources are essential to guarantee the long-term sustainability of equity initiatives and provide the opportunity to scale them up. These can come partly from the national authorities if they are willing to translate the official commitment in favour of equity and inclusion into concrete actions. At the institutional level, the diversification of funding sources can better protect universities from financial instability.

Third, while many equity promotion initiatives may have been launched by a visionary and inspirational individual, their transformation into programs embedded into the core function of entire institutions cannot happen without the sustained efforts of multiple teams working together and united around the conviction that students from under-represented groups deserve equal opportunities and are capable of great academic achievements. These teams are most effective when they work from a common vision, share an ethic of care for the students they seek to support, and can work as stable teams over the years.

2 Overview of the Contribution of the Papers to the Theme

Against this background, the eight articles included in this sub-theme on Access, Inclusion, Completion, and Employability illustrate the kinds of pertinent studies that help deepen the knowledge perspective on these topics and provide relevant evidence to guide policymakers at the national level and university leaders at the institutional level. As the following list shows, the articles cover a wide range of themes, including support programs and alternative pathways for specific equity target groups (non-binary students, displaced students, long-term students, delayed students, university dropouts), the intersection of quality assurance and equity, and enhanced employability prospects:

- Beyond the Binary: A Comparative Analysis across Europe of Non-Binary Student Experiences and Methodological Considerations for Gender Measurement, *Johanna Dau (Institute for Advanced Studies, Vienna)*
- Social inequality contested: Prior Learning Assessment in the context of displacement, *Lisa Unangst (Empire State University, New York, USA)*
- The need for tailored support for long-term students, *Franziska König and Bettina MJ Kern (Technical University of Vienna)*
- Do Early Signals Count? Exploring Potential Root Causes of University Dropout, *ţ tefan Marius Deaconu (University of Bucharest), Roland Olah (UEFISCDI), Cezar Mihai Haj (UEFISCDI)*
- Exploring Delayed Transition into Higher Education: A Comparative Analysis of Romania, Lithuania, and Austria, *Sylvia Mandl and Martin Unger (Institute for Advanced Studies, Vienna)*
- The social dimension of higher education: an exploratory study for the validation of quality assurance indicators, *Adrian Opre (Babes-Bolyai University, Romania), Dana Opre (Babes-Bolyai University, Romania), Cristina Ghiuţlică (National University of Science and Technology Politehnica Bucharest, Romania) and Sebastian Pintea (Babes-Bolyai University, Romania)*
- Connecting Academia and Business on the Quadruple Helix. Employers' Support to Optimise Training in Higher Education, *Venera-Mihaela Cojocariu, Elena Nechita, Gabriel Mareş, Liliana Mâţă (Vasile Alecsandri University of Bacău, Romania)*
- Ascending the Social Ladder: Exploring Professional Advancement and Employability Among First-Generation Graduates in Romania, *ţ tefan Marius Deaconu (University of Bucharest) and Alina Roiniţă (Ministry of Education, Romania).*

The first article, by Johanna Dau, focuses on a group of students—non-binary students—who have not received much attention in the equity literature so far. Using microdata from the 2023 set of EUROSTUDENT surveys, it presents the first European comparative analysis of non-binary students. While the EUROSTUDENT dataset covers 17 countries, information on non-binary students appears in only eight of the surveyed nations. Relying on both bivariate-descriptive and multivariate analyses of these data, the author finds that students with a non-binary gender indication are more likely to be affected by psychological stress and financial difficulties across countries and are more often considering dropping out of their studies. The policy implication is that non-binary students clearly belong to the groups of vulnerable and disadvantaged students deserving special attention and support.

In addition to providing clear evidence regarding the need to consider non-binary students as a key equity target group in national policies and institutional programs, the article makes an important methodological contribution to operationalise research on gender aspects in the field of equity and inclusion. The author builds on the methodological obstacles encountered during the research process to propose new approaches to guide the quantitative analysis of gender. The aim is to undertake gender-sensitive data collection that is theoretically precise and practical at the same time, which would require adapting the survey methods to the reality of life of marginalised groups such as gender non-conforming persons.

The second article, written by Lisa Unangst, focuses on the challenges faced by displaced students and examines alternative ways offered to them through the recognition of prior learning. Combining the results of a broad literature review and a more specialised review of the grey literature produced by the 217 existing higher education research centres in the world, the author investigates how displaced learners are pursuing Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) opportunities across the world. The category of displaced learners is defined as all individuals holding refugee or asylee status or any form of temporary humanitarian protection.

On the positive side, this study confirms that strong support structures are now in place for displaced learners across the European higher education sector. In addition, a growing number of universities have put in place well-developed structures with clear procedures and criteria to evaluate and recognise the prior learning of displaced students. Three institutions, Lund University in Sweden, Tallinn University of Technology in Estonia, and Vilnius University in Lithuania, stand out for their pioneering work in that regard.

On the downside, however, hardly any research is being carried out on PLA for displaced learners by the specialised higher education research centres established across the globe. This suggests the need to consider displaced students as a target equity group which should be included in the research agenda of those specialised centres that work on access and equity themes with respect to prior and experiential learning. However, the 217 higher education research centres in focus here are not pursuing that research with an emphasis on lifelong learners and PLA; that is to say, displaced learners are omitted from the discourse on access and equity with respect to prior and experiential learning across these research agendas (according to data currently available on public-facing websites).

Written by König et al., the third article investigates the issue of long-term students, using the Austrian experience as a case study. While being a problem for the individual students who require more years to graduate than the theoretical completion time, the phenomenon of long-term students is also a serious problem for higher education institutions in Austria, which get penalised budget-wise when students do not graduate on time. The analysis of university records revealed a whole range of reasons behind the situation of long-term students, such as low grades, failed exams, difficulty in writing the bachelor thesis after completing the mandatory courses, transfer to master courses before graduating, etc.

Based on a review of the literature regarding this issue in Austria and other European countries, the article offers suggestions on the kind of academic and psychological support that can be effective in helping to reduce the length of study for long-term students. These include early detection of at-risk students, offering tutoring options to students failing a course, support to find a thesis subject or a thesis supervisor, and outreach to long-term students who are missing only a few requirements to graduate. Making technical programs less theoretical and more practical has also been identified as an effective approach to reduce course failure. The recommendations from this article could be useful for institutional leaders seeking to successfully reduce extended durations of study. But, this necessitates a nuanced knowledge of the target group and bespoke solutions, considering that long-term students appear to be a heterogeneous group of students struggling with different aspects of the study programme.

In the fourth article of the series, Deaconu, Olah, and Mihai Haj probe the causes of university dropouts in Romania. Using data from the National Student Survey and EUROSTUDENT VII for both bachelor and master students over several years, the authors attempted to identify key factors that can affect a student's decision to continue or discontinue their academic journey, such as satisfaction with the quality of teaching and learning, the university infrastructure, their learning outcomes, and available student support services. Understanding which of these factors plays a role can help predict the students' dropout with a higher degree of probability.

A second focus of the study is to examine the extent to which individual characteristics of students influence their results in terms of study completion. The article explores, in particular, the role of the Baccalaureate Exam as an indicator of the probability of dropping out at the university level. On that basis, the study uses binary logistic regressions to predict the impact of pre-entry characteristics on student dropout. Finally, it considers the extent to which dropout rates rose during the Covid-19 pandemic as a result of changed delivery modes and related structural aspects. Access to online resources was crucial for first-year undergraduate students, as it increased their chances of academic persistence in a substantial way.

The analysis clearly showed the significance of early signals for identifying at-risk students and addressing the issue of potential student dropouts, with Baccalaureate scores being the best predictor of success at universities. Additional elements, such as field of study, happiness with the chosen field, and a sense of belonging, contribute to the success of students. These findings could guide higher education institutions in their efforts to understand the factors that influence student dropout and put in place effective retention strategies. They also provide useful insights for policymakers set on reducing dropouts nationally.

The fifth article, written by Mandl and Unger, looks at alternative pathways available to students with delayed transition to higher education through a comparative analysis of three countries: Austria, Lithuania, and Romania. Delayed transition refers to the experience of high school students who never completed their secondary education or went into the labour market and are seeking to enter university without a high school certificate. EUROSTUDENT VII data indicate that 23% of students are in this situation in Austria, 11% in Lithuania, and 10% in Romania. Most students in these groups are first-generation students (especially in Lithuania and Romania) and face financial difficulties. The article compares how existing regulations and policy measures influence the trajectory of these students.

The study found that none of the three countries have a comprehensive system in place to directly support delayed entry students. While Austrian universities have a mechanism for the recognition of prior learning, it is seldom used for admitting delayed transition students. However, universities do sometimes give some course credits for relevant professional experience in all three countries. Lithuania provides partial funding for older students. Part-time study programmes are available in Lithuania and Romania, making it easier for working students. In the absence of full distance learning options in the three countries, delayed entry students benefited from online learning opportunities during the Covid-19 pandemic period. Since this group of delayed students has not received much attention from policymakers, the findings of this article will hopefully help European governments and higher education leaders give more priority to the creation or consolidation of alternative pathways.

In the sixth article, Opre et al. examine how the social dimension of higher education can be reflected in and supported by quality assurance systems. The literature survey on key concepts and good practices in the European context undertaken to carry out the study was complemented by focus group meetings with relevant stakeholders in the Romanian higher education system, including academic and non-academic staff, immigrant students, and students with disabilities.

The authors ended up with a comprehensive list of potential indicators that can be integrated into quality assurance criteria to ensure a closer alignment between national equity promotion policies and quality assurance systems in Romania. The most important criteria were the intrinsic characteristics of equity target beneficiaries (students with disabilities and immigrant students in this case), the intended social value dimensions (equality, equity, diversity, and inclusion), the target beneficiaries of the specific measures (students, academic staff, and non-academic staff), the process to design and implement the measures (top-down as part of the strategic plan or bottom-up as part of a participatory consultation process), and the phase in the sequence of the educational process to which the indicators refer (admission, recruitment, participation, graduation and post-graduation.

While the focus of this important study is on immigrant students and students with disabilities in the context of an Erasmus+ project on Social Inclusion, Tolerance, Acceptance, and Realisation for all Students, the findings have wider implications in terms of guiding national authorities on how to organise the contribution of quality assurance as a complementary instrument to accelerate the push for greater equity and inclusion in higher education.

The seventh article written by Cojocariu et al. investigates the evolving connection between academia and business to improve the relevance of training against the background of the transformation of higher education during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. Not only have higher education institutions not been able to maintain close relationships with firms during the health crisis but they have faced significant challenges regarding program content because of the growing importance of digital skills and program delivery, integrating online and hybrid modes of teaching and learning.

The results presented in the article reflect research conducted between April and September 2023, using a mixed methodology approach combining a questionnaire to employers and focus group meetings to analyse the various facets of university relations with the labour market. The data collected represent the views of employers with respect to the quality of existing programs and their recommendations to improve the training of students. They emphasise, in particular, the need to further develop specialised practical training, teamwork, effective communication, time management, social responsibility, and forward-thinking skills.

Besides collecting many concrete suggestions to strengthen the relationship between universities and companies that would help make the training offered to students more efficient and relevant, the study shows how academic institutions and the business sector can mutually benefit from closer communication and collaboration linkages.

The last article, prepared by Deaconu and Roiniță, investigates opportunities for professional advancement and employability among first-generation graduates in Romania. The study uses data from the National Survey on the Employability of Higher Education Graduates (CNAAIS) to analyse the employment outcomes of first-generation students and compare them to the general population of university graduates.

The main finding of this research is that first-generation students tend to earn lower median incomes at both bachelor's and master's levels and have a higher rate of underemployment than their peers with at least one parent with a higher education degree. This happens even though first-generation students appear to have developed more in-depth skills in some areas, such as foreign languages or introductory and advanced IT skills, than their colleagues from a more educated family background. Also, they have a more active participation in internships, volunteering activities, and external mobility programs. Among the various factors influencing labour market outcomes, the study identified networking and the capacity to negotiate. In addition, there is a significant element of discrimination against first-generation students in hiring practices due to their lower socioeconomic status. The article concludes by outlining several interventions that could enhance employment prospects for first-generation students, such as career advice, professional mentoring and coaching, and access to professional networks through alumni groups.

3 Conclusion

The set of articles presented in this section generated rich conversations around the methodological challenges involved in doing research on equity and inclusion. Clear definitions and comprehensive approaches are necessary to ensure a thorough understanding of the characteristics and needs of equity target groups, especially those which have not been frequently analysed in the European context, such as long-term students, delayed-entry students, dropouts, students with special needs, migrant students, and non-binary students. Research yields better policy results when it relies on a combination of quantitative surveys and data sets, on the one hand, and qualitative investigations through interviews and focus group meetings, on the other hand.

As could be expected from a Conference taking place in Bucharest, a large proportion of the articles presented were linked to a specific dimension within the equity or employment sphere in the Romanian national or local context. However, three of the studies took a deliberately comparative approach to analyse the situation of particular equity target groups (displaced learners, non-binary students) or types of equity promotion measures (recognition of prior learning, alternative paths for delayed transition students). Researchers on the Bologna Process should be encouraged to take a comparative perspective to enrich the relevance of their findings in the European context.

Learning from the experience of others, nationally and internationally, is not about copying or imitating policies from other countries or institutions. the lessons of experience can contribute to a better understanding of what works and what does not work under various conditions and circumstances. In that way, they can serve to increase the probability of success and help avoid repeating the errors and failures of others.

As observed in previous editions of this Bologna Process Researchers' Conference, the Bologna Process benefits from the strength of the consensus that has emerged at the supra-national level. This consensus can facilitate and influence the replication of successful policies and initiatives at the national and institutional levels documented in these articles. This is especially true when national policies and institutional programs are designed and implemented in a complementary fashion.

At the same time, the articles have illustrated significant differences across European countries in terms of national commitment to the pursuit of the equity agenda. The relationship between the State and higher education institutions ranges from compulsory national equity policies to strong government push in the form of financial incentives or quality assurance requirements to situations of government indifference for lack of clearly defined and financed equity policies.

Three of the eight articles included in this section examined approaches aimed at giving a second chance to student groups facing special challenges, such as long-term students, delayed entry students, and displaced students. In societies characterised by a longer lifespan of their citizens, rapid technology-driven changes in job contents, and a greater variety of learner profiles, these studies highlight the need to move away from the traditional concept of trying to bring non-regular students back into the traditional mould and adopt instead a broader lifelong learning perspective where alternative pathways and multiple entry and exit points become the norm rather than the exception.

A noteworthy new element that had not come out strongly in prior editions of the Conference came up this year, namely the issue of labour market insertion for graduates from traditionally under-represented groups. The article about first-generation students in Romania brought relevant insights in that respect, revealing that first-generation students face discrimination in the labour market after graduation. Even with the same degree, they have worse results in terms of type of jobs and salary level than their colleagues from wealthier families. The implication of this finding is that national and institutional equity promotion policies should not only include interventions that facilitate access to higher education and successful completion of studies for traditionally under-represented groups but also offer adequate support to enhance the probability of effective integration into the labour market after graduation. Higher education institutions need to put in place integrated interventions over time that start with outreach to increase access, continue with retention to guarantee success, and terminate with adequate support for smooth entry into the labour market.

The lessons from the Romania case study are supported by evidence from the United States, where research showed that low-income students have worse labour market outcomes than graduates from wealthier families. Additionally, labour market results play out differently for young adults of different genders, different socioeconomic backgrounds, and racial or ethnic groups (Ashtiani et al., 2013). In addition, student loan debt has a negative impact on labour market outcomes and economic mobility, with low-wealth graduates experiencing less economic mobility and lower incomes (Odumosu, 2023).

These observations echo the results of recent studies in developing countries. A World Bank exploration of barriers to gender balance in Tanzania after graduation found that women who were successful in accessing university programs usually reserved for men, such as engineering, did face additional challenges in landing relevant jobs (World Bank, 2021). A 2023 survey of the labour market results of natural science graduates in South Africa similarly found discrimination against non-white students (James, 2023).

Another interesting aspect has appeared in relation to the retention policies explored in the article on dropouts in Romania. Echoing the experience of institutions in other parts of the world that have focused on a combination of academic, psychological, and financial support measures to help at-risk students, the article points to the importance of paying more attention to the issue of cultural belonging. In Romania, as elsewhere, many students from disadvantaged backgrounds find it daunting to fit in an institution where they must interact with students from wealthy families who feel more naturally at home in a university environment, as documented by a recent book on elite universities in the United States and the United Kingdom, … "universities at this level are often incredibly unwelcoming for those outside of the traditionally accepted social circle, and further ingrain race and class discrimination." (Bhopal & Myers, 2023).

Being thrown into a totally "foreign" institutional culture perceived as unwelcoming can be a source of frustration and lack of motivation for non-traditional students leading to academic failure. Therefore, creating favourable conditions to make all incoming students welcome, generate a strong feeling of belonging, and boost their sense of self-confidence is a crucial part of retention policies that is not taken into consideration often enough.

A final element that was not covered by the articles included in this section but which did come up in the section on values is the backlash against equity and inclusion policies faced by a growing number of countries in Europe and elsewhere following the worrisome developments in Hungary heralded by the ban of gender studies which led to the closure of the Central European University. This new trend is a striking reversal after two decades of European consensus and commitment to promote the social dimension of higher education and eliminate the financial and non-monetary barriers faced by traditionally under-represented students.

Further work is needed to explore these important aspects more extensively, collect robust evidence on effective ways to overcome old and new challenges, and disseminate relevant lessons of experience.

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The Social Dimension of Higher Education: An Exploratory Study for the Validation of Quality Assurance Indicators

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(This study is part of an Erasmus + Project: START—Social Inclusion, Tolerance, Acceptance and Realization for all Students)

Abstract The present study aimed to identify, generate, and validate a set of indicators of the social dimension of higher education in the context of quality assurance systems, with a focus on immigrant students and those with disabilities. For this purpose, two research methods were implemented: the systematic analysis of specialized literature and focus groups. The literature review sought to update conceptualizations and good practices in the European and national context. The focus groups were conducted with stakeholders relevant for the social dimension of higher education: academic and non-academic staff, immigrant students, and students with disabilities. The corroborated results revealed a complex structure of potential indicators. The most important criteria were the category of beneficiaries (students with disabilities and immigrant students), the reflected social value (equality, equity, diversity, and inclusion), the target of the specific measures (aimed at students or at academic and non-academic staff), the direction of the measures (top-down or bottom-up), the

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stage of the educational process to which the indicators refer (recruitment admission, participation, graduation and post-graduation), the level of implementation of the measures (primary measures and secondary measures/meta-measures). The indicators identified in this study allow multiple uses. In relation to the objective of the study, the most important is the possibility of use in the evaluation of the social dimension of higher education in the context of quality assurance systems.

Keywords Quality assurance in higher education · Social dimension of higher education · Immigrant students · Students with disabilities

1 Introduction

The last decade has been marked by a series of important and rapid changes in the dynamics of higher education institutions. We are, in fact, witnessing a series of transformations at the academic level in response to society's demands: the diversification of the student population, increased migration, the need for concentrated measures to assure inclusion, the need for flexible learning, including the appearance of micro-certificates and e-leaning, etc. Of course, these trends are also felt in terms that should be reflected in quality assurance procedures, standards, and indicators. In fact, universities and higher education systems are increasingly concerned with exploring new ways of approaching the quality of education in order to provide diversified, highly useful, and responsive services.

In this context, one of the concerns of the quality assurance agencies and universities alike is the social dimension of higher education. The present paper focuses on two target groups of measures relevant to aspects of the social dimension: immigrant students and students with disabilities, respectively. This research is part of a larger Erasmus + Project (*START—Social Inclusion, Tolerance, Acceptance and Realization for all Students)* where students with disabilities and immigrants are the main target groups. For the social dimension, we used the same definition adopted in the final report by the Advisory Group 1 on Social Dimension: "social dimension encompasses the creation of an inclusive environment in higher education that fosters equity and diversity, and is responsive to the needs of local communities" (EHEA, 2020).

The phenomenon of immigration has gained increasing magnitude in Europe in recent years. Statistics indicate that, as of 2017, there were approximately 21.6 million people in the European Union with citizenship other than that of a member state of the EU (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019). Among these immigrants, a significant proportion falls within the age range of 18–34, theoretically eligible for the European higher education system. Their integration into European higher education poses a real challenge.

The needs of immigrant students are diverse, including appropriate academic guidance, provision of training programs, vocational and psychological counseling, and social assistance. In this context, most European countries do not have yet a comprehensive and coherent policy for their inclusion in higher education (Vasilopoulos & Ioannidi, 2020).

Another population group worth looking at is students with disabilities (Ring & McKernan, 2008). Evans and Zhu (2022) have shown that students with disabilities have reduced access to university, higher chances of dropping out, achieving lower graduation and employment outcomes compared to their non-disabled peers. For example, a number of studies on the German student population show significantly higher dropout intentions for students with disabilities versus students without disabilities (Koopmann et al., 2023; Rußmann et al., 2023), while studies in the USA and Canada found that students with disabilities receive lower grades than students without disabilities (Eisenberg et al., 2009; Parsons et al., 2021).

At the European level, several political commitments have been made in recent years to strengthen diversity and inclusion in higher education, starting with the Declaration of Paris by EU member states in March 2015, promoting citizenship and common values of freedom, tolerance, and non-discrimination through education. This is also reflected in documents such as the Yerevan Communiqué of 2015 and the Paris Communiqué of 2018 within the Bologna Process. All these documents consolidate the importance of the social dimension of European higher education.

More recently, with a focus on social inclusion in higher education, one of the most important documents outlining principles and implementation recommendations at the European higher education level is the Rome Communiqué of 2020 (Annex II). Based on the report of the Working Group 1 on Social Dimension (2020), this document includes a set of ten principles for conceptualizing policies to improve the social dimension.

Building on the aforementioned documents, several studies have been conducted at the European level to monitor the implementation of the social dimension of higher education. In a relatively recent report titled "Equity and Inclusion in European Higher Education Institutions: Results from the INVITED project," Claeys-Kulik et al. (2019) published the results of the INVITED project of the European University Association, which aimed to support universities in developing strategies for ensuring equity, diversity, and inclusion. The report provides a comprehensive picture through quantitative data collected from 159 higher education institutions in 36 European systems, gathered through a survey and subsequent interviews between the fall of 2018 and the summer of 2019. Unlike other similar studies that focused more on macro-level indicators (national policies and strategies), this report focused on institutional approaches (challenges and success factors). The project's design and data offer a wide range of possible institutional strategies, diversity dimensions, success measurement methods, levels of analysis, barriers, and ways to overcome them in ensuring social dimension/equity/inclusion.

Another study, conducted in 2022 by the European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, based on the general principles and recommendations of Annex II of the Rome Communiqué (2020), produced a report titled "Towards Equity and Inclusion in Higher Education in Europe" analyzing how the ten principles are applied at the level of European national higher education systems. The conclusion was that few countries have taken the necessary subsequent measures since the adoption of the general principles and recommendations of Annex II of the Rome Communiqué in November 2020.

A similar study (Kaiser et al., 2022) identified indicators of social inclusion in higher education and developed a guide for building these indicators at the level of higher education institutions based on the investigation of a sample of policymakers, practitioners, and student representatives.

Starting from the need to build a set of evaluation indicators for the social dimension of Romanian higher education, the general objective of this study is to investigate the social component of Romanian higher education for students with disabilities and immigrant students. The specific objectives are: (1) Identifying the perceived level of social dimension support for students with disabilities and immigrant students in Romanian higher education, (2) Identifying how relevant stakeholders (experts and students) define success in guaranteeing the social dimension, (3) Exploring possible ways to measure the success of a higher education institution in designing and implementing measures to ensure equality of opportunities for students with disabilities or immigrant students, and (4) Exploring perceived barriers to ensuring the social dimension and solutions to overcome them.

2 Methodology

Participants. The study included two categories of respondents, experts, and students selected on a voluntary basis. According to the target student population, the first category was divided into two subcategories: for students with disabilities, eight experts in special psychopedagogy, inclusive education, multiple disabilities, counseling, and psychotherapy; for immigrant students, three experts in mobility and international students. The experts in mobility and international students are the category of experts closest to the issue of immigrants at the university level.

The same grouping was followed in the student category: eight students with visual, hearing, and motor disabilities, respectively, and 16 immigrant students (representing Moldova, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Guinea, Brazil, Bangladesh, and Ukraine). All students were enrolled at Babeș-Bolyai University. Although the sample of students with disabilities does not cover all disability categories, those represented by the study participants are the most common among our students. Additionally, the specific perspectives centered on the individual needs of each participating student were complemented by a broader and more integrative perspective provided by the selected experts. The same observation holds true for immigrant students. Even though the immigrant students participating in the study represented a relatively limited variety of countries and specific needs, the perspective of the experts was broader and more integrative.

Instruments. The focus groups were conducted based on an interview guide that addressed four main themes: (1) The perceived level of social dimension insurance for students with disabilities and immigrant students in Romanian higher education; (2) Defining success in guaranteeing the social dimension for students with disabilities and immigrant students; (3) Measuring the success of a higher education institution in providing the social dimension; (4) Barriers to ensuring the social dimension for students with disabilities and immigrant students and ways to overcome them.

Procedure. Five focus group meetings were conducted, including face-to-face sessions with expert participants and online meetings with students. At the beginning of each meeting, participants were informed about the study's objective and assured that confidentiality and anonymity of responses would be respected in all forms of presenting the study results. The average duration of the meetings was one and a half hours.

3 Results

3.1 Analysis of the Social Dimension Issues for Students with Disabilities

3.1.1 Perceived Level of Social Dimension Insurance for Students with Disabilities in Romanian Higher Education

Student Perspective. Overall, respondents appreciated that students with disabilities benefit from various facilities contributing to the social dimension, such as assistance during exams, sign language interpretation, etc. Among the highlighted issues were problems with wheelchair ramps, successive classes held in different buildings or areas of the city without sufficient time between them for a student with motor disabilities to arrive on time, and blocked access routes for students with motor disabilities during university building repairs.

Expert Perspective. From the experts' perspective, the social dimension concerning students with disabilities should be ensured primarily through a unified strategy/policy at the university level, which should then be reflected at lower levels: faculties, departments, and ultimately in individual behaviors of teaching and non-teaching staff. In this regard, respondents noted a mismatch/discrepancy between the university's policies regarding diversity for students with disabilities and actual practices. This means that there are often formal structures or procedures at the university level designated to manage the problem of students with disabilities, but they are not always implemented correctly or completely.

3.1.2 Defining Success in Guaranteeing the Social Dimension for Students with Disabilities

Student Perspective. The students highlighted several important characteristics, including the provision of resources needed for a student with disabilities to navigate independently in the university environment (e.g., building maps for the visually impaired, bibliographic materials adapted for each type of disability, etc.), communication (with university staff and peers), congruence between formal institution procedures and policies and their implementation in the field, and inclusion from all perspectives (formal and informal, both in the educational process and student organizations and extracurricular activities).

Expert Perspective. The experts outlined the need to monitor adherence to the values of equality, equity, diversity, and inclusion, having a specific vision and strategy and implementing them in daily university activities.

3.1.3 Measuring the Perceived Success of a Higher Education Institution in Providing the Social Dimension for Students with Disabilities

Student Perspective

Recruitment. The key indicators resulting from the interviews were: (1) Presentations of the educational offer for potential students with disabilities; (2) Online promotion explicitly recruitment services for students with disabilities; (3) Availability of career guidance services, including vocational counseling.

Admission. The most important aspects highlighted were: (1) Preparation for the entrance exam; (2) Assistance during the entrance exam (extra time, separate space, if necessary, assistance in writing, etc.).

Retention. The main indicators mentioned were: (1) Psychological counseling services for students with disabilities, medical services; (2) Allocation of mentors or tutors for groups of 2–3 students with disabilities to guide them throughout the study program; (3) Adaptation of examination methods (oral exams, extra time, writing support); (4) Adaptation of bibliographic materials, course presentations (Braille, audio), adjustment of the volume of information, etc.; (5) Existence of scholarships for financial support; (6) Mandatory training for academic university staff to raise awareness of issues faced by students with disabilities, interaction models with this category; (7) Monitoring the results of this training.

Graduation/Post-graduation (by post-graduation, we mean both the transition to the labor market and the enrolment into postgraduate study programs such as master's or Ph.D. programs). For this sequence/phase, students identified the following indicators: (1) Facilities for participation in graduation ceremonies alongside other students; (2) Monitoring the progress of graduates; (3) Centralized information related to employment opportunities; (4) Providing support for integration into the job market;

(5) Offering internship opportunities and collaboration with private companies; (6) Post-graduation counseling related to job market integration; (7) Facilitating the connection of graduates with disabilities with private companies.

Expert Perspective

Recruitment. From the experts' perspective, the main indicators for this stage could be: (1) Promotional activities for university specializations among potential students with disabilities, especially those compatible with certain disabilities. These can be identified through an analysis of the specializations most sought after by students with disabilities (existence of promotional materials adapted for this category of potential students); (2) The existence of a strategy to open the university to special high schools (summer schools, workshops, collaboration protocols); (3) The existence of a designated structure, teams responsible for promotional activities; (4) Vocational guidance services for potential students.

Admission. For this stage, experts listed the following indicators: (1) Accessibility in university buildings where entrance exams or competition file processing take place; (2) Providing complete and transparent information about accessibility services (assistance/support) offered by the university for specific activities (e.g., assistance during registration); (3) Special places for students with disabilities, accompanied by very clear information about eligibility criteria for those places.

Retention. The indicators suggested for this stage were: (1) Opportunities to express requests for flexibility in teaching, learning, and examination methods; (2) University partnerships with organizations/foundations/companies to provide certain services for students with disabilities in interaction with the university (e.g., translation into sign language for students with hearing impairments, adaptation of tactile resources for the visually impaired, assistance for non-mobile individuals, etc.); (3) Ensuring infrastructure that allows accessibility in university buildings, classrooms, seminars, and laboratories; (4) Level of participation of students with disabilities in educational and more general social activities organized by the university; (5) University collaboration with the families of students; (6) Academic staff training to adapt teaching, learning, and evaluation methods to the specific needs of students with disabilities; (7) Training for typical students to interact with individuals with disabilities; (8) Anti-discrimination training; (9) Availability of adapted examination methods (additional time, a special room, oral exams, a special place in the examination room, etc.).

Graduation/Post-graduation. In this stage, experts stated indicators such as: (1) Pass rate; (2) Graduation results; (3) The percentage of those who want to continue their studies after graduation; (4) The percentage of students with disabilities who have entered the field in which they completed their studies.

3.1.4 Barriers to Ensuring Social Dimension/Equity/Inclusion and Ways to Overcome Them

Student Perspective. The main barriers identified by students were poor management and reduced involvement in the administrative/decisional structures of the university.

Solutions mentioned for overcoming these included: (1) The existence of an online interface where students with disabilities can present their problems and needs, and the university can provide support or allocate a support person; (2) The number and regularity of meetings with students with disabilities to obtain feedback on implemented measures and the need for new measures; (3) Representation of the category of students with disabilities in university leadership structures (e.g., the faculty council, the board of directors); (4) Universities receiving support in implementing measures related to the social dimension (e.g., from the Ministry of Education); (5) The development of hybrid higher education (with a focus on the online component) that would favor students with disabilities (compensating for the difficulties of access for some students); (6) Flexibility of teaching staff flexibility in teaching and evaluation activities regarding course organization (Table 1).

Expert Perspective. A first barrier identified by experts, manifested in the resistance to flexible assessment methods (extended exam time, oral exams, etc.), was the fear of professors for not breaking institutional regulations (fear of disadvantaging other students). The proposed solution to overcome this barrier is the development of clear university-level policies related to managing students with disabilities, accompanied by implementation guides that are popularized among university staff, both teaching and non-teaching.

A second barrier identified was that respect for diversity (an open attitude toward diversity) is not necessarily an intrinsic characteristic but needs to be educated and trained at university staff level through explicit programs. The solution could be the introduction of courses on inclusive education, diversity skills, and awareness for both students and university staff.

The third identified barrier is legislative gaps regarding the status of people with disabilities or disabling conditions. The solution coming from experts would be to provide feedback from university representatives to decision-makers to address these gaps.

The fourth identified barrier was the existence of certain stereotypes among teaching staff that adapting methods to the specific needs of students with disabilities would lower the quality of higher education (the quality of teaching the respective discipline). The solution could involve, on the one hand, the existence of a university-level strategy regarding the social dimension for students with disabilities popularized among teaching staff and, on the other hand, their participation in training targeting equality, equity, diversity, and inclusion for students with disabilities.

The last highlighted barrier was that the international evaluation of universities and the rankings do not include the social dimension. From this perspective, universities do not have strong motivation to introduce policies/strategies to ensure the social dimension. Also, at the institutional level, professors are not evaluated for ensuring the social dimension. The solution to this problem would be lobbying universities and other institutions to introduce the social dimension as an indicator of university performance. Additionally, at the institutional level, the solution would involve introducing in the evaluation criteria for teaching staff by the institution indicators related to involvement in activities adapting teaching methods for students with disabilities (Table 1).

Table 1 Barriers to ensuring the social dimension for students with disabilities and solutions (students vs. experts)

	Barriers	Solutions
Students	– Dysfunctional management – Legislative barriers	– The existence of an online interface where students with disabilities can present their problems and needs, and the university can give them support or assign them a support person – The number and regularity of meetings with students with disabilities to obtain feedback related to the implemented measures and the need for new measures – Representation of the category of students with disabilities in the management structures of the university (e.g., faculty council, board of administration) – Universities should benefit from support in the implementation of measures aimed at ensuring the social dimension (e.g., from the Ministry of Education) – The development of hybrid higher education (with an emphasis on the online component) would favor students with disabilities (it would compensate for the access difficulties of some students) – The flexibility of teaching staff
Experts	– Teachers' fear of violating regulations at the institutional level – Respect for diversity is not necessarily an intrinsic characteristic; it must be educated – Llegislative gaps regarding the status of people with disabilities or with a disabling condition – Stereotypes of teachers according to which, if they adapt their methods to the specifics/needs of students with disabilities, this would decrease the quality of higher education	– The existence of a university regulation on ensuring the social dimension for students with disabilities – Inclusive education courses, skills for diversity, awareness – Providing feedback to decision-makers from university representatives to fill legislative gaps – Teacher evaluation grids that include ensuring the social dimension for students with disabilities

3.2 Analysis of the Social Dimension Issues for Immigrant Students

3.2.1 Perceived Level of Social Dimension Assurance for Immigrant Students in Romanian Higher Education

Student Perspective. Overall, immigrant students appreciate the efforts made by universities to ensure the social dimension, but they highlight several issues related to the social, political, and university environment. The issue of paperwork, specifically residence permits, is emphasized. Respondents point out a gap between entering the university and obtaining a residence permit, negatively affecting access to facilities normally offered by the university. Respondents also note that the immigration center is poorly organized, with slow case processing leading to long queues and wasted time.

Articulation issues between institutions that immigrant students interact with are also mentioned. Lack of collaboration between immigration centers and universities is highlighted. Sometimes, students are required to make more trips than necessary to resolve certain documents because university staff are not sure about the required document format. The lack of a common database between the two types of institutions is also noted.

Communication barriers, both general and language-related, are mentioned. Students sometimes face challenges in obtaining clear and transparent information about the percentage of courses/seminars conducted in a foreign language, building/room locations, accommodation facilities, libraries, and other study resources. Immigrant students mention having to often gather information from social media groups. Other times, language barriers arise when instructors do not sufficiently master the foreign language, preferring to teach in Romanian.

Discrimination issues, whether at the institutional or student level, are raised. At the institutional level, respondents mention that immigrant students, even with excellent grades, cannot receive merit or performance scholarships. Regarding Romanian colleagues, respondents report sometimes encountering hostile attitudes, citing the argument that immigrant students are taking the place of local students.

Expert Perspective. The interviewed experts highlight two categories of problems: general issues related to cultural differences (especially for non-EU students) and university-specific issues (logistic problems).

In the first category, cultural differences are mentioned and perceived as significant. Without support to understand Romanian cultural specifics and guidance through the bureaucratic system and all formal university requirements, many immigrant students struggle.

In the second category, logistical problems are primarily signaled. The structures responsible for managing these students lack personnel, clear protocols for interaction with immigrant students, and efficient means of communication regarding the rights and obligations of this student category. In the absence of this infrastructure, the pressure is felt by the employed staff, who must solve specific problems of these students, sometimes using their own resources and under their pressure (social cases). Experts also emphasize the need for representation of immigrant students in the leadership structures of faculties or universities (e.g., faculty councils) to facilitate communication regarding their needs and university policies in this regard. Lastly, the need for social and psychological assistance is highlighted.

3.2.2 Defining Success in Guaranteeing the Social Dimension for Immigrant Students

Student Perspective. The main characteristics defining a successful university in ensuring the social dimension for immigrant students are accessibility (feeling integrated into the higher education institution's policy), equality (providing specific opportunities), inclusion/non-discrimination (students from Africa signal discrimination compared to European students, whom they consider privileged), transparent communication (feeling that the university thinks about them, cares about them, considers their needs; communicating the specific requirements of the university for this category of students and the opportunities offered), respect for cultural diversity, social and psychological assistance, and financial support (reducing financial disparities between local and immigrant students).

Expert Perspective. From the experts' perspective, a successful university in ensuring the social dimension for immigrant students is one that is conceptually prepared (having a vision and strategy targeting all stages of the educational process, from promoting the university's educational services to graduation and post-graduation) and logistically prepared (personnel, interaction protocols, efficient and transparent communication infrastructure, collaborations with other involved institutions, social, psychological, and medical assistance services) to manage the number of immigrant students and the diversity of issues they face (generated by cultural diversity but also specific social cases).

3.2.3 Measuring the Perceived Success of a Higher Education Institution in Providing the Social Dimension for Immigrant Students

Student Perspective

Recruitment. Respondents highlighted two ways of promoting educational services to potential students: formal and informal. Regarding formal promotion, students mentioned the need for information to be presented on the university's platform in a centralized form, in multiple languages, and accessible from anywhere in the world. The participation of the university in university fairs or other international promotion events was also mentioned. Regarding informal promotion, respondents believe that the best advertisement the university can have among potential immigrant students is how it provides quality services and supports the post-graduation integration of immigrants who have already graduated.

Admission. Respondents mentioned three dimensions of evaluation/measuring success: (1) Legal/bureaucratic dimension (optimizing the relationship between the university and other responsible institutions, simplifying bureaucratic/legal procedures, complete digitization of legal procedures associated with admission); (2) Linguistic support (language preparation courses for the host country and foreign languages); (3) Optimization of internal procedures (extended admission process for immigrant students, special places for immigrant students in all faculties and specializations).

Retention. For this stage, respondents mentioned the following measures: (1) The existence of procedures/protocols through which the university can continuously monitor the progress of immigrant students and the issues they face; (2) Integration measures; (3) Involvement of PhD students in teaching and research activities; (4) Permanent guidance services through the administrative system; (5) Providing scholarships.

Graduation/Post-graduation. For this stage, respondents mentioned the following measures: (1) The existence of university strategies/procedures to monitor the integration of graduates into the workforce; (2) Providing equal internship opportunities for immigrant and local students; (3) Assisting graduates in finding their first job after graduation.

Expert Perspective

Recruitment. The main indicators highlighted by experts were: (1) Fairs, workshops, and webinars promoting the university's educational offerings; (2) Presence on international platforms for university promotion; (3) Promotion on social media (social networks), recruitment agencies from foreign countries; (4) Recommendations from existing/graduated students that attract other students.

Admission. Experts believe that the success of this stage depends on two factors: a positive result in the admission itself and obtaining a visa. They recommend that all links/structures involved in the admission process work together and do not send contradictory messages to students (e.g., the minimum number of credits required to move from one year of study to another, attendance at courses, seminars, laboratories). From this perspective, the relevant indicators would be: (1) Coherent articulation between the various structures responsible for the admission process of international students; and (2) Clear and transparent communication of all rights and obligations of this category of students in the educational process.

Retention. Although experts acknowledge that the cultural diversity of the body of immigrant students is a challenge, they consider that the teaching staff is sufficiently internationalized and does not need specific training on cultural diversity. They also appreciate that there are no issues related to delivering courses in international languages. Instead, experts believe that teachers should monitor the progress of immigrant students enrolled in their courses and offer counseling if they observe unsatisfactory progress. Another proposed solution is for immigrant students to have a tutor from among Romanian students to provide support.

Graduation/Post-graduation. Experts consider that the graduation rate among immigrant students could be an indicator. For the post-graduation stage, useful indicators would be: (1) Monitoring the progress of immigrant graduates (the existence of a database in this regard); (2) Employment rate in the field in which they completed their studies; or (3) The percentage of those who manage to start a business after graduation.

3.2.4 Barriers to Ensuring Social Dimension/Equity/Inclusion and Ways to Overcome Them

Student Perspective. The first barrier mentioned is the gap between the formal strategies and procedures of the university and their actual implementation. The proposed solution is monitoring how formal protocols and procedures are implemented in practice. The second barrier is cultural, religious, and racial differences. In this context, respondents highlight cases of discrimination in relation to local students. The proposed solution could be the organization of events by the university that bring together immigrant and local students. The third barrier is linguistic: communication in international languages with both teaching and non-teaching staff. The suggested solution is additional training in the use of international languages for both immigrant students and university staff. Other proposed solutions include: (1) Building comparative indicators at the European level, separately for university specializations, such as the percentage of integrated immigrant students in higher education; (2) Constructing representativity indicators covering cultural diversity; (3) Explicit social integration programs for immigrant students; (4) Adaptability of study programs for immigrant students, evaluating program flexibility based on the specific needs of immigrant students; (5) Financial support for immigrant students and open communication of all financial opportunities available to this student category; (6) Involvement of students in research activities; (7) Use of indicators quantifying the number of immigrant students participating in international conferences, members of scientific article author teams, etc.; (8) Procedures to evaluate feedback from immigrant students regarding university services and mechanisms to integrate this feedback for service improvement; (9) Creation of student organizations (including immigrant students) to mediate communication between immigrant students and the university; (10) Training programs for university teaching and non-teaching staff to raise awareness of cultural and religious diversity and anti-discrimination training (Table 2).

Expert Perspective. The main barrier mentioned by experts is cultural diversity (difficulties in understanding local specifics, university requirements, and the rights and obligations of both parties: students and the academic staff). The suggested solution is assigning tutors from among local students for small groups of immigrant students to guide them throughout their studies and formal/bureaucratic interactions with the higher education institution. The second barrier is logistical (staff shortage, protocols/procedures necessary for the proper management of the immigrant student

Table 2 Barriers to ensuring the social dimension for immigrant students and solutions (students vs. experts)

	Barriers	Solutions
Students	– Formal/ implementation inconsistency at the level of protocols and procedures – Cultural and religious differences – Language barriers	– Monitoring the implementation level of formal procedures/protocols – Organization of integration events/projects – Language training for university staff and students – Comparative indicators at the European level (e.g., immigrant students integrated into the higher education system – Indicators of representativeness to cover cultural diversity – Indicators for evaluating the flexibility of study programs by referring to the specific needs of immigrant students – Financial support for immigrant students – Communication of available financial opportunities – Involvement of students in research activities – Indicators regarding the number of immigrant students participating in international conferences, members of the collective of authors of scientific articles, etc. – Procedures to evaluate the feedback of immigrant students related to the services offered by the university and mechanisms to integrate this feedback to improve the services offered – The integration of immigrant students into student organizations – Anti-discrimination training
Experts	– Cultural differences – Logistic deficiencies	– Tutors/mentors assigned from among local students—strengthening the institutional interface

population). The suggested solution is strengthening the institutional interface in relation to immigrant students (Table 2).

4 Conclusions and Discussions

This study analyzed the main issues related to the social dimension of a Romanian multicultural higher education institution with respect to students with disabilities and immigrant students, as well as a series of indicators to measure this dimension. The study collected information from experts in these fields (special education, inclusive education, diversity education, mobility, immigrant students) as well as from students with disabilities and immigrant students.

Both experts and students identified common and specific issues. Regarding the current situation of ensuring the social dimension for both categories of students, it can be observed that both students with disabilities and immigrant students appreciate the efforts made by the university in this regard. However, both categories of students also point out aspects that can be improved.

For students with disabilities, most issues are related to the facilities that the university should provide to enable them to navigate independently in both physical (buildings, classrooms, seminars, laboratories) and non-physical environments (regulations, bureaucratic/legal elements, etc.), as well as issues related to the flexibility of teaching staff in teaching and evaluation activities. As for immigrant students, they cite specific legal issues, particularly those related to coordination between institutions (university, immigration centers, etc.), communication problems with the university, language barriers, and even discrimination.

The perspective of experts on the same issues is largely consistent with the views of the students. Experts confirm the need to optimize the aspects highlighted by students, emphasizing the need for a broader institutional vision to guide and legitimize individual behaviors in specific situations. In other words, there is a need for a top-down institutional approach, where teaching and non-teaching staff act guided by protocols, explicit procedures for interacting with students with disabilities or immigrant students, and the need for additional investment in infrastructure.

Starting from the definitions or characteristics of success in ensuring the social dimension, relatively similar between students and experts, with an emphasis on communication, flexibility, counseling, and financial/logistical support, the study participants generated a series of concrete proposals to assess this success. Although only one criterion of analysis was explicitly targeted, the stage of the educational process (access, admission, retention, and graduation/post-graduation), the indicators highlighted in the focus group discussions can be grouped according to other criteria aligned with those highlighted in various previous European studies.

Thus, it can be observed that beyond the stage of the educational process that is not revisited here (being explicitly treated in the results section), the study has identified indicators that directly target services for students and indicators that target university staff. The first category includes most indicators (e.g., psychological counseling services, vocational guidance, social assistance, language support, financial support, internship opportunities, employment, etc.). The second category includes a smaller volume of indicators such as anti-discrimination training, inclusive education courses, diversity skills, intercultural communication, awareness, evaluation grids for teaching staff that include ensuring the social dimension for students with disabilities or immigrant students, etc.

Another aspect that can be looked at is the direction of the institutional process: top-down indicators versus bottom-up indicators. In the first category, respondents mentioned the existence of an institutional vision, strategies, regulations, protocols, and procedures at the institutional level to guide the individual behaviors of university staff in relation to students with disabilities or immigrant students, the representation of both categories of students in the university's leadership structures, etc. The second category corresponds to indicators such as mechanisms/interfaces through which students with disabilities or immigrant students can present their needs and specific problems so that these can be acknowledged and addressed by the university leadership.

Another implicit criterion resulting from the participants' responses is the indicators' level of implementation: primary measures versus secondary or meta-measures. By primary measures, we mean those measures that directly target students or academic and non-academic staff, and by secondary measures or meta-measures, we mean those mechanisms by which the primary measures are monitored and adjusted or optimized. The primary measures category incorporates various facilities, structures, and processes through which students with disabilities or immigrant students are supported. Here, we include indicators such as financial support, the existence of a structure responsible for managing these categories of students, and the existence of inclusive training programs for students or teaching staff. The secondary measures or meta-measures category incorporates strategies or mechanisms through which, based on the analysis of the results of the measures or through the analysis of feedback, the process of ensuring the social dimension is optimized. For example, meetings with students with disabilities or immigrant students to obtain feedback on the implemented measures and evidence of adjusting procedures according to feedback, the existence of a monitoring mechanism for student performance and adjustment of teaching activities for optimization, monitoring the evolution of graduates in the labor market and adjusting their preparation and the type of support for employment, etc.

Also, the indicators can be classified into structural indicators versus functional/process indicators according to the objective they aim for. The first category will include those indicators that evaluate the existence of institutional structures, teams, and interfaces designed to manage the problems of students with disabilities or immigrant students (the existence of an office for students with disabilities, the existence of a structure responsible for monitoring the evolution of graduates, the degree of representation in the Faculty Councils/Senate/Board of Directors, etc.). The category of functional/process indicators can include monitoring mechanisms, feedback, optimization, promotion activities for educational services, collaborations with other institutions, recruitment centers, etc. From our point of view, the categories called structural and functional (process) indicators are very important in evaluating the quality of higher education in general and the inclusion of vulnerable students in particular. Thus, it is, first of all, important to have structures, formally appointed teams with the management of these problems (structural component), but then it is of even greater interest how these structures work, the various processes at play, and their dynamics (functional component). It is very important that structures are not just empty forms but living entities that perform their functions.

In this context, it is worth mentioning that any comprehensive evaluation of ensuring the social dimension of higher education must take into account a set of multi-criteria indicators. Ultimately, we suggest a final criterion (but not the least important), that of the specificity of Romanian higher education (European vs. national). In other words, although an evaluation system for ensuring the social dimension must include common elements of the European higher education system, it is important for the evaluation to incorporate indicators derived from the national context.

The last topic addressed was the barriers to ensuring the social dimension and solutions to overcome them. The mentioned barriers were both individual, such as the mentalities and stereotypes of teaching staff or Romanian colleagues, and general, such as legislative gaps, university motivation, and cultural diversity. However, what stands out is that for each barrier, study participants, whether experts or students, proposed constructive solutions to overcome them, solutions that ultimately can become good indicators of a (desirable) assurance of the social dimension in higher education.

Of course, this study is not without limitations. The main ones are the limited heterogeneity of study participants under the specter of geographical areas of origin, in the case of immigrant students, in terms of the type of disability for students with disabilities, and in terms of the specializations that both categories study. Also, the number of participants is relatively small, which may have limited the richness of issues, solutions, and indicators identified in this study. Last but not least, it is possible that the interaction with the researcher or just the awareness of participating in a study generated a certain reserve in expressing all needs or problems.

Even taking into account all the above, the results of this study offer a broad basis of options or at least starting points for building an evaluation method to assess the social dimension of Romanian higher education that has not only an evaluative but also a constructive-formative value.

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Beyond the Binary: Non-binary Students in a European Country Comparison and Methodological Considerations on Surveying Gender

Johanna Dau

Abstract Gender is a complex variable that is no longer understood as a binary construct. It is a constant task of social science to critically question variables and survey instruments and to close the gap between theory and empiricism. Thus, higher education research must also design the measurement of gender in such a way that gender-inclusive and theoretically valid results can be gained. To date, trans and inter students have hardly been included in the analyses of European higher education research. This paper presents the first European comparative analysis of non-binary students based on the EUROSTUDENT VII microdata set published in 2023 (Cuppen, 2023). This dataset covers 17 countries of which eight include information on more than fe(male) students. Bivariate-descriptive as well as multivariate analyses based on these eight countries show that students with a non-binary gender indication are more likely to be affected by psychological stress and financial difficulties across countries and are more often considering dropping out of their studies. Thus, non-binary students belong to the group of vulnerable and disadvantaged students whose inclusion is claimed to be essential in the "Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education" (Advisory Group 1 on Social Dimension, 2020) for the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The methodological obstacles encountered during the research process are used to reify the criticism of the operationalisation of gender in quantitative research. Finally, possibilities for improved gender measurement are discussed. Accordingly, the paper provides answers to two research questions: (1) In which aspects does the study and life situation differ between students with a non-binary gender indication and those with a female or male gender indication in an international comparison? (2) How can a gender-sensitive and research-practical set of gender questions be implemented in student surveys?

Keywords EUROSTUDENT · Non-binary gender · Mental health · Dropout · Gender mesurements

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1 Introduction

The conventional construction of gender in social sciences typically simplifies human beings into two categories: men and women. Accordingly, all people can be classified into one of these categories, and the task of social research is to investigate the differences between these two groups. But the social world is much more complex in reality.

Similar to earlier feminist perspectives in regard to the construction of women as subordinate to men, a queer-feminist perspective exposes the binary categorisation of gender as a powerful, socially constructed order that limits individuals beyond conventional norms and deprives people of opportunities to live—or even to survive as recognised subjects (Butler, 2004). In most cultures, people with a certain "biological makeup" (Morgenroth et al., 2021, p. 731) are still expected to develop either a female or a male body, identify as a woman or a man and behave according to female or male stereotypes. This reveals what is described in queer-feminist theory as heteronormative hegemony (Ludwig, 2011), a concept that also criticises the notion that gender is a binary construct and differences between women and men are inherently natural.[1]

In recent years, this critical perspective has gradually influenced legal frameworks, medical practices, language usage, and everyday situations, creating space for individuals existing beyond the categories of man and woman. Consequently, empirical social sciences face the challenge of expanding their gender categories to encompass intersex and transgender individuals in their analyses.[2] While there has been contemplation on this matter for more than 25 years (Sumerau et al., 2017), the actual implementation in research practices is slow and comes with unresolved challenges. So, there is also a need for improvement in European higher education research, both in the inclusion of intersex and transgender students in the analyses and in the methodology of data collection on gender.

To fill in the gaps, this article reports the results of the first international comparative analysis of the study and living conditions of students with a non-binary gender indication across European countries (Dau, 2023). The analysis is based on the microdata obtained from the EUROSTUDENT VII project, in which data from student

[1] "Heteronormativity organizes a set of beliefs, social practices, and relationships of identity that presume heterosexuality *and* enforce **binary gender** norms." (Staley, 2022, p. 250, emphasis in original).

[2] While people are described as cisgender if their sex assigned at birth (female/male) matches their current gender identity (usually translated as woman/man), individuals are described as transgender if their sex assigned at birth differs from their current gender identity or expression. Transgender people can identify with binary (women/men) and non-binary gender categories. Intersex is used as a (self-)description of people with bodily characteristics that do not clearly correspond to the cultural-medical norms of male or female, and they may use different terms for their gender identity. Transgender and intersex people are sometimes also referred to as gender minorities. Not to be confused with terms for sexual minorities based on sexual desire, such as gay, lesbian, bisexual or asexual (see also for an overview of various basic terms here: European Commission, Directorate-General for Justice, 2012).

surveys of European countries are processed and collected for internationally comparable analyses. Finally, the methodological challenges of collecting data on gender are briefly discussed, and a proposal for a new question design is made. The paper, therefore, addresses two questions:

1. In which aspects does the study and life situation of students with a non-binary gender indication differ from those with a female or male gender indication in an international comparison?
2. How can a gender-sensitive and research-practical question about the respondent's gender be implemented in student surveys?

2 State of Research

A quantitative analysis of individuals with a non-binary gender identity encounters an initial challenge due to the limited estimates available regarding their proportion in the general population, which is made more difficult by the lack of standardised counting methods. Some estimates are based solely on bodily visible characteristics (often defined by the term *sex*), while other counts also include the gender identity of individuals in everyday life. One of the reasons for this is that an official registration as non-binary is/was only possible for people with medically confirmed non-binary sexual characteristics so that solely intersexuality is documented in the official statistics. Furthermore, even within medical literature, there is disagreement about which physical characteristics categorise a person as neither 'fully' male nor 'clearly' female because "sex is given by our position in a multidimensional graph (in which the axes represent genotypic sex, gonadal sex, phenotypic sex, and hormonal sex)" (Cresti et al., 2018, p. 562). A frequently quoted estimate of the proportion of intersex people, which includes physical variation at the chromosomal, hormonal, or anatomical level, is around 1.7% of live births (Blackless et al., 2000; Preves, 2002). Moreover, variations in sex characteristics can be present from birth or develop later during puberty. However, these numbers do not include those whose physical characteristics align with the medical definition of female or male but who identify as (non-binary) transgender. But current sources capturing the lived and expressed gender identity are scarce and country-specific. Studies in the United States estimate that approximately 0.6% of adults and adolescents self-identify as transgender (Herman, Flores & O'Neill, 2022). A study among Brazilian adults estimates a prevalence of 0.7% transgender and 1.2% non-binary individuals (Spizzirri et al., 2021), while a study for the United Kingdom estimates a proportion of 1% gender variant people in the general population (GIRES, 2011). Thus, it is reasonable to assume a proportion of up to 2% transgender and intersex individuals in the overall population, though the distribution within the European student population may vary, but for which no official population data is currently available.

The socio-cultural perception, acceptance, and legal reality of people with non-binary gender and/or transgender are very different around the world.[3] Existing studies show that there is more acceptance of these representations and corresponding rights in many European countries but this is also accompanied by political backlash, hate crimes and discriminatory laws, even within a country (European Commission. Directorate General for Justice and Consumers, 2019; ILGA-Europe, 2024; LGBTI Survey Data Explorer, 2024). What can be stated, however, is that the protection of the human rights of transgender people is still insufficient in most countries (Dicklitch-Nelson & Rahman, 2022). In addition to the lack of legal inclusion, the lack of social acceptance of transgender and intersex people is also reflected in particular challenges and frequent forms of discrimination that some studies have found (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020; Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016; Kasprowski et al., 2021; de Vries et al., 2020).[4] The available information suggests that transgender and intersex people often appear to face mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety, and are exposed to stigmatisation (Bradley, 2020; Zeeman & Aranda, 2020). Individuals with intersex variations also report physical and psychological impacts of medical and surgical treatments, often carried out at birth or during childhood (Blackless et al., 2000; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020). Moreover, in the intersex and transgender population, school dropouts and increased levels of suicidal ideation or attempts are frequently observed (Herman et al., 2019; Jones, 2016; McBride, 2021). For European countries, it has been demonstrated that more than half of the intersex and transgender respondents in the LGBTI Survey (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020) reported difficulties in making ends meet financially. Reasons for this include higher unemployment rates due to discrimination in the labour market based on their gender expression or transition process (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014; de Vries et al., 2020). In summary, existing research findings show that transgender and intersex people often have difficulties with their health and a precarious socio-economic status.

For the situation of students identifying as intersex and transgender in Europe, predominantly critical discussions, field reports, and some recommendations for recognising transgender students at universities exist. For the USA, Beemyn (2019) published the anthology *Trans Students Book*, which provides insightful summaries

[3] The Trans Rights Indicator (TRIP) can be used to track differences in legislation on gender minorities at a global level from 2000 to 2020. The creator of TRIP (Williamson, 2023) has also made a comparison between the existing rights on sexual orientation and those on gender minorities and found that their legal situation and their experiences of discrimination cannot be equated—with rights of gender minorities mostly being worse. Exceptions are countries such as Pakistan and India, which are known for allowing (also non-binary) "gender marker changes once individuals satisfied the prohibitive requirements" (ibid., p. 11), but the rights of lesbians, gays and bisexuals are less legally protected there.

[4] While some of the studies cited compared the experiences of transgender or intersex people with cisgender people (Kasprowski et al., 2021; de Vries et al., 2020), some only compared experiences of discrimination among LGBTI populations (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020), and most documented the different discrimination experiences faced by certain gender minority groups (Bradley, 2020; Grant et al., 2011; Herman et al., 2019; Zeeman and Aranda, 2020).

of a range of recent and older studies on transgender and intersex students but also claims that more nuanced research is still needed. However, based on the existing results, it can be observed that transgender and intersex students frequently experience verbal, physical, and sexual assaults. A study conducted in 2009 in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, for example, reveals that transgender students often experience discrimination in various forms (Valentine & Wood, 2009). For instance, they may avoid using binary-coded restrooms due to fear of verbal or physical attacks and worry about not being addressed with the correct pronouns or names, which increases the likelihood of involuntary disclosure and potential bullying (ibid.). Subsequently, this leads to "stress or loss of confidence, and self-exclusion from specific spaces within the university" (ibid., p. 2), thereby raising the likelihood of skipping classes or abandoning their studies altogether. Furthermore, Garvey and Dolan (2021) illustrate how cis-normativity[5] negatively impacts the academic success of queer and transgender students, primarily drawing on results from US-American students. They state that the academic success of intersex and transgender students is impaired by verbal and physical attacks and stigmatisation in the academic environment, resulting in a sense of exclusion. Moreover, they also mention a lack of financial support from their families as a disadvantage that seems to affect transgender students more often (Rehr & Regan, 2022). This is mainly due to the fact that parents often reject their transgender children and reduce financial support services for this reason (Garvey & Dolan, 2021; Goldberg et al., 2019b; Valentine & Wood, 2009). Garvey and Dolan (2021) also report that experiences of discrimination faced by transgender students result from infrastructural constraints or administrative obstacles, as well as a lack of representation (and role models) in teaching and research.

Overall, the studies and recommendations for action recurrently identify certain areas in which transgender and intersex students encounter discrimination. These are: (a) infrastructural barriers such as binary organised sanitary facilities, changing rooms or accommodation for students; (b) administrative requirements such as registration in university administrative systems; (c) communication in various speaking situations, e.g., during lessons; and (d) representation in research and teaching.

Drawing on the results of the barriers faced by transgender and intersex persons in general and the existing results on non-binary students, it can be stated that those who identify as intersex and transgender are more frequently affected by psychological stress, experiences of discrimination and financial insecurity. Therefore, the hypotheses have emerged that a European country comparison will also show that non-binary students are more affected by

(1) mental health problems,
(2) financial difficulties,
(3) and rate their study situation worse than students in the female or male gender category.

[5] Cis-normativity refers to the idea that all people are (binary) cisgender and that physical sex characteristics determine gender identity and gender expression (see also Lindqvist et al., 2021).

3 Methods

To understand how the results presented in the next section were attained, this section describes how the sex/gender characteristic was collected for the project (see Fig. 1). This also gives an insight into the methodological challenges involved in analysing non-binary students.

The hash # in the question text “What is your #sex?” indicates that the researchers should use the official wording for sex which is common in the higher education statistics of their respective countries. As the English language reveals, the term sex or gender alone results in different theoretical understandings of gender.[6] Therefore, a first ambiguity in the operationalisation used is that it leaves room for interpretation as to which understanding of gender is being surveyed. Hence, respondents cannot conclude if their officially registered sex entry or gender identity is surveyed.[7] Secondly, the response categories are also vaguely formulated, e.g., it remains open what exactly is meant by “Other”. In particular, “I prefer not to assign myself” is a ‘black box’, as several interpretations are possible here. So, on the one hand, it might be that the respondents with a non-binary gender identity cannot or do not want to identify with the term “Other”,[8] and “I prefer not to assign myself to

6.2. What is your #sex?

Single choice.

- O Female (→ please go to question 6.4)
- O Male (→ please go to question 6.4)
- O *[if existing as official category in #country] #Other* (→ please go to question 6.4)
- O *[Optional]* #I prefer not to assign myself into the above-mentioned categories (→ please go to question 6.3)

Fig. 1 Formulation of the sex/gender question for the EUROSTUDENT VII project. *Source* EUROSTUDENT Questionnaire (IHS & DZHW, 2019)

[6] A much discussed and well-known distinction in early feminist debates is that between sex and gender, whereby sex often refers to the physical differences between male and female bodies and gender to social attributions and personal identification. One concern of feminist theory was and is to criticise the fact that conclusions are often drawn from physical characteristics to character traits, which are therefore considered natural and unchangeable. In addition, Judith Butler (1990) is known for having emphasised that what is socially understood as sex is also socially constructed.

[7] The officially registered sex entry usually reflects the assignment made at birth based on the physically visible sexual characteristics at that time. Gender identity can be divided into felt gender identity, externally perceivable gender expression, and one can more or less conform to normative gender role expectations. If only sex/gender (or the country-specific formulation) is used without a short explanatory text, the common understanding is questioned. Here, Queer Theory points out that gender has different dimensions that can diverge.

[8] Because “Other” can be read as a negatively formulated umbrella term for a deviation from the norm of the binary gender. This is when the concept of *Othering* takes place: “ […] a practice which may reinforce and reproduce subordination by defining who differs from the norm” (Johnson et al., 2004 in Lindqvist et al., 2021).

the above-mentioned categories" suits them better. On the other hand, it is equally conceivable that respondents solely choose the fourth category because they want greater anonymisation in the questionnaire. Due to these uncertainties in the operationalisation, the two non-binary gender categories are considered separately in the analysis.

The EUROSTUDENT VII microdata set covers 17 countries of which only eight include information on more than female and male students (see Table 1). For the analysis, four countries have been grouped together due to insufficient case numbers in the non-binary gender category ($n < 30$). This resulted in a total of five country categories for the international comparison (Austria, Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands, and the grouped country variable consisting of Croatia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, and Slovenia).

For the first investigation, bivariate descriptive analyses were carried out using cross-tabulations of the sex/gender variable and a wide range of variables that provide an explorative overview of the study and life situation of students with a non-binary gender indication. Six topics were covered, namely socio-demographic and higher education characteristics, their health, financial, and employment situation, and their assessment of different aspects of their study situation compared to female and male students. In a first step, *intra*national significant differences between non-binary and binary students within each country have been identified. The identification of clear, i.e., significant differences relied on confidence intervals instead of conventional significance tests such as the Chi^2 test. That is because the latter quickly runs towards zero due to the high case numbers in the female and male categories (see Table 1) and thus tends towards type I alpha errors (false positive) (Lin et al., 2013). Ultimately, an *inter*national trend was identified only if non-binary students in at least four of the five countries differed significantly from male *and* female students, i.e. the confidence intervals did not overlap with those of the non-binary categories. This seemed to be the most promising and statistically rigorous way to deal with the challenges posed by the different case numbers in the gender categories or low case numbers in the non-binary categories. In the second stage, multivariate logistic regressions were run to analyse the effect of the sex/gender indication on the three hypotheses (see page 249) in comparison to other predictors. Overall, despite the ambiguous wording of the gender question and statistical challenges, the results were very clear in some areas.

Table 1 Frequency table of weighted case numbers by sex/gender indication (only countries with case numbers in at least one non-binary gender category)

What is your #sex?	Austria	Croatia	Finland	Ireland	Lithuania	Luxembourg	Netherlands	Slovenia	Total	Total (%)
Female	22,155	1,045	3,716	10,333	1,887	389	8,286	1,209	49,020	53
Male	18,615	771	3,188	9,354	1,447	321	7,832	879	42,407	46
Other	86		30						116	0.1
I prefer not to assign myself	1,080	24	73	213	22	9	157	24	1,602	1.7
Total	41,936	1,840	7,007	19,900	3,356	719	16,275	2,112	93,145	100

Empty cells: Category not included in the national questionnaire
Source Weighted data, EUROSTUDENT VII Micro Data, Cuppen et al. (2023)

4 Key Findings

This section reports the results considered cross-national trends from the exploratory bivariate descriptive analyses followed by a brief contextualisation of the hypotheses by drawing on the results of the multivariate analyses and findings from the literature. The following cross-national trends were observed[9]:

- In all countries, students with a non-binary gender indication state more frequently that their parents are financially not well-off (at all).[10]
- In all countries, non-binary students are many times more likely to study subjects in the ISCED field of study "Arts and Humanities".
- In all countries, non-binary students are more frequently affected by at least one health problem (depending on the country, up to four times more frequently than students with a female/male gender indication). Mental health problems are far more often reported by students with a non-binary gender indication (twice to six times as often, see Fig. 2). Another long-standing health problem (not further specified in the questionnaire) is also reported twice to four times more frequently across countries.
- Non-binary students in four countries (all except Ireland) are around 10–20% points more likely to report financial difficulties (see Fig. 3). In these four countries, non-binary students also state that they are unable to pay an unexpected bill (neither themselves nor can they count on support from others).
- In three countries, non-binary students are more likely to seriously consider dropping out of university and in two countries, they are more often unsure about this (see Fig. 4). Furthermore, non-binary students in all countries are more likely to consider changing their study programme than students in the female or male gender categories.
- In all countries, non-binary students state more frequently that they get along less well with teaching staff.
- In all countries, non-binary students state less frequently that they have much contact with their fellow students.
- In four countries, non-binary students are more often dissatisfied with the learning support provided by their universities.
- In all countries, non-binary students are less likely to recommend their study programme to others.

Overall, students with the non-binary gender indication "Other" and "I prefer not to assign myself" are very similar in all aspects analysed. In addition to these clear

[9] This paper is a summary of an extensive research project (Dau, 2023), which is why the results are presented in this condensed form. A cross-national trend means that at least four of the five countries analysed showed significant differences between non-binary and binary students for the same characteristic.

[10] This result reflects the students' assessment of their parents' financial affluence on a 5-point scale from "not at all well-off" to "very well-off".

cross-national trends, some tendencies across several countries exist.[11] Tendencies among non-binary students are, for example, that they rate the higher education infrastructure less favourably, are more likely to feel that teachers are not interested in what students have to say, indicate less often to feel that they belong in higher education, and are more likely to have completed their schooling abroad (i.e., to be international students). At the same time, they show no or only rarely cross-national differences in some key characteristics compared to students with a binary gender indication, such as age or their primary source of income, the extent of employment alongside their studies, the time intensity of study, the assessment of their own performance compared to fellow students or their intention to study one day.

To put these observable results into an explanatory context, at least three hypotheses (that could be identified as cross-national trends) were analysed using logistic regressions. In a comparison of several substantiated factors, a non-binary gender indication seems to have a strong effect on the probability of mental health problems occurring (see Fig. 5). For the probability of having financial difficulties (see Fig. 6) and intention to drop out of higher education (see Fig. 7), a non-binary gender does not increase the probability of occurrence as much as other factors, and other variables are much more helpful for prediction.

But how can this relatively strong structural connection between a non-binary gender indication and a mental health burden be interpreted? Firstly, the regression model for mental health among students has a low explanatory power overall (McFadden $r^2 = 0.07$). This means that there are other explanatory factors behind this relation that could not be included in the model because relevant variables are missing in the data set. For the connection between gender and mental health problems, it is particularly important to emphasise that this result can be explained by societal factors. It is not sex/gender per se that is responsible for the high prevalence but rather socio-cultural factors resulting from the experience of living with a non-binary gender.

Due to the imprecise operationalisation of the question on sex/gender (the wording of the response categories and the wording of the question, see Chap. 3), it is strictly speaking not theoretically flawless to draw conclusions about intersex and transgender students from respondents with non-binary gender information. Nevertheless, the empirical results on these gender categories are consistent with the results found in the literature on transgender and intersex students. This includes, above all, the result on the increased impact of psychological stress. It is known in theory and from other research that people with non-conforming gender experiences are often affected by exclusion, stigmatisation, and discrimination in their everyday (student) lives. Several studies describe this socio-cultural, psychological context as “minority stress” (Bockting et al., 2013; Tankersley et al., 2021; Williams, 1992). For this model, the non-binary gender specification can, therefore, be interpreted as a proxy

[11] Tendency means either that non-binary students are similar in one aspect across at least four of the five countries analysed, but not all differences are significant (i.e., not clear enough) or that only three of five countries show significant differences between non-binary and binary students.

for experiences of discrimination and points to a complex relationship that cannot be explained with quantitative social science data alone. The current state of research shows that intersex and transgender students are often confronted with stigmatisation and violent attacks in a world that denies their existence. But such experiences could not be depicted in the model. Moreover, it should be borne in mind that the surveys took place before the COVID-19 pandemic, and studies show that mental health has deteriorated among students as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Chen & Lucock, 2022; Holm-Hadulla et al., 2021; Vötter, 2021). All of this provides a motivational basis for further research.

As described, a non-binary gender indication does not appear to be predictive of the presence of financial difficulties (see Fig. 6). According to the calculated regression model, the parents' financial situation appears to have a major influence on the existence of financial difficulties among students in comparison to other characteristics. The descriptive analysis shows that non-binary students also frequently indicate that their parents are financially not well-off, which may explain a part of the higher prevalence of financial difficulties among them (see page 253). Another reason cited in the literature is the often-strained relationship between parents and intersex and transgender students, which leads to them not providing financial support if they reject the children's gender-non-conforming identity (Garvey & Dolan, 2021; Goldberg et al., 2019b; Rehr & Regan, 2022; Valentine & Wood, 2009). This argument gains weight given that, according to the regression model, the parents' financial situation primarily determines the students' financial situation. This context may partly explain why non-binary students are more frequently affected by financial difficulties, as the descriptive analyses show. However, this model also has a low explanatory power overall (McFadden $r^2 = 0.08$). This indicates that there are more complex relationships behind the phenomenon that need to be analysed using other data and a variety of methods.

Likewise, a non-binary gender indication alone makes no significant contribution to explaining an increased probability of dropping out of university (see Fig. 7). However, the higher prevalence of intention to drop out among non-binary students can also be explained by the fact that they are often found in categories that generally make dropping out more likely. The descriptive results show that non-binary students are less likely to feel a sense of belonging to the academic world and are less likely to recommend their study programme to others. These aspects, in turn, have the strongest influence on the intention to drop out of university in the model calculated. The descriptive results also show that non-binary students are more likely to be found in other less influential but nevertheless explanatory factors for an increased probability of dropping out. These include having little contact with other students, getting along less well with lecturers, having financial difficulties or health problems. In contrast, the age structure among non-binary students is not different from that of binary students, and they rate their academic performance just as highly or are employed just as often as female and male students. Therefore, the increased intention to drop out seems to be more caused by university-related characteristics. This means that a worse experience in higher education settings can be interpreted as an explanation for the increased intention to drop out among non-binary students.

In summary, it can be said that the literature and the current state of research as well as the combination of bivariate-descriptive analyses with multivariate methods converge towards similar conclusions. It is also clear that the quantitative methods have their limits and cannot explain these multifaceted interrelationships on their own, especially if little is known about the object of investigation. Multidisciplinary knowledge and intersectional approaches as well as qualitative methodology would make a constructive contribution to explain the presented results. However, the insights generated by this research can provide the basis for further hypotheses that can be tested with improved surveying on gender and other research designs.

5 Implications for Higher Education Policies

The "Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education" (Advisory Group 1 on Social Dimension, 2020) for the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) aim to promote the inclusion, equality, and diversity of vulnerable, disadvantaged, and underrepresented students. Intersex and transgender students are underrepresented in higher education research and policy, as mentioned above. They are also among the most vulnerable students because they are more exposed to the risk of discrimination: "[…] people who continually occupy a space of non-conformity—as many non-binary people do—may also continually occupy a position of vulnerability." (Frohard-Dourlent et al., 2017, p. 4). The results of this study also show that they are among the most disadvantaged students because they are often burdened by health problems and financial difficulties. This means there is an urgent need for focused higher education policy interventions for this group of students based on internationally established guidelines.

Several recommendations for improving the study situation of transgender and intersex students can be derived from the results of the study on non-binary students presented here in combination with literature and studies from other sources (Beemyn & Rankin, 2019; Garvey & Dolan, 2021; Goldberg et al., 2019a; Lawrence & Mckendry, 2019; McBrien et al., 2022; Park, 2016; Wanti et al., 2022). An overview can be found in Table 2. The groups targeted by the national equity policies for universities (if existing at all in a country) are just as varied as the institutions responsible for implementing those policies in each country (Salmi, 2018). The table can, therefore, only provide a rough breakdown between the university and government levels, which may not always fit the national context.

Some examples are measures that could be implemented with little to no financial cost but can be essential for transgender and intersex students' sense of belonging like using gender-neutral language. Furthermore, "non-monetary instruments [which increase] the students' chances of success in their academic career rather than just eliminating financial barriers" (Salmi, 2018, p. 34), like outreach and bridge programmes that are "early interventions and collaborative partnerships between universities and schools" (ibid.), can facilitate access to higher education for gender non-conforming persons, as studies also show that many of those have already

Table 2 Suggestions for improving the study situation for non-binary students at the university and governmental level of measures

University level	Governmental level
Adopt internal documents (policies and protocols) that explicitly consider gender identity and gender expression	Allow registration with a self-chosen pronoun and name at universities
Employment and involvement of intersex and transgender academic staff in teaching and researching and the development of measures	Involvement of intersex and transgender academic staff in the development of measures
Promote contact points and student associations for gender-non-conforming people to find like-minded people and advice	Support adjustments in the infrastructure like sanitary facilities, changing rooms, accommodation for intersex and transgender students and university staff
Set up psychological counselling centres whose staff are trained to deal with gender-related questions and LGBTQIA concerns	Offer and facilitate financial support for low-cost psychotherapeutic treatments for students
Develop transgender-inclusive curricula in research and teaching	More scholarships to students affected by gender-based stigmatisation (regardless of the parents' income)
Use of gender-neutral pronouns or ask for self-chosen pronouns in spoken and written interactions (e.g., teachers should avoid reading lists of names out loud or using only examples of men and women in teaching content). Do not assume the gender of a person only by physical appearance	
Request or conduct workshops, events and other educational programs that promote awareness, recognition, and inclusion of transgender and intersex people (which could also be visible on the websites of the universities)	

dropped out of school due to experiences of discrimination (see Chap. 2). Likewise, retention programmes that include psychological counselling as well as academic advising prove to be helpful for marginalised groups in general (ibid.). Recognising that experiences of discrimination based on gender non-conformity can contribute to the risk of mental health problems in students, psychological counselling centres can be set up whose staff are trained to deal with gender-related concerns, LGBTQIA issues, and mental health problems related to discrimination. The analyses also show that university-related characteristics such as a lack of a sense of belonging or strained teacher-student relationships are decisive factors that cause gender non-conforming students to drop out of their studies more frequently. Therefore, more awareness, recognition, and inclusion of these groups in teaching and research would appear to be helpful steps. The empirical analyses and the literature also indicate that peer groups (or interest groups) and specific contact points at universities can be particularly helpful for gender non-conforming individuals. Additionally, if financial difficulties among transgender and intersex students are also due to a strained parent–child relationship, more scholarships can be offered to students affected by gender-based stigmatisation regardless of the parents' income. Health impairments also have an impact on the financial situation, with the results suggesting that offering low-cost psychotherapeutic support can be a helpful combination. The COVID-19 pandemic has also shown the general need for this.

Furthermore, specific measures that contribute to inclusion, greater acceptance, and representation of gender non-conforming students include allowing registration with a self-chosen pronoun and name, making infrastructural adjustments (sanitary facilities, changing rooms, accommodation), integrating or implementing gender-sensitive knowledge into teaching content, offering educational programmes for students and staff, and employing intersex and transgender individuals as teaching staff, as well as involving them in the development of measures.[12] The existence and concerns of these groups must also be integrated into higher education policy guidelines. Finally, it is emphasised how important the adequate inclusion of intersex and transgender students in higher education research is and that improved survey methods are necessary for this.

6 Measurement of Gender in Large Student Surveys

Finally, this section presents a proposal for operationalising the gender question in large student surveys based on the methodological critique of other research (Bauer et al., 2017; Diethold et al., 2023; Frohard-Dourlent et al., 2017; Garvey, 2019; Lindqvist et al., 2021; Muschalik et al., 2021; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2022). To conduct a research-practical, theoretically valid, and inclusive survey of the gender variable, at least the following aspects should be considered:

- When designing the intended research project, it is important to determine at the beginning which aspects of gender are of interest and aim to provide an unambiguous understanding of gender. For example, is the research interest more focused on medical-physical characteristics, performed gender roles and associated expectations, lived gender expression, or felt gender identity of people?
- According to the research interest, the question text and response categories must be coherent (e.g., the question text often asks for gender identity, but only the medical categories female/male are offered as response options).

[12] An overview of some country-specific differences in the rights of LGBTI people and examples for improving their study situation with concrete measures that have already been implemented can be found in the policy paper of UNESCO and IGLYO (2021).

- The question design must be comprehensible for the respondents and should not provoke respondents to cancel the questionnaire (e.g., people who reject gender diversity should also be considered when formulating the question). At the same time, discrimination through too few response categories or degrading formulations must be avoided.
- Since the response options should be distinguishable, inclusive, and not too complex, question modes that allow multiple responses are sometimes suitable to fulfil these requirements but, in turn, often require subsequent hierarchisation for analysis into one category by the researcher, which should be avoided. This is an example of the need to also consider a suitable survey mode.
- Currently, no standardised solution for the missing reference statistics on non-binary gender individuals exists, and alternative approaches for representative weighting procedures must be considered.[13] Additionally, the question text and the response categories should allow for a comparison with official data to weight the survey data representatively.

A three-step query is proposed to cover as many aspects as possible, knowing that this suggestion cannot meet all needs but serves as a basis for discussion:

The first step would be to clearly ask for the officially registered gender entry, whereby a reference text should make the purpose of the question clear (this is the comparability with official statistics). In the second step, the correspondence between the officially registered sex/gender entry and one's own gender identity would be asked, which can be answered with a simple yes/no. One of the aims of this mode is to prevent respondents who do not (or do not want to) understand the question about gender identity from cancelling the survey.

In the next step, people who have previously selected "No" would be asked about their self-chosen gender designation, with an open response field available. Research suggests that this offers some advantages over fixed gender categories.

1. *[Mandatory]* **With which sex are you officially registered at the university?**
   Explanation text: This question is for statistical reasons. Your self-attributed gender is asked by the next question.
   Response options: Categories of the official gender markers
2. **Does the registered sex match your gender identity?**
   Response options: Yes/No
3. *[If No was selected]* **Which gender do you currently identify with?**
   Response option: Open field.

[13] In social science, weighting is the process of calculating factors (weights) for each respondent that reflect whether their personal characteristics are over- or under-represented in the survey compared to the overall target population. This requires officially registered data on the 'real' quantities in the population, but there are currently no valid official statistics for transgender and intersex students. It would be conceivable, for example, to create a separate weight for non-binary people, which can be estimated from the literature and other surveys, instead of assigning them one of the binary weights or not including them in the analyses at all.

Overall, for a gender-sensitive, theoretically precise, and yet practicable data collection, several aspects must be considered, and the variant of data collection strongly depends on the overall design of the research and the research interest. It should be noted that some contradictions must be overcome to be able to research with quantitative methods on marginalised groups. From the perspective of critical quantitative research, marginalised and under-researched groups should be included in the data analyses and reporting of the results, even without a perfect solution, so that initial results can be obtained and a basis exists on which the survey methods can be further developed (Garvey et al., 2019). In any case, it must be noted that it is not the gender-non-conforming persons who are the problem but the survey methods that do not allow their reality of life to be reflected in the analyses.

Appendix

See Figs. 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6.

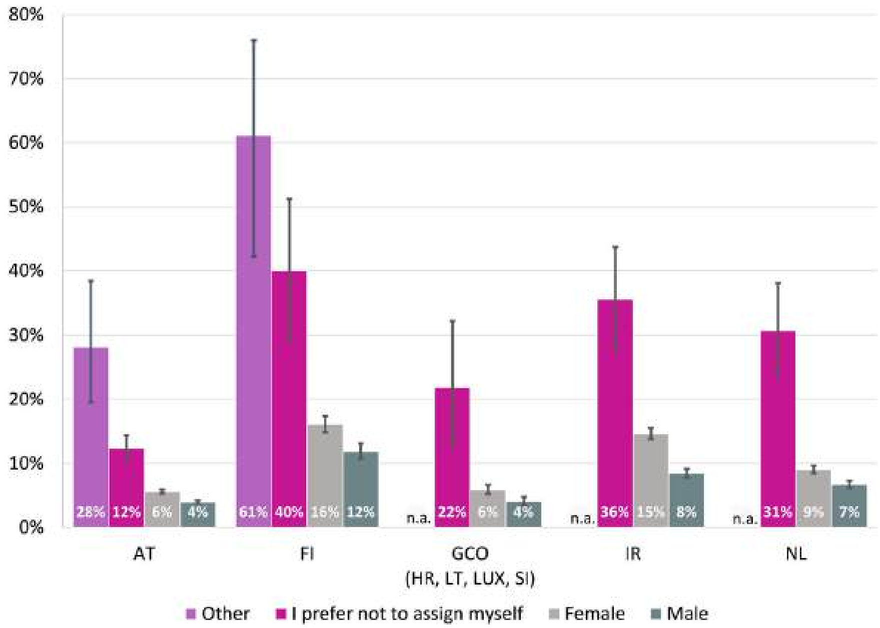

Fig. 2 Proportion of students with a mental health problem by sex/ gender and country with 95% confidence intervals (axis section 80%). If the confidence intervals do not overlap, there are significant differences between the groups. Wide spreads of the confidence intervals exist due to low case numbers. N.A.: not available as there is no response category "Other" in these countries. AT: Austria, FI: Finland, GCO: Grouped countries (Croatia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Slovenia), IR: Ireland, NL: Netherlands. *Source* Own calculations with weighted data (Dau, 2023) based on EUROSTUDENT VII micro data (Cuppen et al., 2023)

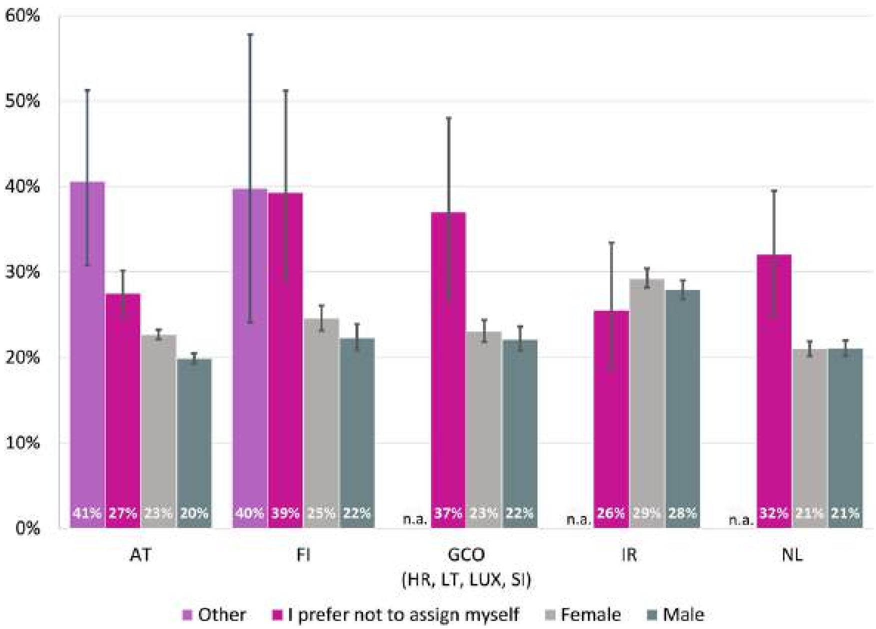

Fig. 3 Proportion of students with financial difficulties by sex/ gender and country with 95% confidence intervals (axis section 60%). If the confidence intervals do not overlap, there are significant differences between the groups. Wide spreads of the confidence intervals exist due to low case numbers. N.A.: not available as there is no response category "Other" in these countries. AT: Austria, FI: Finland, GCO: Grouped countries (Croatia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Slovenia), IR: Ireland, NL: Netherlands. *Source* Own calculations with weighted data (Dau, 2023) based on EUROSTUDENT VII micro data (Cuppen et al., 2023)

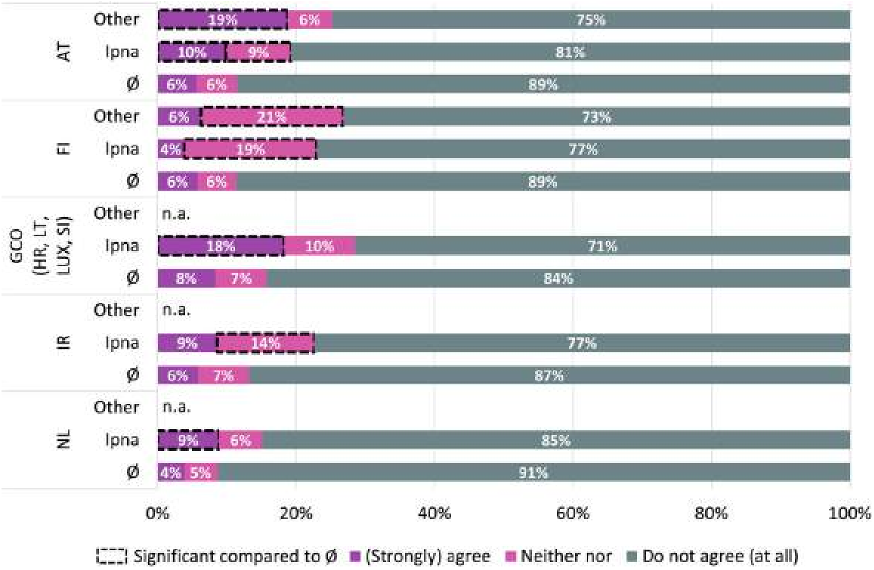

Fig. 4 Intention to drop out of higher education by sex/ gender and country (agreement with the statement "I am seriously thinking of completely abandoning my higher education studies"). The response options were recoded from a 5-point scale to a 3-point scale. The response categories "1 + 2 (strongly) agree" and "3 neither nor" with a black dotted border indicate a significant difference to the average. Due to the much higher number of cases in the gender categories "female" and "male", the average value is almost identical to that of all students in the binary gender categories and expresses their response behaviour. Ipna: "I prefer not to assign myself". If the confidence intervals do not overlap, there are significant differences between the groups. Wide spreads of the confidence intervals exist due to low case numbers. N.A.: not available as there is no response category "Other" in these countries. AT: Austria, FI: Finland, GCO: Grouped countries (Croatia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Slovenia), IR: Ireland, NL: Netherlands. Totals > 100% result from rounding differences. *Source* Own calculations with weighted data (Dau, 2023) based on EUROSTUDENT VII micro data (Cuppen et al., 2023)

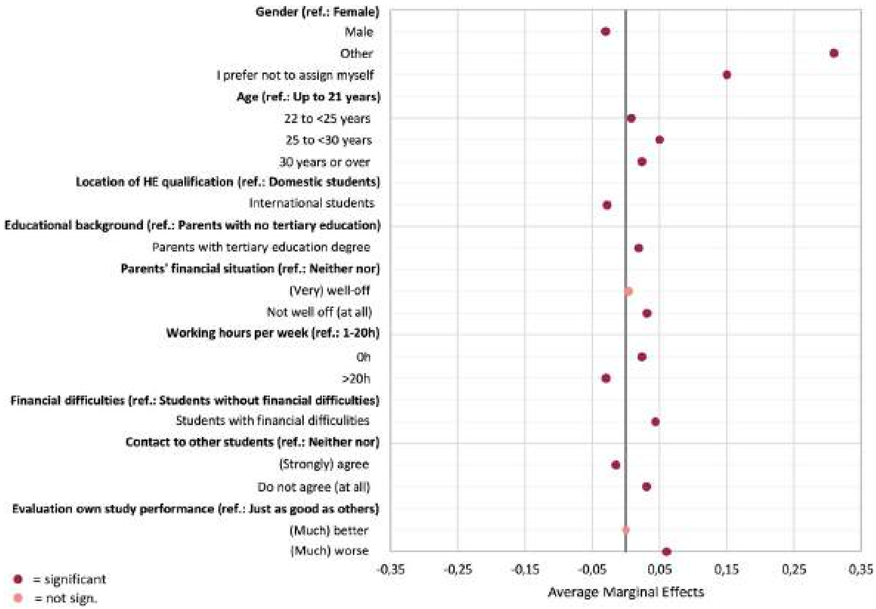

Fig. 5 Logistic regression model "Mental health" with Average Marginal Effects (axis section ± 35% points). Dependent variable: mental health problem (1 = Yes, 0 = No). If a value lies to the right of the reference line (value 0), the Average Marginal Effect is positive, i.e. this characteristic increases the probability of a mental health problem and vice versa. The further away the marker is from the reference line, the greater the effect. N = 54,808 (all analysed countries included). Pseudo-r2 (McFadden) = 0.07. Significant = *p*-value < 0.05. Dark: Significant. Light: Not significant. *Source* Own calculations with weighted data (Dau, 2023) based on EUROSTUDENT VII micro data (Cuppen et al., 2023)

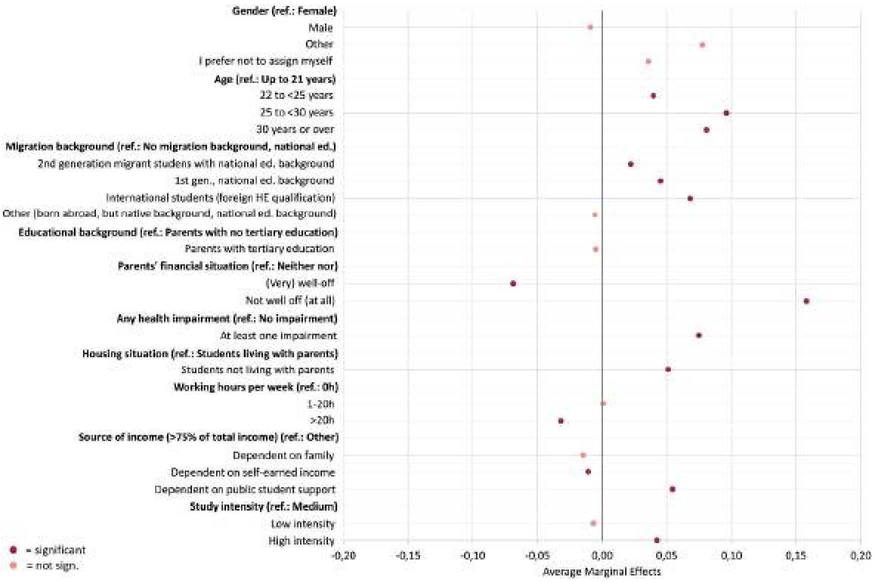

Fig. 6 Logistic regression model "Financial difficulties" with Average Marginal Effects (axis section ± 20% points). Dependent variable: financial difficulties (1 = Yes, 0 = No). If a value lies to the right of the reference line (value 0), the Average Marginal Effect is positive, i.e. this characteristic increases the probability of having financial difficulties and vice versa. The further away the marker is from the reference line, the greater the effect. N = 41,762 (all analysed countries included). Pseudo-r2 (McFadden) = 0.08. Significant = *p*-value < 0.05. Dark: Significant. Light: Not significant *Source* Own calculations with weighted data (Dau, 2023) based on EUROSTUDENT VII micro data (Cuppen et al., 2023)

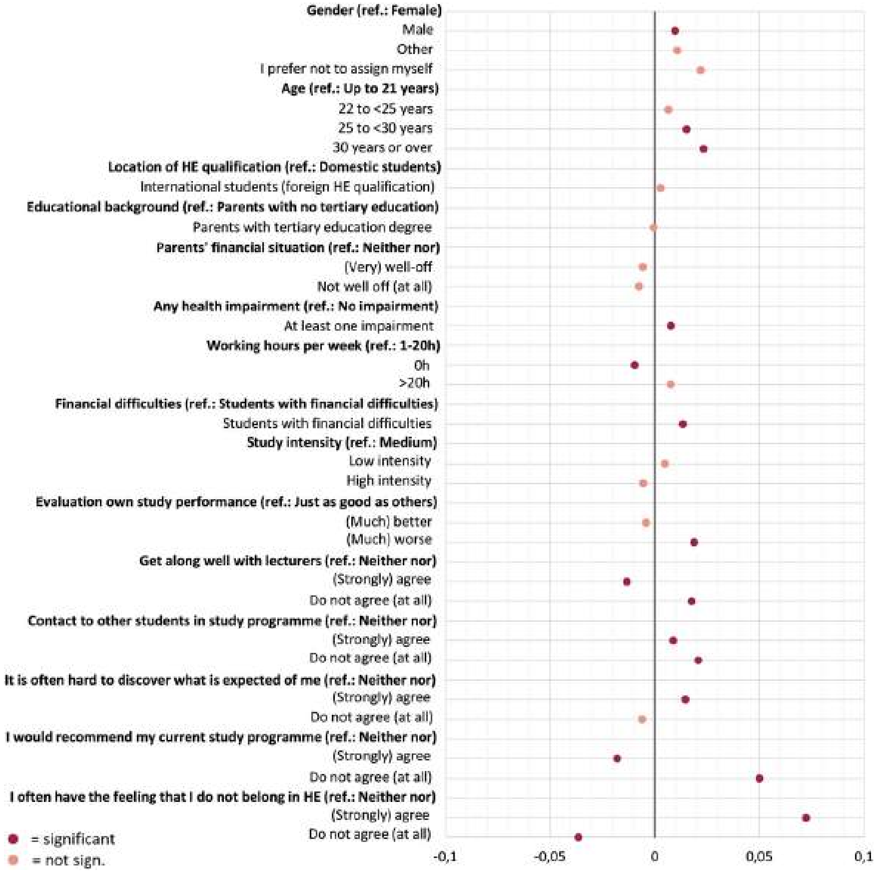

Fig. 7 Logistic regression model "Intention to drop out of higher education" with Average Marginal Effects (axis section ± 10% points). Dependent variable: dropout intention (1 = Yes, 0 = No). If a value lies to the right of the reference line (value 0), the Average Marginal Effect is positive, i.e. this characteristic increases the probability of an intention to drop out and vice versa. The further away the marker is from the reference line, the greater the effect. N = 36,731 (all analysed countries included). Pseudo-r2 (McFadden) = 0.26. Significant = *p*-value < 0.05. Dark: Significant. Light: Not significant. *Source* Own calculations with weighted data (Dau, 2023) based on EUROSTUDENT VII micro data (Cuppen et al., 2023)

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Social Inequality Contested: Prior Learning Assessment in the Context of Displacement

Lisa Unangst

Abstract Building upon a growing attention to the intersection of displacement and alternative higher education pathways, this paper probes how the current literature addresses Prior Learning Assessment serving displaced learners.

Keywords Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) · Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) · Displaced learners · Refugee education · Higher education · Access and equity

1 Introduction

Building upon a growing attention to the intersection of displacement and student-centered higher education pathways, this paper draws upon the extant literature—encompassing grey literature and institutional reports as well as peer-reviewed publications—to analyze how displaced learners across the lifespan are pursuing Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) opportunities across world regions. By displaced learner, I refer to individuals holding refugee or asylee status or a form of temporary humanitarian protection, with that latter category varying across national borders.

This emphasis on pathways for those outside the "traditional" college age range addresses the marginalization of those learners within education scholarship and the increasing emphasis on degree attainment among those with "some college, no degree" (Shapiro et al., 2014), who are ever more in focus given demographic trends. Moreover, adult learners frequently balance added financial pressures and caring responsibilities against those resources that can be dedicated to study; the extant literature demonstrates that financial barriers present a significant challenge to participation in higher education. This analysis addresses the following research questions: **How does PLA serve displaced learners according to the current literature? Second, how does the grey literature produced by the 217 higher**

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education research centers identified by the third edition of *Higher Education: A Worldwide Inventory* address PLA serving displaced learners?

The purpose of this study is to provide an overview of institutional innovations and student experience in the recent past and the contemporary moment. The review encompasses a literature search targeting the date range January 1, 2000 to October 1, 2023. Importantly, this search is limited neither by discipline nor institutional type: a plurality of international education practices and programs worldwide are in focus with an eye towards catalyzing those innovations across Europe in the years to come. Through those various interventions, the educational trajectories of individual learners holding statuses including refugee and asylee will be supported, as will the future rebuilding of current conflict states.

Why this focus on displaced learners? As argued elsewhere (see Unangst et al., 2022), there are several rationales undergirding the provision of higher education for displaced groups. These include the student equity argument, which draws from a critical lens to reform educational processes that have historically excluded groups on the basis of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and religion, among other (essentialist) identity markers (e.g., Brett, 2014; Korntheuer et al., 2018); the humanitarian argument, which draws from elements of the United Nations human rights architecture to underscore obligations to uphold agreed-upon protections among member states (e.g., Bhabha, 2002; Willems & Vernimmen, 2018); the diplomatic (or security) argument, emphasizing that tertiary attainment among displaced groups supports the future rebuilding of conflict states; the internationalization at home argument, which calls for attention to international/intercultural communities in any given national context (e.g. Hudzik, 2011; Leask, 2015); and finally, the economic argument, which points to short- and long-term advantages to the host or receiving country accrued by moderately or highly skilled displaced groups as well as economic benefit through remittances (e.g., Bahar, 2018; Lenette et al., 2019; World Bank, 2019; Wright & Plasterer, 2012).

2 Literature Review

2.1 Refugee Education

Though a nascent literature has begun to address how displaced learners access and experience higher education, the comparatively "small body of work on educational provision for students of displaced background obscures a gap in coordination of relevant policy and services" (Unangst et al., 2022, p. 96). However, individual Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have developed a range of initiatives (e.g., Berg et al., 2023). These initiatives are

> differentiated based on resources, legal protections available to displaced people, and the (de)centralization of higher education systems and span teaching, research, and service functions. Given that displacement will continue to proliferate in the midst of continued

economic, security, and climate challenges, there is an ever-increasing need to investigate and develop systems to support displaced individuals with a range of lived experiences. Cultivating HEIs that are supportive of the diverse population of displaced learners requires engagement with iterative policy and program development—incorporating a participatory approach and ongoing feedback from the broader community of policy actors, rather than policy "targets," as discussed by Turner and Mangual Figueroa (2019)—to address this vital human rights issue. (Unangst et al., 2023)

2.2 Prior Learning Assessment

Prior Learning Assessment is a process by which students pursuing a credential may earn credit for earlier learning outside the classroom. As Browning (2018) puts it, the two key areas for PLA include

> non-formal learning [which] refers to learning gained through participation in non-credit courses, workplace-based training, seminars or workshops but does not lead to attainment of a formal qualification or credential. Informal learning refers to learning gained through life experience, workplace-based tasks, voluntary activities, self-study, hobbies, family responsibilities, etc. (p. 5)

PLA (or Recognition of Prior Learning) has been used across national contexts since at least the 1970s. It is generally framed as a student-centered practice furthering post-secondary access and attainment and also an opportunity to liaise with industry partners to support the further training of (potentially) highly skilled workers lacking a college or university credential. Barriers to PLA include a lack of consistent, easy-to-understand policy; varied regulations around whether loans/aid may be used to cover fees associated with PLA (e.g., Plumlee & Klein-Collins, 2017); and the resources required to evaluate PLA submissions.

How specifically PLA is conducted has varied over time and across institutions. In their policy brief *The Current State of Prior Learning Policies*, García and Leibrandt assert that mechanisms for recognizing prior learning may include standardized examination, faculty-developed challenge exam (for which learners may earn credit for a specific course by passing a comprehensive examination developed by faculty), portfolio-based and other individualized assessment, and/or evaluation of non-college programs (which might be based on recommendations by organizations such as, in the US, the American Council on Education, which evaluates training offered by employers/military, or alternately based on HEI-specific review in partnership with workforce development agencies or other training providers linking to external training/credentials and existing degree programs).

Vital questions around PLA's structure and implementation persist and also vary across regional, national, and institutional settings. Moreover, these questions are tied to the differentiation of higher education systems, access and equity, and the relative hierarchies of HEIs (e.g., Unangst, 2017). As Mandell (2000), among others, has pointed out, consideration of prior learning is necessarily linked to questions around academia's epistemic extractionism and gatekeeping. Mandell posits:

> PLA has been critical to the conversations about access and inclusion and significant to the changing role and configuration of colleges and universities, which are themselves embedded in a particular world of work, credentials, and socio-economic reality. But perhaps most important, PLA has also been about our assumptions regarding knowledge itself. That is, at least part of PLA's power has come from the most basic questions it has forced us to ask, and with which we now have the opportunity to seriously grapple. For example, what is learning? What is a skill? What is valuable knowledge? Who has what knowledge? Who cm1 we trust to make these judgments? What are the strengths or limitations of what any person knows? How do we determine when something is learned? Where does this learning come from? (Mandell, 2000, p. 48)

In the European setting, the European Commission's proposal of Individual Learning Accounts offered a clear indication for PLA, with next steps being "proposals [to] be negotiated with Member States". These accounts would allow individuals to capture the training or skills development they had pursued relevant to their career goals, with these smaller, individual learning opportunities then reflected in evaluation by higher education institutions, should the learner decide to pursue more formalized degree opportunities. "Once adopted by the Council, the Commission will support Member States, social partners, and relevant partners in implementing these Council Recommendations" (European Commission, 2021). Concurrently, the Swedish Council for Higher Education (UHR) led the EU-funded project "Recognition of Prior Learning in Practice" with ten formal partners and 11 associated higher education institutions (HEIs) across five countries from April 2019 to April 2021 (Swedish Council for Higher Education, 2021). In 2022, the launch event for a new European Recognition of Prior Learning Network was hosted by the Austrian Quality Assurance Agency (AQ Austria), this being a component of the Austrian 3-IN-AT-PLUS project funded by Erasmus + Bologna call from March 2022 to December 2024 (European University Association, 2022).

3 Methods

The purpose of this scoping review was to identify the literature available on PLA and displacement across literature from the last 23 years captured by the large social science database Web of Science, with the purpose of identifying key concepts and data sources and pointing toward gaps in the research. As a complement and acknowledging that research on workplace/informal learning is often published in the grey literature, a paired source of evidence was also utilized: a review of how 217 research centers identified in an authoritative global scan by Rumbley et al. (2014) have considered this same topic.

The search in Web of Science used keywords, titles, and abstracts of studies from the database. The initial search terms/keywords were "Prior Learning Assessment" AND [refugee* OR asylee*] with a date range from 2000 through 2023. In a second search using the same date range, search terms/keywords were "Recognition of Prior Learning" AND [refugee* OR asylee*]. Further work might draw upon these same search criteria in an examination of other scholarly databases; this is acknowledged as a limitation of the present paper.

For each research center, Rumbley et al. (2014) identified the relevant website (where such a site existed), and I began my search using those websites and reverting to a Google search if a website was unavailable. Several centers seem to have merged or closed; at the University of Sydney, for instance, the following text was made available: "at the end of 2015, the Institute for Teaching and Learning, and Sydney eLearning merged to form a new Educational Innovation (EI) Team located in the DVC (Education) Portfolio." Other websites are not visible from the author's internet connection in the US (connection blocked). The next step was to search for the terms "prior learning" and "refugee" on each of these pages before reviewing the list of research publications (as available). The following results were collected from that scan.

4 Findings

4.1 Web of Science (WoS) Literature Review

The search of the WoS examining "Prior Learning Assessment" produced 96 results broken into academic fields as indicated in Table 1.

Following a scan of all titles and abstracts, a very small pool of articles with some connection to PLA was identified. In total, five articles with some relevance were culled from this search, a strikingly low result. The titles of the journals included *American Journal of Health System—Pharmacy, the International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care, Social Sciences, Refuge, and the Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. Upon closer examination of the full text, the reference to PLA was indirect across the papers in question. These included calls for increased collaboration across local, county, and state lines in support of refugee women seeking employment and education in tandem (Namak et al., 2022), as well as a consideration of ways to support "liminal status students [to] pursue their education… finding spaces to be their authentic selves" (Syeed et al., 2022, p. 6) and also challenging "the supposed divide between campus and community" through acknowledgment of their various learning experience (which PLA might well facilitate) (ibid, p. 4). Writing about refugees in the US, Yu et al. find that their study participants "revealed a tendency and disposition to help others which carried through from their country of origin into their new lives in the United States" (p. 1657); indeed, unpaid work with community organizations is used by my own university as an example of learning that may form the basis of a credit-earning experience. If displaced learners, broadly, were able to include their experiences before, during, and following resettlement in support of their own community, this could indeed be transformational for individuals, communities, and institutions (including the very HEIs granting credit, which

Table 1 Results of Web of Science literature review; assembled by author

Web of science categories	Record count	% of 96 search results
Public environmental occupational health	18	18,750
Demography	14	14,583
Law	7	7,292
Psychiatry	7	7,292
Education educational research	6	6,250
Social work	6	6,250
Ethnic studies	5	5,208
Geography	5	5,208
Social issues	5	5,208
Social sciences interdisciplinary	5	5,208
Family studies	4	4,167
Psychology clinical	4	4,167
Sociology	4	4,167
Anthropology	3	3,125
History	3	3,125
Infectious diseases	3	3,125
Health care sciences services	2	2,083
Humanities multidisciplinary	2	2,083
Immunology	2	2,083
Medicine legal	2	2,083
Microbiology	2	2,083
Multidisciplinary sciences	2	2,083
Otorhinolaryngology	2	2,083
Pediatrics	2	2,083
Political science	2	2,083
Art	1	1,042
Dentistry oral surgery medicine	1	1,042
Education scientific disciplines	1	1,042
Genetics heredity	1	1,042
Health policy services	1	1,042
International relations	1	1,042
Literature	1	1,042
Medicine general internal	1	1,042
Medicine research experimental	1	1,042
Oncology	1	1,042
Pharmacology pharmacy	1	1,042
Psychology multidisciplinary	1	1,042

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Web of science categories	Record count	% of 96 search results
Psychology social	1	1,042
Public administration	1	1,042
Religion	1	1,042
Urban studies	1	1,042
Women's studies	1	1,042

relatively infrequently offer degree programs focused on migration in several national contexts including Germany (see Unangst & Martínez Alemán, 2021).

In the search for "Recognition of Prior Learning," or RPL, 107 results were produced. Those results were largely produced in the Global North, with the following distribution: USA (77), Canada (5), Croatia (5), Mexico (4), Australia (2), Brazil (2), Finland (2), Netherlands (2), Spain (2), and Sweden (2). One matching document was produced in each of the following: Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, England, Germany, Ireland, Latvia, Lebanon, New Zealand, Norway, Turkey, and Uruguay. Two duplicates were removed, leaving 105 papers for analysis, with a scan of those publications again resulting in a small number with some connection to RPL/PLA being identified. After reviewing abstracts, four articles were identified as relevant; these are in the journals *International Migration* (Andersson, 2021), *International Journal of Lifelong Education* (Andersson & Fejes, 2010), *Journal of International and Comparative Education*, (Atesok et al., 2019) and *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education* (Van Dijk, 2022). These pieces outline questions around how RPL might be used more effectively and/or expanded in scope; they do not underscore innovative applications of RPL.

5 Higher Education Research Centers

Few of the 217 higher education research centers identified by the third edition of *Higher Education: A Worldwide Inventory* assembled by Rumbley et al. (2014) are conducting research around displacement, and it was not possible to identify any that are specially addressing prior learning assessment in conjunction with displacement. It may be that there are connections between these topics at the given centers, but they have not (yet) been clarified on the centers' public-facing websites—I acknowledge this as an important limitation of the present work. This "null finding", in itself, is notable: if indeed displacement is a pressing issue worldwide (e.g., Unangst et al., 2023), scarce attention in the higher education sphere is problematic. Broadly, there is some (limited) focus on each of these topics separately, and in the paragraphs that follow, I will highlight some work that, if extended, I argue might productively examine aspects of PLA in the context of displacement.

In addition, I highlight one publication in particular, produced by the OECD, which clearly addresses this intersection. *Recognition of Prior Learning for Ukrainian Refugee Students* (2023) builds from an OECD survey challenges and pressures on Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) policies and practices, with that survey finding that "'Equivalency issues with Ukrainian qualifications' was the second most frequently reported barrier to the enrolment of Ukrainian students in [European] higher education systems (after language)" (p. 1).

5.1 PLA

The center based at Austria's Universität Krems, that was formerly called the Centre for Educational Management and Higher Education Development—now the Department of Higher Education Research—has completed several research projects related to PLA. These include an EU-funded project on Work Based Learning (WBL) as well as a published work focused on university validation and recognition of non-formal and informally developed competencies. The open access book summarizing this project is available online via the Waxmann publishing house (see: Fellner et al., 2022). Chapters include "How to create a mobile European LLL culture by the complementary use of European instruments such as VNFIL, RPL, micro credentials and the EQF;" "The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) practice in Munster Technological University (MTU)—collaboration with employers"; and "Prospects and challenges: work-integrated learning as a key component of validation in higher education."

Croatia's Institute for the Development of Education also displays significant involvement with PLA, notably through a 2011–2013 project titled "University Recognition of Prior Learning Centres—Bridging Higher Education with Vocational Education and Training." Partner institutions included Jagiellonian University, Edinburgh Napier University, and Paris Est Creteil University; the project description is as follows:

> Importance of the achievement of the Lifelong Learning (LLL) objectives in Europe have been highlighted in various policy papers. This has been reflected in the national efforts across European Union to adapt or create their national qualification frameworks and prepare its practical exploitation. However the use of new opportunities linked to national qualification frameworks such as formal recognition of informal and work based learning requires cultural change but also practical tools and knowledge. This project provides a unique opportunity for coached transfer of an established process of Recognition of Prior Learning into countries currently implementing their qualifications frameworks. (Institute for the Development of Education, 2023)

5.2 Displaced Learners

The 2022 OECD working paper *Holistic refugee and newcomer education in Europe: Mapping, upscaling and institutionalizing promising practices from Germany, Greece and the Netherlands* by Koehler et al. addresses educational interventions across the primary, secondary, and post-secondary levels that were developed in conjunction with universities in those countries and elsewhere (Leeds Beckett University, for example, is an external evaluator for one of the programs in Greece). This publication points not only to interesting innovations with clear importance for university access but also points to the role of current university faculty, staff, and possibly students in supporting the development of promising practices across primary and secondary levels.

UNESCO's 2022 book titled *From radio to artificial intelligence: Review of innovative technology in literacy and education for refugees, migrants and internally displaced persons* addresses the technological contexts in which displaced learners find themselves worldwide and profiles promising tools and programs. This work is valuable not only for the number of country contexts addressed but also for the variety of tech interventions and innovations—it is an important piece of work for those supporting displaced learners in higher education globally.

6 Discussion

Why, then, is there a lack of focus on the intersection of PLA/RPL and displacement? As possible legal statuses for displaced learners have changed over the last decade, so too must higher education pathways for each of these statuses be described as fluid or variable. It is indeed difficult to articulate new PLA or RPL pathways for distinct student populations in a short period of time, and all higher education systems—centralized and decentralized—have been challenged by rapid iteration. It remains useful, though, to highlight what is possible: the adaptation of existing pathways to serve displaced learners.

It is clear in the European context, as elsewhere, that many colleges and universities have well-developed structures for evaluating prior learning, with these structures serving adult and other minoritized learners. Lund University, for instance, offers a stand-alone website outlining relevant procedures and offering manuals, process charts, and decision templates for institutional faculty and staff, also referring to a dedicated staff person serving as primary point of contact (Savino, 2023). Tallinn University of Technology does the same and additionally offers an applicant self-assessment form to learners pursuing PLA, which the university also refers to as Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning (APEL) (2024). Vilnius University notes that learners may apply PLA for up to fifty percent of their overall degree credits (2024). Thus, various institutions have moved far beyond "one size fits all" PLA, offering a range of approaches to evaluate learner experiences and expertise.

These programs support student success across the lifespan (e.g., Chappell, 2012; Klein-Collins et al., 2020; Travers, 2013).

In parallel, strong support structures are now in place for displaced learners across the European tertiary sector, though research and practice continue to demonstrate that policy and programmatic iteration are needed (e.g., Abamosa, 2023; Croke, 2023; Grüttner et al., 2024). However, the 217 higher education research centers in focus here are not pursuing that research with an emphasis on lifelong learners and PLA; that is to say, displaced learners are omitted from the discourse on access and equity with respect to prior and experiential learning across these research agendas (according to data currently available on public-facing websites).

One clear question that the research centers might productively engage is whether/how PLA is being implemented differently for displaced learners as compared with other minoritized learners in a given national setting (and indeed across national settings). If this is the case—as seems highly likely given the website content of myriad college/university PLA initiatives—then a distinct challenge to access and equity presents itself. Qualitative and quantitative research is, therefore, urgently needed at the institutional and policy levels. One opportunity for innovation in this space relates to creative outreach strategies aimed at multilingual displaced people who might pursue PLA if they were aware of it (e.g., Flanagan, 2023). This might well take place in collaboration with civil society actors engaged with or providing service to displaced learners on a regular basis.

In 2024, this query of PLA serving displaced learners has found scarce results across the extant literature and research activity of higher education research centers worldwide. To address that gap, institutions and researchers are called to (re)consider defining access and equity in light of permanent, dynamic displacement with an eye towards a vitally supportive structure already in place across Europe as elsewhere: Prior Learning Assessment. As Conrad (2022) has put it, referring to the recognition of prior learning (RPL):

> For while RPL provides a logistical framework for assessing prior knowledge, it does not answer the fundamental epistemological questions of knowledge that remains: Whose knowledge is valued, whose is not valued? Whose experiential learning is included, whose is excluded? The acknowledgment of valued knowledge is key to equity and inclusion. (Online only edition).

By extension, data on PLA/RPL—both learner-reported and institution-reported—is in a real sense humanitarian data. Understanding education as a human right and PLA/RPL as established good practice underscores its utility in supporting displaced learners pursuing, concurrently, humanitarian protection and higher education.

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The Need for Tailored Support for Long-Term Students in Informatics Bachelor's Programmes

Franziska Lucia König, Bettina Manuela Johanna Kern, and Peter Knees

Abstract Long-term students in higher education are characterised by extended study durations well beyond the expected or typical completion time. Extended study durations pose a persistent problem to higher education institutions in Austria, as they rely on their students graduating in a timely manner for budgetary reasons. Despite the importance of the issue, long-term students are currently an understudied topic in higher education research. This paper investigates subgroups of long-term students and discusses potential barriers to successful graduation. The data used for this study are administrative records from a technical university which include enrolment information, exams, and grades. There are 50 cases of registered students (as of August 2023) who enrolled in the Software and Information Engineering (SIE) bachelor's programme between 2011 and 2016, have completed over 160 ECTS points, and have neither graduated nor dropped out. Results indicate there is a subgroup among the long-term students struggling with the bachelor thesis while others struggle with specific exams, either repeatedly failing or not attempting them. A subgroup of these students is continually active, completing only one or two courses each semester but doing so persistently. The university records, unfortunately, do not contain any information on why this is the case since the data only contain information on the long-term students' academic performance and administrative status. To shed some light on the issue, a representative sample of long-term students would need to be surveyed and asked about their living circumstances. The findings show that not all students who study for a long time without graduating need help, while others struggle, especially with the bachelor thesis. This illustrates that a more fine-grained understanding of the reasons for extended study duration is required if universities want to develop support structures for long-term students that actually meet their needs.

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Keywords Long-term students · Student support · Software and Information Engineering students (SIE) · Bachelor thesis

1 Introduction

Extended study durations for significant numbers of students pose a persistent challenge to public universities in Austria. Long-term students in higher education are characterised by much longer periods of study well beyond the expected or typical completion time. Higher education institutions in Austria rely on their students graduating in a timely manner. Their budget is determined by so-called performance agreements with the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research (*Bundesministerium Bildung*, *Wissenschaft und Forschung*). These agreements set specific objectives the university must obtain in order to receive the full budget. A significant performance indicator is the number of graduations within a three-year period, which is used to determine the budget for the subsequent period. This indicator is adversely affected by extended study durations. Students who complete most of the curriculum but ultimately fail to graduate are especially costly, as they create expenses almost equivalent to a complete study degree, but the university is not compensated for them due to the failure to graduate. For the concerned students, the delay results in missing out on employability (Statistik Austria, 2023) and wage benefits (OECD, 2022a, 2022b) that a university degree ensures. After exceeding the standard study duration of six semesters plus two so-called tolerance semesters, they are required to pay a study fee of 363,36 € each semester in order to stay enrolled. In the public discourse, the topic of long-term studies is a controversial one (Kuda, 2000) that usually revolves around penalty measures, such as study fees, to incentivise all students to progress swiftly through the curriculum (Kuda, 2000).

Available literature on this topic was predominantly published in the early 2000s, often in the form of grey literature (e.g., Bienert, 2002; Fischer, 2018; Kuda, 2000) and mostly in German. As a result, there are no widely or internationally recognised scientific standards or definitions for long-term students. The standard or minimum period of study plus two semesters is sometimes used (e.g., Kuda et al., 2000), but it is not scientifically grounded and not in relation to the actual length of study needed by the students, which may differ considerably between universities and study programmes. Previous studies from Germany have investigated mental health problems (Jamrozinski et al., 2009) and demographic characteristics (Neumann et al., 2019) associated with extended study duration. However, not only is researching such factors costly in terms of data collection, but mitigating them is far beyond the means of a university. This makes it difficult for universities to develop tailored support structures that could prevent long-term students from withdrawing from their studies completely and leaving the university without obtaining a degree. This preliminary study thus uses university records that are automatically collected by universities and accounts for changes to the curriculum by aligning equivalent mandatory courses across curricula. This allows a more fine-grained analysis of the barriers in the students' mandatory coursework.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows: Sect. 2 describes the approach for leveraging and enriching the university records for descriptive data analysis. Section 3 presents the key findings of our study, followed by a discussion of these results in Sect. 4. Section 5 concludes with limitations and plans for future research.

2 Data and Methods

2.1 Raw Data

The raw data used in this study are student records from a technical university in Austria. Students enrolled in one of the six informatics bachelor's programmes were the focus of the analysis after the observation was made that numerous students who started a bachelor's programme in 2011–2016 have neither graduated nor dropped out but are still officially enrolled as of August 2023.

The university records contain per-semester information on the students'

- anonymised student identifier
- status (enrolment, graduation, dropout, leave of absence)
- courses (title, course identifier, type, ECTS)
- grades (on a scale from 1–5, with 1 corresponding to "*excellent*", and 5 to "*insufficient*", i.e., failing the exam).

As mentioned, the information is given for each semester the student is enrolled, resulting in a nested data structure with several rows corresponding to one student. The data are anonymised with a six-digit identifier to ensure data protection. Students can be enrolled in more than one of the six informatics bachelor's programmes:

- UE 033 521—Informatics (*new as of 2023 winter semester*)
- UE 033 526—Business Informatics
- UE 033 532—Media Informatics and Visual Computing (*discontinued*)
- UE 033 533—Medical Informatics (*discontinued*)
- UE 033 534—Software and Information Engineering (*discontinued*)
- UE 033 535—Computer Engineering.

It may be worth noting that three of the individual bachelor's programmes are discontinued as of the 2023 winter semester and are replaced by a general informatics bachelor with seven optional areas of focus (TU Wien, 2023). For the purpose of this study, going back to the year 2011, the previous structure of the bachelor's programmes is still relevant, though.

2.2 Data Preparation

In the timespan from 2011 to 2023, the informatics bachelor's programmes have seen various changes and updates to the curriculum. This is relevant for our analysis. To assess how close a student is to completing their studies, it is necessary to know to what extent they completed the mandatory coursework. Since the mandatory coursework changes according to the different curricula, with new courses becoming mandatory, others ceasing to be mandatory, being split up into several courses or merged into one, a lot of missing data are introduced to the dataset. As a consequence, it is not possible to distinguish whether a student has a grade missing in their records because (a) they have not attempted the course yet or (b) they have already completed an equivalent course under a different curriculum.

To mend this issue, equivalent courses from different curricula were mapped. Since this is a painstaking task, the scope of the analysis was limited to students enrolled in the most popular and largest bachelor's programme, Software and Information Engineering. It encompasses almost half of the concerned long-term students. Equivalent courses across a total of ten curricula from 2011 until 2022 were mapped out. The upcoming curriculum for 2023 was not included, as it was not relevant yet at the time of the analysis.

The mapping was done only for the mandatory courses, as the curricula allow wide-ranging freedom to the students with regards to elective courses and transferable skills. Also, it seems unlikely that students are deterred from graduating in a timely manner by elective courses—if they struggle with an elective, they are at liberty to choose a different one. This is not the case for mandatory courses, which is why these are more likely to act as a stumbling block to graduation.

The resulting data structure differs from the raw data, as mandatory courses from different curricula are now pooled into one variable for each mandatory course module. Elective courses are excluded from the analysis due to their aforementioned versatility.

The new variables created during this process denote a module as completed when equivalent courses or combinations of courses from any curriculum were completed with passing grades. As a result, a clearer picture can emerge of how many and which courses or modules have not been completed by the long-term students. The nested data were pivoted to represent each student with just one row. To account for cases when students needed several attempts to pass a course, individual grades were averaged.

3 Results

Of the 5036 students who enrolled between the winter semester of 2011 and the summer semester of 2017 (range limits included), 445 are still enrolled in at least one informatics bachelor's programme as of August 2023. Limiting the scope of the analysis to students enrolled in the Software and Information Engineering (SIE) bachelor's programme further reduces the sample to 217 long-term students. This sample was again filtered to include only students who are relatively close to graduating. To account for the fact that the number of completed ECTS points that count towards the bachelor's degree may be overestimated, students with at least 160 ECTS with a passing grade were included. This brought the sample down to 50 long-term bachelor

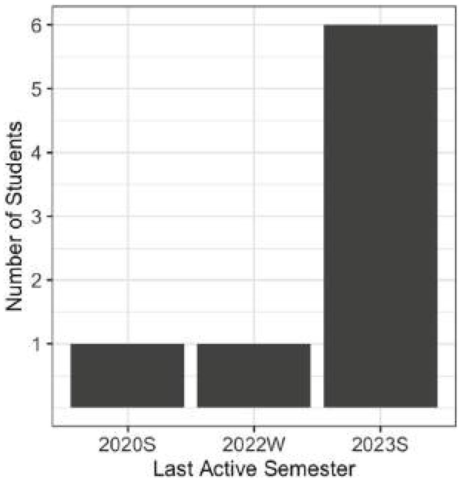

Fig. 1 Last semester with any exam-related activity of long-term students (SIE, with more than 160 ECTS points) who completed the thesis but not all mandatory courses

students of Software and Information Engineering with at least 160 completed ECTS points.

Eleven students completed their bachelor thesis, but have not completed all mandatory courses. Upon closer inspection, three enrolled in several bachelor's programmes, graduated from one and then enrolled in a master's programme. The Software and Information Engineering bachelor's programme was not completed, though, and remains unfinished to this day. Due to the fact that the students are now enrolled in a master's programme at the same university, they also continue to be enrolled in the unfinished Software and Information Engineering programme unless they proactively de-register from it. Since they have moved on to a master's programme, it seems unlikely that these students are interested in graduating from the unfinished SIE programme, even though they have completed substantial portions of the curriculum.

This leaves eight students who struggle with courses in specific modules. Unsurprisingly, the modules related to mathematics (statistics, linear algebra, analysis) and technical subjects (distributed systems, operating systems) have students either fail or put off courses until the very end of their studies. To gauge whether the long-term students are still actively engaging with their studies, the last semester in which they exhibited any study-related activity was extracted, no matter if they passed or failed and no matter how many ECTS points they attained or tried to attain. As can be seen in Fig. 1, six out of eight students were active in the previous semester (2023S). Two students were last active in the summer semester of 2020 and winter semester of 2022. It should be noted that while these two students have not actively engaged with their studies ever since, they have continuously renewed their enrolment each semester and, each time, paid the study fee associated with extended study duration.

42 long-term Software and Information Engineering students (SIE) with more than 160 ECTS have completed the mandatory courses but not the bachelor thesis.

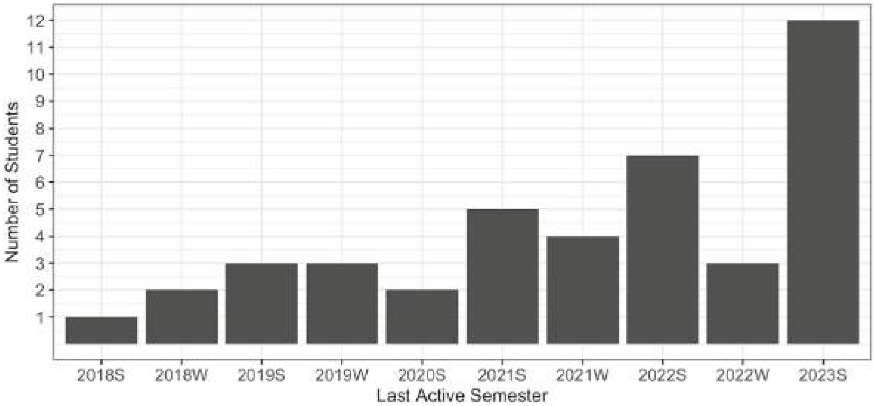

Fig. 2 Last semester with any exam-related activity of SIE long-term students with >160 ECTS points who completed the mandatory courses but not the bachelor thesis

As can be seen in Fig. 2, twelve were active in the previous semester (2023S). Nine were last active before the 2019 summer semester. Compared to the group of students who finished the bachelor thesis but not all mandatory courses, the group of students who have not completed the thesis is larger and many years have passed since their last exam-related activity. This is remarkable, as these students pay a study fee of 363,66€ to continue their enrolment every semester—despite their lack of study-related activity.

4 Discussion

Based on grade records from a technical university in Austria, this study identified specific problem areas that long-term students struggle with, as indicated by low grades, failed exams, and the absence of grades. Students who fail specific exams may be in need of tutoring for those subjects. Students who have completed the mandatory courses but not the bachelor thesis may require support in finding a thesis topic or a supervisor. If they already started working on the thesis, they may need help overcoming writer's block and structuring the writing process more efficiently. Students who are close to graduation but have abandoned the incomplete bachelor curriculum for master courses need to be nudged to return their attention to the courses from the bachelor's programme. They may be struggling with procrastination and test anxiety issues and may profit from personalised outreach and counselling. Continuously active students do not require specific support as long as they do not fall out of that group.

The results seem to indicate that mandatory courses are not the prime reason for delays. First of all, the group of concerned students is small with $N = 8$, and second, six of them were active in the previous semester. It thus seems that open mandatory courses do not pose too much of a roadblock to students. The bachelor thesis appears to be more of a challenge. The concerned group is larger with N = 42, of which twelve students were active the previous semester. This leaves 30 SIE students who, despite having successfully completed more than 160 ECTS points and all mandatory courses, are not graduating, with only the bachelor thesis left to complete.

Possible explanations are manifold and should be investigated in future research. Informatics is a highly technical subject with a pronounced practical orientation. Students who study this subject primarily out of interest to implement code and solve practical challenges may be apprehensive about the theoretical components of an academic thesis. Further, they may be inexperienced with the academic writing process since it is rarely required or practised in their study programme. There is a mandatory course on the scientific workflow, but this may not be enough to lower the psychological barrier of researching and writing the thesis.

For some students, it has been years since they last actively engaged with university. However, it is clear that they have not given up hope of graduating, as is reflected by the fact that they re-enrol consistently every semester, despite the study fee of more than 300 €. Universities need to figure out how they want to deal with such cases. If students who have shown persistence and commitment to their studies over the years appear stuck close to the finish line, should universities just abandon them when they fail to take the final step in graduating? Is offering support to them fair to other students who manage on their own? What could such support look like?

This paper obviously cannot provide definitive answers but aims to encourage decision-makers to consider these questions. Effective interventions to reduce extended study durations require a nuanced knowledge of the target group. Long-term students appear to be a heterogeneous group, struggling with different aspects of the study programme. Their specific problems need to be taken into account if a higher education institution wants to implement measures to effectively reduce extended study durations. The study at hand sheds some light on the bachelor thesis as a relevant roadblock for bachelor students at the faculty of informatics. This insight allows developing a targeted support for concerned students.

5 Limitations and Future Research

This research focused on long-term students in the Software and Information Engineering bachelor programme for practical reasons: Manually aligning curriculum changes is a laborious task and has not been done yet for the other five bachelor's study programmes at the informatics faculty. The SIE bachelor's programme encompasses almost half of all informatics bachelor students, but this still means that half of the long-term students were not included in the present analysis.

Another constraint was introduced by focusing on SIE students with >160 ECTS points. If students drop out this close to the finish line, it is especially tragic for the university that invested a maximum of educational resources without getting compensated but also for the students. They committed considerable time and effort to their studies and persisted for years way beyond the standard study duration.

These considerations led to the somewhat arbitrary cut-off of 160 ECTS points. Future research could look into the long-term students below this threshold to find the patterns and antecedents leading to extended study durations. There may be predictors manifesting at an earlier stage as to why some long-term students manage to graduate eventually, and others do not.

Finally, the approach of mining automatically collected university records leaves a blind spot with regards to the students' perspectives. The approach was chosen to identify angles and measures that are within the sphere of action of universities and can easily be monitored without collecting personal data. The assumptions drawn from the results will still be validated in future research by reaching out to long-term students and conducting qualitative interviews or quantitative surveys with them.

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Do Early Signals Count? Exploring Potential Root Causes of University Dropout

Ștefan Marius Deaconu, Roland Olah, and Cezar Mihai Hâj

Abstract This study examines the factors leading to student attrition in Romanian higher education, providing valuable insights that are applicable to other countries. The predictability of student dropout can be determined by assessing the extent to which student satisfaction with teaching and learning, academic and social infrastructure, outcomes, and support services are met. Moreover, this paper investigates the impact of pre-entry characteristics, specifically focusing on the final upper secondary school exam results (*Baccalaureate*), which emerge as the most robust indicator of undergraduate dropout rates. In contrast, other social characteristics do not exhibit a comparable level of significance in this regard. It also underlines a shift towards greater value of academic and social infrastructure to support students in relation to teaching efficacy, as the sense of community is a critical factor in retaining students. Timely detection of learners who are considering dropping out is crucial, as it can result in decreased rates of student attrition. In order to address this, customised strategies that take into account the contextual factors (including pre-university characteristics) and mechanisms through which students can articulate their feelings on their educational curriculum and academic journey could be developed. The consideration of their perceived challenges is crucial, given that peer learning has been identified as a significant factor contributing to student attrition among undergraduate students. The study provides more information regarding the student experience during the COVID-19 epidemic, as it reveals, for instance, that 40% of students who contemplated leaving university owing to the pandemic did so, mitigating some of the factors for this situation. This work also makes a valuable contribution to the wider theoretical debate around student dropout by investigating the potential interactions and distinct influences of several factors on student paths. The data utilised in this

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study was obtained from the National Student Survey in Romania (NSSS-RO) and EUROSTUDENT VII, including the period from autumn 2020 to spring 2021. Additionally, administrative data from the National Student Enrolment Registry (RMUR) was also incorporated.

Keywords Student dropout · COVID-19 · Student retention · Student satisfaction

1 Introduction

1.1 What Does Student Dropout Mean?

Student dropout represents one of the top research issues in the scientific literature concerning higher education. Nevertheless, as tertiary education is still subject to expansion, there is still space for improvement in understanding the dropout phenomenon through its multiple characteristics. One of the most comprehensive models was proposed by Tinto (1975), with several dimensions for describing dropouts, such as the individual attributes and pre-college experiences, integration into academic and social systems, or goal and institutional commitments. Tinto perceived student dropout as a process rather than as a single event. This longitudinal process involves interactions between the individual and the institution, leading to varying levels of persistence or dropout.

This article refers to student dropout as individuals that leave the university study programmes before completion and obtaining a degree (Tinto, 2012). Given the complexity of this subject matter, it is crucial to consider numerous layers. For instance, scholars differentiate between "dismissed" students and those who "withdrew" (Tinto, 1975; Vaughan, 1968) based on the distinction between academic failures and voluntary withdrawals. According to Johnson (1991), the inability to accurately distinguish between these types of dropouts has resulted in discrepancies among study findings and a lack of effective solutions to address the increase in university departures.

Bean and Metzner's model (1985) highlights the dropout process among non-traditional undergraduate students. Their research underlines the significance of environmental factors like financial limitations, work commitments, family obligations, and transfer prospects in comprehending the underlying causes of dropout. Social background variables such as age, enrolment status, residency, educational aspirations, high school performance, ethnicity, and gender also impact this process.

The aim of this study is to explore potential statistical correlations between dropout rates and various variables that share similarities with the models outlined above. These findings will be applied within the unique context of the Romanian university education system. Nevertheless, given their integration into previous models, the conclusions may have broader implications for other higher education systems, particularly those with comparable contextual factors.

1.2 Student Dropout in the Romanian Higher Education Context

Until recently, Romania did not have a system in place for tracking university dropouts, nor did it have many public policies or legal frameworks addressing this issue. However, this changed with the launch of the "Educated Romania" project in 2016 (Herțeliu et al., 2022). The project placed a particular emphasis on equity and access to higher education, as well as addressing the problem of students dropping out (Presidential Administration, 2021). This was to be achieved through various support schemes and a system designed to identify early warning signs of students dropping out.

The project report was released in 2021, and its results have since been incorporated into two new laws on education, including Law No. 199/2023, which specifically pertains to higher education. According to this law, the Romanian Government, through the Ministry of Education (MoE), will adopt a new National Programme for Reducing University Dropout (PNRAU), which aims to tackle educational disengagement and sustain academic attrition, including among first-generation university students.

It is important to note that the initial comprehensive research on student dropout rates in Romania was conducted within the Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding (UEFISCDI) in 2022. In their study, Alexe-Coteț et al. (2022) utilised administrative data from the National Student Enrolment Registry (RMUR) to determine student dropout rates. Additionally, applying the same methodology and using the same database, Herțeliu et al. (2022) found that nearly half of the students who enrolled in 2015 failed to complete their studies and obtain a degree by 2021, resulting in a dropout rate of 47.96%. Furthermore, 43.8% of students discontinued their studies during the first year of their bachelor's degree programme. Even so, Romania's university dropout rate remains lower than that of many European nations (Szabó & Borbála, 2023).

The literature review on student dropout rates in the Romanian higher education context reveals that previous studies have primarily focused on individual faculties within universities (Bungău et al., 2017; Cocoradă et al., 2021; Hatos et al., 2020; Istrate et al., 2020; Voiadeș-Cojan & Lazăr, 2020; Stăiculescu & Richiteanu Nastase, 2019), with limited cross-comparisons between institutions (Hatos & Pop, 2019). Surveys have been the primary method used to collect and analyse data across all studies cited above. Additionally, student unions like the National Alliance of Student Organisations in Romania have addressed the issue of student dropout rates by advocating for the improvement of social-based criteria scholarship systems (ANOSR, 2014) and calling for increased investment in higher education financing and counselling centres for students (ANOSR, 2017).

2 Methodology

The research methodology includes the analysis of data from the National Student Survey (NSS-RO), which was implemented together with the EUROSTUDENT VII Survey, EUROSTUDENT VII Survey data, as well as data from the National Student Enrolment Registry (RMUR) to address the following research questions:

- RQ1: To what extent are pre-entry characteristics, including demographic details, family educational background, and previous academic performance, associated with student dropout rates?
- RQ2: Which factor (or set of factors)—students' access to academic resources, their sense of belonging to the institution's social community, financial resources, or the perceived effectiveness of teaching—is/are a better predictor of students' persistence or withdrawal from higher education?
- RQ3: How significantly have the challenges introduced by the COVID-19 pandemic, such as resource limitations, insufficient institutional support for online education, and dissatisfaction with the transition to digital learning, impacted dropout rates among university students?

2.1 National Student Survey (NSS-RO)

The National Student Survey (NSS-RO) was developed by UEFISCDI and MoE to measure the quality of tertiary education in Romania. The survey included 61 questions divided into 10 sections covering various topics such as satisfaction, social services, teaching activity, and COVID-19 impact. The questionnaire featured a 5-grade scale, with options ranging from "definitely agree" to "definitely disagree," as well as a "not applicable" option.

The completion period for both NSS-RO and ES VII was from 24 November 2020 to 18 January 2021. A total of 24,280 students participated in the survey, and 23,796 students from 76 institutions were successfully validated. The NSS-RO aimed to provide stakeholders with reliable data on students' perceptions to contribute to evidence-based policymaking at both national and institutional levels.

2.2 Eurostudent VII (ES VII)

EUROSTUDENT is a comprehensive survey that takes place every three years across 26 European countries. Its central aim is to monitor the living and studying conditions of students. The collected data is intended to be of practical use to public authorities and other stakeholders (Hauschildt et al., 2015). The seventh round of EUROSTUDENT research was conducted from 2018 to 2021. Of these, 21 conducted fieldwork prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, while five, including Romania, conducted their research during the pandemic period (Dervis et al., 2022; Hauschildt et al., 2021). Romania participated in the seventh round and administered the questionnaire to their entire eligible student population, receiving a response rate of 7.2% (Florian et al., 2022). The final number of subjects, after weighting procedures, was 19,612 cases, which served as the basis for international comparisons on the EUROSTUDENT platform and formed the basis of the analyses in this report. The application mode was the same as NSS-RO, online, through the same platform managed by UEFISCDI (Lazăr et al., 2022).

2.3 Theoretical Approach and Survey Questions

The current study considers the assessments of school environment and student contentment as measures of academic and social integration (Tinto, 1975), highlighting the significance of the bond between learners and the university (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980), particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic's disruption (Yu & Zadorozhnyy, 2023). Tinto (1997) has argued that integrating students into higher education involves both individual and institutional factors. With regard to institutional factors, he has referenced both the social system and the academic system.

In order to analyse the collected data, this study used the revised Tinto institutional departure model elaborated by Qvortrup and Lykkegaard (2022). The aim was to describe the outcome of the educational process as persistence, meaning the choice or capacity of a student to continue studying, instead of the word "departure" that was used in earlier versions of the model to describe the choice of dropping out.

Questions that address the *social system* relate to students' social experience at an institution, including their integration into the social fabric of the institution, participation in extracurricular activities, and the social support infrastructure provided by the institution. Those that address the *academic system* pertain to the academic experience and support, such as perceptions of the learning community, support from faculty, or other aspects of the academic induction programme. Nonetheless, survey questions that addressed *Teaching* comprise factors directly related to the act of teaching and instructional quality, including study groups, alignment in teaching or feedback provided. Therefore, the analysis will take into account five analytical categories, adding *Pre-entry attributes* and *COVID-19 impact* to the above-mentioned categories, as seen in Table 1 (Fig. 1).

2.4 Data Analysis

The data for the current study were generated by merging the NSS-RO and ES VII databases, resulting in 19,715 valid responses. In order to provide relevant information for the present analysis, the methodology followed several steps:

Table 1 Survey questions, pre-entry attributes and indicators concerning students' perception of the academic system, social system, teaching, and the COVID-19 disruption

Category	Question/indicator	Variable name	Source
Pre-entry attributes	Age (at the moment of survey completion)	age	RMUR
	Baccalaureate exam session average	BAC_average	RMUR
	Birthplace—county (NUTS2)	birthplace_region	RMUR
	First-generation students	first_gen	RMUR
	Gender	gender	RMUR
Academic system	I believe that the university offers the necessary conditions and a favourable atmosphere for my personal development	uni_personal_development	NSS-RO
	I benefit from IT resources and other online facilities (e.g., platforms, access to scientific databases, updated software resources relevant to the field of study)	tech_resource_access	NSS-RO
	I am satisfied with the existing common spaces for learning in the university administration (libraries, reading rooms, hubs, etc.)	satisfaction_with_learning_spaces	NSS-RO
	It was easy to access online educational resources on the topics of the disciplines studied	online_resource_accessibility	NSS-RO
	I would recommend my study programme	recommend_programme	ES VII
	It has always been clear to me that I will go to university	university_intent	ES VII
	I am seriously considering changing my study programme	change_study_programme	ES VII
	I am seriously considering leaving higher education	consider_leaving_HE	ES VII
Social system	I have the feeling of belonging to a university community consisting of the institution's staff and students	sense_of_community	NSS-RO
	I benefited, if needed, from educational development courses or tutoring activities	tutoring_benefit	NSS-RO
	It is often difficult to figure out what is expected of me in my study programme	difficulty_expectations	ES VII
	I often feel that I don't belong in higher education	belonging_in_HE	ES VII
	To what extent are you currently experiencing financial difficulties?	financial_difficulties	ES VII
	Would you be able to cover an unexpected but necessary expense of 1200 lei?	cover_unexpected_expense	ES VII

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Category	Question/indicator	Variable name	Source
	I work for a living	work_for_living	ES VII
	Without a job, I couldn't afford to be a student	job_for_study	ES VII
	I work because I have to financially support other people (children, partner, parents, etc.)	work_to_support_others	ES VII
Teaching	I easily understood the subject taught by teachers in courses/seminars/laboratories	ease_of_understanding	NSS-RO
	Teachers use teaching techniques that facilitate the learning process	teaching_techniques_efficacy	NSS-RO
	By the way a particular topic was taught, I felt it was relevant to my professional training	topic_relevance_professional_training	NSS-RO
	We received quality feedback (professional, timely) for papers, projects, or papers	quality_feedback_received	NSS-RO
	I have access to educational resources through teachers' personal pages	teacher_resource_access	NSS-RO
	I am satisfied with the way I was supported to interact with colleagues in the learning process (e.g., working groups)	satisfaction_peer_interaction_support	NSS-RO
COVID-19 impact	The context generated by the COVID-19 pandemic determined me to consider dropping out of university	university_dropout	NSS-RO
	I encountered challenges in the educational process due to impoverishment (e.g., lack of a tablet, laptop, poor Internet connection)	impoverished_students	NSS-RO
	I received support from the higher education institution to participate in online teaching activities (e.g., tablets, laptops)	HEI_support	NSS-RO
	I am satisfied with the way the university has transferred the educational process to the online environment	online_transition	NSS-RO
	I benefited from online educational resources necessary for teaching (e.g., work platforms, access to institutional email addresses, access to dedicated online communication platforms)	online_resources	NSS-RO
	There was constant information from the university regarding the development of the educational process and possible changes	hei_information	NSS-RO

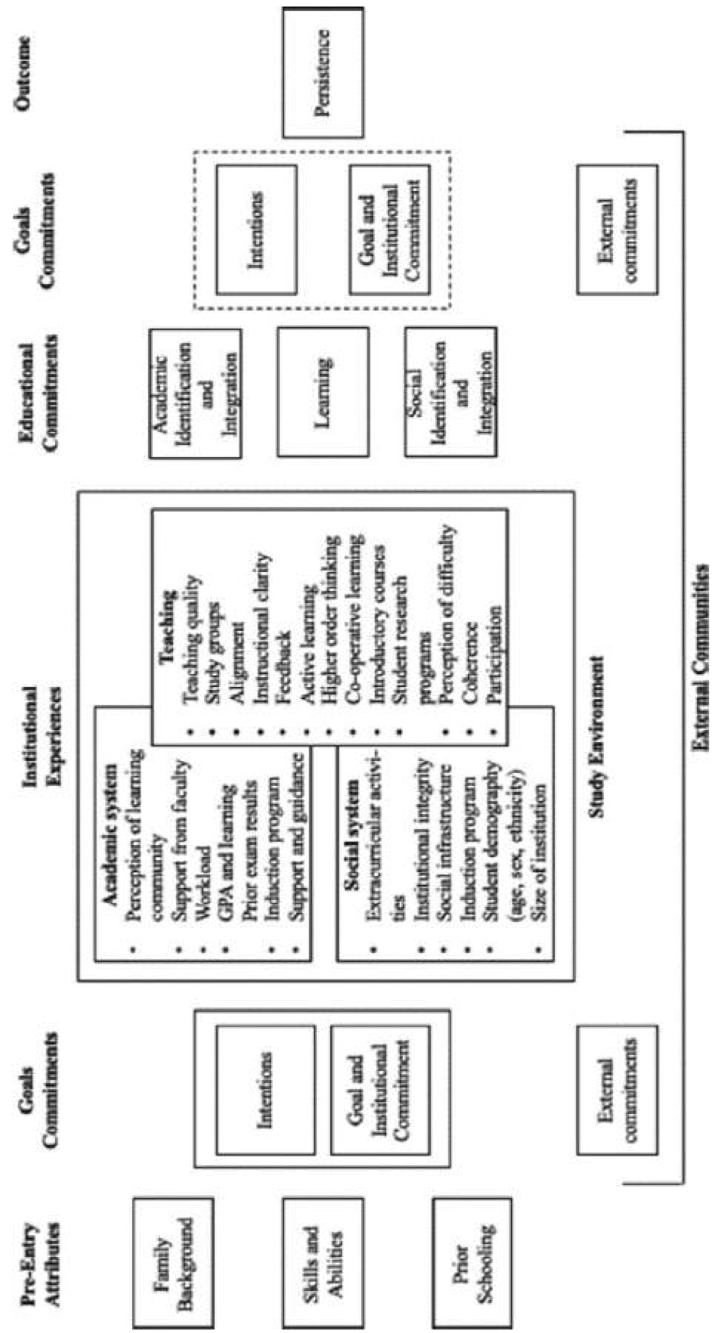

Fig. 1 Revised and elaborated version of the institutional departure model (Qvortrup & Lykkegaard, 2022)

Table 2 Breakout of student dropout variables on academic degrees and study years

Study degree	Study year enrolment when surveyed (2020/2021)—T0	Study year enrolment when @dropout_1year (2021/2022) (T + 1)	Study year enrolment when @dropout_2years (2022/2023) (T + 2)
Bachelor (BA)	First	Second	Third
	Second	Third	Not applicable
Master (MA)	First	Second	*Graduation*[1]

1. The initial database was weighted to reduce sampling error and potential non-response bias using a gender and study field (n = 19,569), using a model previously validated by Deaconu and Olah (2022).
2. Data was collected in the academic year of 2020/2021 (T0, year of survey), so two dropout variables were defined in order to see if a student withdraws one year after the survey, at the beginning of 2021/2022 (*@dropout_1year*) or two years later, at the beginning of 2022/2023 (*dropout_2years*).
3. Three cohorts are included in the analysis: (1) three-year bachelor's degree programmes with students of the first year in 2020/2021 (n = 4,154); (2) three-year bachelor's degree programmes with students of the second year in 2020/2021 (n = 4,965); and (3) two-year master's degree programmes with students of the first year in 2020/2021 (n = 1,741). The total number of valid cases after selection was n = 10,860. A total of 108 international student were taken into consideration.
4. The student dropout was defined as a student that was enrolled in the previous academic year and withdrew prior to the progression in the next academic year.
5. For each category of survey questions, a model was developed starting from the selected variables in Table 1, where for each cohort, the dependent variable suitable for each case (*@dropout_1year* or *@dropout_2years*) was applied, according to Table 2.
6. For each of the above-mentioned dependent variables concerning student academic nonpersistence, a probability (p_i) was associated, and a Logit model was built using the variables from Table 1, divided into five categories: (1) Pre-Entry Attributes, (2) Academic system, (3) Social system, (4) Teaching, and (5) COVID-19 impact.

$$\ln\left(\frac{p_i}{1-p_i}\right) = \beta_o + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \cdots + \beta_n X_n$$

7. For each category from those five, the above equation was applied to each dependent variable, where p is the probability of the student dropping out (at one year

[1] The dropout rate among master's degree candidates, specifically after two years of enrolment (@dropout_2years), can be deemed as the final dropout rate for master's degree graduates. For bachelor's degree students, the analysis referred only to active enrolments.

or two years from the survey), β_o is the constant (intercept) for each category, β_1 to β_n are the coefficients for each predictor variable, and X_1 to X_n are the predictor variables for each category.

8. The results are presented in this article, where Cox and Snell R^2, Nagelkerke R^2, significance test and Chi^2 were taken into account for each test.

2.5 Limitations of the Study

Regarding data collection, there were certain limitations with both NSS-RO and ES VII that required attention to avoid potential errors. As highlighted by Deaconu and Hâj (2022a), these challenges were addressed through various measures, including: (1) using multiple dissemination channels for surveys, including online options and promotion through HEIs; (2) implementing an innovative survey platform design to address non-responses and survey dropouts; (3) applying the surveys as a census with non-probability sampling that required weighting adjustments; (4) response rate at several questions was low and there are differences between total number of respondents at NSS-RO and ES VII questions; and (5) data from RMUR is subject to a particular methodology as dropout rates from academic year 2022/2023 are still to be fully validated now when this article is written.

Regarding data analysis, the models were statistically significant for the vast majority of results with $p < 0.001$. The main exception was the first-year master's degree students for both *@dropout_1year* or *@dropout_2years* in some categories such as *social system* or *teaching*. Cox and Snell R^2 or Nagelkerke R^2 values were usually between modest intermediate values, depicting incomplete student dropout models, but nevertheless, providing some insightful information about relevant variables that can be linked with early signalling of a student's intention to drop out.

In terms of student dropout, the present study has several limitations such as (1) non-differentiation between dropout by types, such as voluntary (e.g. leaving university for job opportunities) or forced (due to financial constraints); (2) the dropout is set at the beginning of the next academic year and do not take into consideration the actual timing of the withdraw, but has a statistical accuracy; (3) several cases that could be considered temporary withdrawal such as pregnancy or severe illness, were not taken into account as non-persistence.

3 Impact of Pre-entry Characteristics on Student Dropout

Upon analysing data comparing student dropout rates between the global student population and data merged between NSS-RO and ES VII, it was found that the dropout percentage is lower among surveyed students, regardless of their study cycle or year. This phenomenon can be attributed to self-selection bias, as students who chose to participate in the survey are more likely to be engaged in their studies and less likely to drop out. This could be due to motivated students being more aware of the survey, taking the time to respond, or being involved in academic communities where the survey was distributed (Ferrari & Cowman, 2004) (Table 3).

Looking at the data, the analysis shows that bachelor's degree dropout rates remain consistent in both the first (9.32%) and second year (9.53%), despite the common expectation of higher dropout rates among newcomers to university. Master's degree dropout rate increases significantly after the first year, with less than half of students completing their study programme. The relative dropout rate in the second year (43.73%) is almost four times higher than the rate in the first year (11.45%).

The average score on the baccalaureate exam is the strongest predictor of bachelor's student dropout rates. An increase in the average Baccalaureate score can lead to a 44% greater chance of persistence for second-year students and up to 30% for first-year students. These percentages remain stable two years after the survey is taken, and the findings are consistent with previous research (Alexe-Coteț et al., 2022; Herțeliu et al., 2022). For master's degree students, there is a significant negative relationship with first-year dropout rates, suggesting that higher baccalaureate

Table 3 Comparative analysis of dropout rates between global and surveyed student population

Student population from the National Student Enrolment Registry (RMUR)					
		2021/2022		2022/2023	
2020/2021 cohort	Total number of students	Dropout rate after 1 year	Number of students that dropped their studies since the first year	Dropout rate after 2 years	Number of students that dropped their studies since the first year
Bachelor					
First year	135,590	22.46%	30,454	32,88%	44,579
Second year	118,664	16.91%	20,066	–	–
Master					
First year	64,344	22.29%	14,345	60,73%	39,079
Merged database between respondents from NSS-RO and ES VII					
		2021/2022		2022/2023	
2020/2021 cohort	Total number of respondents	Dropout rate after 1 year per cohort	Number of students that dropped their studies since the first year	Dropout rate after 2 years per cohort	Number of students that dropped their studies since the first year
Bachelor					
First year	4,154	9.32%	387	17,96%	746
Second year	4,965	4,80%	238	–	–
Master					
First year	1,741	11,45%	199	50.15%	873

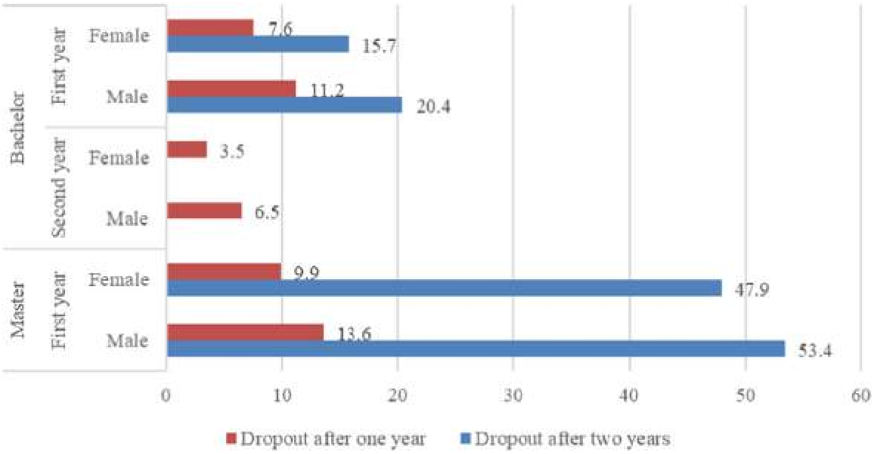

Fig. 2 Gender differences in student dropout rates (%)

averages are associated with a decreased likelihood of dropping out, aligning with the notion that clearer academic and career trajectories at the master's level support persistence. **Gender does not play a significant role in predicting dropout rates for undergraduates**. The difference in dropout rates between male and female students in both bachelor and master programmes ranges from 3 to 5.5% (Fig. 2).

First-generation students' status (*first_gen*) and geographical factors such as the birthplace region or age (at the moment of completion) were not identified as relevant or significant predictors of dropout rates.

4 Determinants of Student Retention: Resources, Belonging, and Teaching Quality

4.1 Academic System

For both first-year bachelor's and master's degree students, whether one or two years after the surveys, the likelihood of dropping out increases significantly when considering leaving higher education, ranging from 12 to 21% (*consider_leaving_HE*). This suggests that if a student is considering withdrawing from higher education, early identification and academic support are essential.

This highlights the importance of academic identification, the psychological relationship of a student to their study programme, meaning that the risk of dropping out is low if students manage to identify themselves with their studies (Finn, 1989; Osborne & Jones, 2011). While academic identification remains under-researched in connection with student dropout (Walker et al., 2006), including in terms of empirical application with Tinto's concept of normative academic integration (Elias et al., 2012), the data provides an insight into the dropout rates differences across various ISCED-F study fields.

At the bachelor's degree level, students enrolled in *Health and Welfare*, *Social Sciences, Journalism and Information*, and *Education* programmes tend to exhibit lower dropout rates after the first year, indicating a potentially higher level of initial student engagement or satisfaction in these fields. However, by the second year, dropout rates tend to increase significantly in fields such as *Arts and humanities* (+12,50%), *Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)* (+11,60%), *Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics* (10,70%). By the second year, the highest dropout rates are in *Arts and humanities* (22,00%), *Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary* (21,60%) or *Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics* (20,00%).

The explanations for these differences are manifold and vary from one ISCED-F domain to another. A common feature that is often highlighted, and not only in the case of dropouts, is the inadequacy of career guidance and counselling at the time of admission to higher education (Bishop, 2016). The latter is reflected in an increased dropout rate of up to 29% for students who are considering changing their programme compared to those who aren't (*change_study_programmeme*). This trend persists across both years of study and underlines the importance of providing support and guidance, such as mentoring and other counselling services, from pre-university education onwards to promote student wellbeing (Braxton & Hirschy, 2004). The difficulty of certain types of studies and the lack of induction and integration activities in the university community also contribute to this situation.

This trend suggests that students may become more aware of the challenges and demands of these programmes as they progress, which could affect their decision to continue. Notably, fields related to *Information and Communication Technologies* (ICTs) show a relatively low increase in dropout rates from the first to the second year, which may be due to a strong academic fit (Valentín et al., 2013) or a market-driven motivation due to the growing demand in this sector (Deaconu & Hâj, 2022b).

At the master's level, there are notable differences compared to the bachelor's level. *Engineering, Manufacturing, and Construction* have the highest dropout rates, possibly due to the rigorous nature of advanced studies or a potential mismatch between student expectations and programme realities. Meanwhile, *Social Sciences, Journalism, and Information* experience a significant increase in dropout rates by the second year, which contrasts with the bachelor's level. This could reflect the unique nature of postgraduate studies in these fields or the availability of job opportunities that may cause students to leave their programmes. *Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries, and Veterinary*, on the other hand, exhibit notably high retention (in comparison with other study fields) from the first to the second year, indicating that those who pursue master's studies in this field have a clear calling or commitment to the profession (Fig. 3).

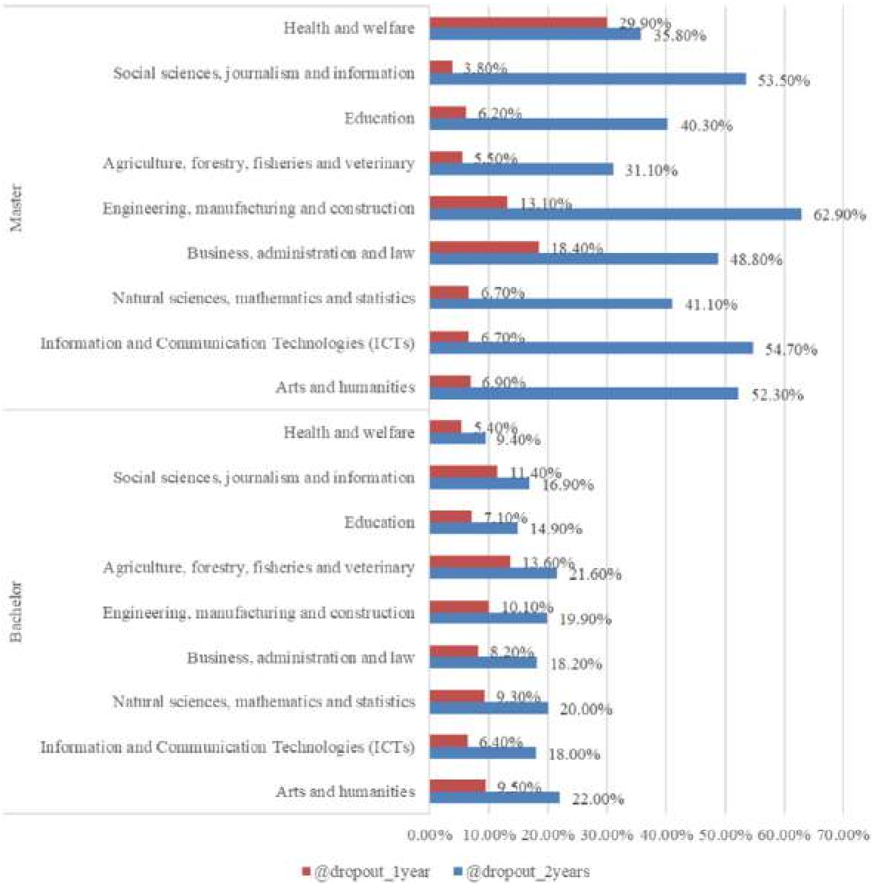

Fig. 3 ISCED-F 2013 study field differences in student dropout rates (%)

Bachelor students who were more likely to recommend their programme were less likely to drop out, regardless of the surveyed generation they represented (*recommend_programme*). A positive answer to this question could be associated with a 16% increase in the chances of positive educational advancement (for BA students from the second to third year, one year after the implementation of ES VII). In addition to measuring overall student satisfaction, positive feedback about a study programme entails an evaluation of its academic content and rigour, faculty expertise and reputation, programme location and culture, and potential career outcomes. This ultimately confirms the alignment between the individual and the academic institution.

However, a correlation between students dropping out and their perception of how the university provides opportunities for personal growth has yet to be established. This suggests that while personal development is highly valued, other factors, such as academic performance or external support systems, may significantly influence dropout rates (*uni_personal_development*). Interestingly, the data indicates that satisfaction with the learning environment, which undoubtedly contributes to the overall university experience, does not decisively impact students' decision to drop out. It could also be attributed to the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, during which most educational processes were shifted online for extended periods (*satisfaction_with_learning_spaces*). Similar trends can be observed regarding the accessibility of online educational resources (*online_resource_accessibility*) and the benefits of IT resources (*tech_resource_access*). This does not imply that the aforementioned factors do not contribute to quality education but have a lesser impact on students' persistence in higher education.

Students who express a desire to withdraw from their studies are statistically more likely to follow through with that decision. In addition, there are certain fields of study at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels where dropout rates tend to be higher. It's important to note that the reasons for these differences vary and are influenced by the unique characteristics of each field. Another possible factor contributing to dropout rates is the desire of students to change programmes. This could be due to a lack of sufficient career guidance during pre-university education or a lack of proper orientation when entering the new programme. Satisfaction with personal development at university, satisfaction with learning spaces, or accessibility of online and other IT resources are less likely to influence a student's decision to drop out.

4.2 Social System

In the data analysis, the critical factor in retaining a social system is a sense of community (*sense_of_community*). Specifically, first-year bachelor's degree students who have a positive perception of this aspect witness a noteworthy 67% increase in their chances of not dropping out. This finding applies to both bachelor's and master's degree students, and the lowest value recorded was 34%.

This finding confirms previous studies highlighting the importance of social integration, which Tinto (1975) defines as the alignment between a student and the institution's social fabric. Larsen et al. (2013) note various operational definitions, ranging from the simple metric of campus residency to complex psychometric evaluations of a student's connection to their social milieu. McQueen (2009) also emphasises a critical oversight in persistence theories: the affective dimension. The student's subjective experience of integration is pivotal, emphasising that the emotional and perceptual aspects of integration cannot be overlooked (Howard et al., 2021). Empirical evidence robustly backs the impact of social integration on both commitment to the institution and student persistence (Braxton et al., 1997). This analysis firmly supports the crucial role of social integration in a student's well-being and underscores its importance in addressing the issue of student dropout.

In the case of BA students' academic transition between their second and third study year, one year after the census, perceived difficulty comprehending staff and institutional expectations could be associated with student dropout (*difficulty_expectations*). Students who disagreed with this statement were less likely to leave university (a 16% difference).

There appears to be no direct link between financial struggles (*financial_constraints*) and the ability to handle unforeseen expenses of up to 250 euros (*cover_unexpected_expense*) in relation to academic persistence. While surprising (Ishitani, 2016), this can be explained by the context of the particular cohorts that were analysed. Firstly, the COVID-19 pandemic and the move to online learning have decreased the financial pressure on students who could stay at home. Secondly, once students started face-to-face courses, the survey on student employability showed that a vast majority of students were employed (part-time) during studies, generating the basic needed income. The survey showed that over half of bachelor's degree graduates (54.8%) and nearly three-quarters of master's degree graduates (73.9%) in the 2020/2021 academic year were employed while studying. Additionally, among bachelor's degree students who worked, half had full-time jobs (Deaconu & Hâj, 2022b), suggesting that financial concerns were likely a primary motivator for working while studying. Thirdly, these cohorts were beneficiaries of increased student social support with increased scholarships, including social scholarships. This is in line with Moline (1987) who argues that a financial support system in place helps students in need to continue their education and with Alexe-Coteț et al. (2015) who show that the situation in Romania improved significantly after the integration in the Bologna Process. The total funding for student support (including scholarships, transportation, student housing, and cafeterias) almost doubled from 107.755.770 to 202.029.265 Euro between 2008 and 2022.

No relevant statistical results were found concerning additional educational support or tutoring in relation with students at risk of dropping out (*tutoring_benefit*). The results do not align with the perspectives shared by other scholars, such as Roberts (1984), Cotton et al. (2017) or Ortiz-Lozano et al. (2020), who stress the significance of tutoring and induction programmes as a foundational element of academic and social integration within an institution. While these authors suggest that a concise, one-week induction programme may be optimal for initial student integration, the absence of statistical significance for ongoing tutoring benefits could imply that the effectiveness of extended support services like tutoring may depend on their integration within the broader induction and engagement strategies of the institution. Thus, while initial induction programmes are substantiated in their effectiveness, the long-term benefits of continued educational support, such as tutoring, require further empirical exploration to establish their impact on student retention.

4.3 Teaching

This study has found that students' positive perception of interaction with their peers during the learning process (*satisfaction_peer_interaction_support*) is a significant factor in reducing dropout rates. This is particularly true for bachelor's degree students, where the odds of not dropping out increase by up to 34% during the first year of study. Furthermore, this effect persists in the following years, with a reduction of up to 18% two years after the students were surveyed.

This finding is consistent with previous studies, which have shown that cooperative learning can decrease the risk of dropout (Cámara-Zapata & Morales, 2020; Poellhuber et al., 2008). Collaborative learning could also be linked to a commitment for group working that also has positive results in tackling dropout (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005).

First-year bachelor's degree students' perception of the relevance of academic topics to their professional training has been shown to significantly impact their likelihood of dropping out (*topic_relevance_professional_training*). Specifically, research has found that a perceived lack of relevance can increase the odds of dropout by up to 34%. To address this issue, an improved curriculum that aligns with students' perceptions of academic significance can be a powerful tool for reducing attrition rates and promoting learning outcomes (Grove et al., 2008). Therefore, particularly for first-year students, it is crucial to foster a deep understanding of their coursework's practical applications and value to bolster student engagement and retention.

No statistically relevant results were found for the question that sought to gauge the quality of teachers based on how well students understood during their classes (*ease_of_understanding*). Therefore, it is not possible to establish whether the teachers' teaching methods significantly predicted retention.

It was assumed that having access to education through university professors' web pages could be related to institutional efforts to overcome economic constraints (*teacher_resource_access*). From the beginning, it was clear that the association between the mentioned indicator and student dropout is not strong, but there is one exception. BA students transitioning from the second to the third study year one year after the census have a 22% chance of progress if they are satisfied with the educational resources available through their teachers' personal web pages. All other results are relevant from a statistical point of view. It is important to emphasise that in Romania, there is no mandatory requirement for teachers to create such pages; alternatively, they may be established through institutional work platforms, such as Moodle.

Additionally, the effectiveness of teaching techniques in enhancing the overall learning experience does not necessarily associate with students' concerns. Despite facing social or economic hardships, students are more likely to persist when they feel they are gaining valuable knowledge and skills. Evaluating the quality of teaching and academic support can be done by examining how teaching techniques facilitate learning, as measured by teaching technique efficacy. However, according to NSS-RO responses, there were no statistically significant results for either generation, indicating that the effectiveness of teaching methods cannot reliably predict lower student dropouts (*teaching_techniques_efficacy*).

While some studies have highlighted the importance of positive student–teacher relationships in reducing dropout rates, there was no clear link between students' perceptions of their teachers' performance and their likelihood to drop out.

Lastly, even quality feedback, which can significantly impact a student's learning experience and academic confidence (*quality_feedback_received*), failed to relate to lower student dropout rates. Although it was assumed that quality feedback for student work, as part of academic support, could reduce the likelihood of students dropping out, the results did not establish any statistically relevant relationships between the variables under consideration for any of the generations surveyed. Receiving constructive feedback may make students feel more supported academically, but it does not appear to be a reliable predictor of lower student dropout rates.

5 COVID-19 Pandemic Challenges and Their Influence on University Dropout Rates

Students' perceptions of the negative impact of the pandemic on their educational journey are closely intertwined with their decision to drop out, particularly as negative experiences have been shown to amplify the likelihood of withdrawal from university studies (*university_dropout*). This correlation holds true across various cohorts—BA first-year students experienced up to a 38% surge in potential dropouts, BA second-year students up to 40%, and MA first-year students 38%. The pattern persists for BA students who began their studies in 2020/2021, with a 39% increased risk of dropping out as they approach their third year, demonstrating the deep-seated and enduring influence of the pandemic on student retention across different academic stages.

Moreover, financial constraints that affect students' ability to participate in the educational process due to the COVID-19 pandemic context—such as inadequate access to IT tools or unreliable internet connections—have been identified as significant predictors of retention (*impoverished_students*). This is especially the case for BA students who were in their first year in 2020/2021, as they were less likely to drop out if they had the proper means to connect to courses, up 24% (one year after the survey) and up to 15% (two years after NSS-RO implementation).

First-year BA students who received comprehensive support from their institutions to facilitate online learning exhibited up to an 18% decrease in the likelihood of ending their studies prematurely (*HEI_support*). Though the study did not encounter other significant results, the results of BA new enrolees of 2020/2021 indicate that having the necessary resources for online learning (like institutional email, learning platforms, etc.) is associated with a decreased likelihood of dropout consideration, highlighting the role of resource availability in supporting students during remote learning. Also, this means that for years of further study, HEIs have tackled dropout concerns due to immediate support received and successful adaptation to online education. Adequate institutional support for online education, including material aid such as laptops and internet access, had a buffering effect on dropout rates during the pandemic.

In contrast, BA first-year students were up to 66% more likely to advance to the subsequent academic year when they had access to important online educational resources conducive to teaching, such as robust working and communication platforms (*online_resources*). The situation maintains for the same generation even two years after the survey while passing from their second to third year, as the odds to advance in their last study year was 56% higher in comparison with those that had the perception of not having such resources. These findings reveal that BA students who commenced their studies in 2020/2021 and reported access to online resources were consistently less inclined to consider dropping out over time.

Statistical analysis did not uncover significant correlations between student dropout rates and the students' perceptions of how higher education institutions (HEIs) transitioned educational processes to online platforms (*online_transition*). The same situation occurred when trying to associate students' leaving with the lack of constant and proper information from the university on potential changes concerning the educational process in a period of uncertainty and frequent changes. This absence of evidence points to a general satisfaction with the transition and underscores the pivotal role of a well-executed shift to remote learning for maintaining student engagement. It also suggests that institutions that communicated effectively and offered clear guidance might have alleviated some of the uncertainty and stress induced by the pandemic, contributing to improved student retention.

6 Discussion and Conclusions

The research questions and analysis clearly demonstrate the significance of early signals in addressing potential student dropout. These findings can serve as a valuable resource for developing or updating public policies to combat dropout at both the institutional and government levels. It is imperative for higher education institutions to understand the factors that influence student dropout in order to create effective retention strategies. These findings can contribute to the development of policies and practices that combat student dropout and promote successful academic achievement. Romania's completion rates of full-time tertiary students, both at the bachelor's and master's level, are not outliers in the broader European context. The OECD data shown in Table 4 support this.

As the research methodology proposed binary logistic regressions on clusters of indicators based on the models described above, the indicators are correlated within the same category, increasing the relevance of the results.

Pre-university and General Factors

- **Pre-university performance at the Baccalaureate is the most significant predictor of retention rates for bachelor's students**. Higher averages are strongly correlated with higher retention rates. Bachelor's degree students can maintain enrolment while achieving a higher average with a probability ranging from 30 to 44%. A high average among master's students does indicate a potential dropout. It is important to note this. While pre-university factors such as gender, age, or birthplace have been studied, they have not been shown to have a significant influence.
- **Early identification of students considering leaving higher education is crucial to tackling dropout rates**. Institutions can implement national or institutional instruments to measure students' perceptions of continuing their studies, even in the early stages. This will help reduce dropout rates and ensure students are supported throughout their studies. Tailor-made measures will prevent dropouts by identifying students who need academic support.

Table 4 Completion rates of full-time tertiary students by level of education and gender (2020)

	Bachelor	Master
Austria	26	38
Estonia	43	43
Finland	46	–
France	36	58
Iceland	39	–
Italy	21	–
Lithuania	59	72
Netherlands	29	–
Norway	49	42
Poland	50	48
Portugal	38	67
Romania	**48**	**39**
Slovenia	38	41
Spain	37	58
Sweden	33	38
Switzerland	39	–
United Kingdom	69	–

Source OECD (2022). See the Source section for more information and Annex 3 for notes (https://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance/EAG2022_X3-B.pdf). For administrative data on Romania, see Alexe-Coteț et al. (2022) for bachelors' degree. For master's degree, data was calculated for 2022

Academic System

- **Tailoring strategies to combat dropout rates is crucial and requires different approaches for each study cycle**. By acknowledging these differences and tailoring the strategies accordingly, HEI's can effectively combat dropout rates and ensure student success. It is important to consider individual students' unique needs and experiences, including their educational backgrounds, years of study, and timing. While the dropout rate for bachelor's degrees increases gradually over time, master's degree students face a sudden spike due to final exams and thesis defence.
- **Early identification of students who are considering leaving higher education is crucial to combat dropout rates, with an increased likelihood of dropping out between 12 and 21%, regardless of the study cycle**. To achieve this, national or institutional instruments should be implemented to measure students' perceptions of continuing their studies. By identifying students who may be at risk of dropping out, tailor-made measures can be taken to provide the academic support necessary to prevent this from happening.
- **Additionally, the study field represents a good predictor of potential dropout**. For instance, bachelor's degree students from ISCED-F 2013 study fields like *Health and Welfare*, *Social Sciences, Journalism and Information*, and *Education* programmes tend to have lower dropout rates. For master's degree students,

the highest retention rate was observed in *Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries, and Veterinary*.

- **Students who want to change their study programme should be taken into account as they could potentially drop out**. Their likelihood of dropping out is up to almost a third (29%) compared to those who are satisfied with their option, especially for undergraduates. Students who recommend their studies to others are less likely to drop out. The likelihood of such a student dropping out is up to 16%, especially for bachelor students. The COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to online learning have made students' lack of access to university resources and learning spaces strongly associated with potential dropout. This may be particularly the case for academic years that were heavily affected by the pandemic. Apart from overall student satisfaction, a programme's recommendation depends on several factors, such as its academic content, quality of faculty, location and culture, and potential career outcomes. This ultimately confirms a match between the individual and the academic institution.

Social System

- **Students who feel a sense of community are much less likely to drop out**. Particularly for first-year students, an increased sense of belonging at university increases the probability of not dropping out by up to 67% for bachelor students. An increase in the sense of belonging between the first and second year of bachelor's degree students reduces the probability of not persisting by 16%.
- **HEIs should take into account students' perceived difficulties in completing their bachelor's degree, especially after the first year, as this can increase the probability of dropping out by up to 15%**. The findings highlight that this is about how students find out what is expected of them in their programme. In this sense, academic staff could improve their combination of formal channels and informal interactions to provide better and more useful information, as well as advice and guidance.

Teaching

- **Peer learning is a key determinant of student attrition for undergraduate (and first-year master's) students**. Those with a positive perception of peer learning are between 18 and 34% more likely not to drop out. And this is true across all years of study. Students who feel that their courses are relevant to their future career are less likely to drop out by more than a third (34%) at the bachelor's level.

Covid-19

- **Institutions that surveyed students on this topic in the 2020/2021 academic year were able to get an accurate picture of potential students on the verge of dropping out**. Access to online resources was crucial for first-year undergraduate students, as it increased their chances of academic persistence by up to 66%.
- **Up to 40% of students who considered dropping out of their higher education studies actually did so in the context of COVID-19**. Even master's degree students

Table 5 Statistical relevant and un-relevant factors on student dropout after analysis

Category	Statistical relevant factors on student dropout	Statistical un-relevant factors on student dropout
Pre-university and general	• High Baccalaureate average correlates with higher retention in BA	• Gender • Age • Birthplace • Residence
Academic	• Early identification of students considering leaving (12–21% increased risk) • Study field (ISCED-F) • Changing study programme increases dropout risk (29%) • Recommending study programme reduces dropout risk (16%) • Perceived difficulty in graduating increases dropout risk (15%)	• Personal development opportunities • Learning environment satisfaction • Accessibility of online resources • Benefits of IT resources
Social	• Strong sense of community reduces dropout risk (67% for first-year bachelors) • Perceived difficulty in academic progress increases dropout risk (15%)	• Financial struggles • Ability to cover unexpected expenses
Teaching	• Collaborative learning reduces dropout risk (18–34%) • Feeling courses are relevant to future career reduces dropout risk (34%)	• Quality of teacher explanations • Access to teacher resources on web pages • Effectiveness of teaching techniques • Quality of feedback received
COVID-19	• Up to 40% of students considering dropping out did so during pandemic • Institutional support for online learning and poverty-related challenges could have reduced dropout rates	• Perception of online learning transition • Lack of information on changes within HEI due to COVID-19 context

had a high dropout rate, with 38% of them likely to end their studies. Institutional support was provided for first-year students of 2020/2021, not only for online education participation (up to 18%) but also for addressing challenges faced by students in actively involved in (online) classrooms due to poverty (up to 24%). This support could have significantly reduced potential student dropout rates.

Table 5 shows there are several statistically irrelevant factors related to student dropout, based on data from NSS-RO and EUROSTUDENT VII. Financial struggles or unforeseen expenses up to 250 euros tend not to statistically influence student dropout. This is just one example. It is common for students to work part-time while studying to meet their basic needs. In addition, support systems have been developed to address such issues. However, this study serves as a foundation for further analysis of student dropout rates in relation to academic, social, and teaching factors, using the institutional departure model derived from Tinto's original findings. The survey was conducted during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the results yielded interesting insights that are relevant to various stakeholders.

Annex 1—Binary Logistic Regression Predicting the Impact of Pre-Entry Characteristics on Student Dropout

@dropout_1year[2] BA—1st year		**B**	**S.E.**	**Wald**	**df**	**Sig.**	**Exp (B)**
age	Age	−0,013	0,015	0,674	1	0,412	0,987
BAC_average	Baccalaureate exam session average	0,259	0,071	13,367	1	0,000	1,295
Birthplace_region	Birthplace—county (NUTS2)	−0,002	0,006	0,161	1	0,688	0,998
first_gen	First-generation students	−0,002	0,183	0,000	1	0,990	0,998
gender	Gender	0,194	0,157	1,515	1	0,218	1,214
–	Constant	7,963	3,891	4,188	1	0,041	2873,582
@dropout_1year[3] BA—2nd year		**B**	**S.E.**	**Wald**	**df**	**Sig.**	**Exp (B)**
age	Age	0,040	0,032	1,551	1	0,213	1,041
BAC_average	Baccalaureate exam session average	0,363	0,095	14,515	1	0,000	1,437
Birthplace_region	Birthplace—county (NUTS2)	0,003	0,008	0,181	1	0,671	1,003
first_gen	First-generation students	0,018	0,251	0,005	1	0,942	1,018
gender	Gender	0,307	0,212	2,095	1	0,148	1,359
–	Constant	2,809	4,995	0,316	1	0,574	16,596
@dropout_1year[4] MA—1st year		**B**	**S.E.**	**Wald**	**df**	**Sig.**	**Exp (B)**
age	Age	−0,038	0,025	2,274	1	0,132	0,963
BAC_average	Baccalaureate exam session average	−0,247	0,116	4,564	1	0,033	0,781

(continued)

[2] R^2 = 0.027 (Nagelkerke). Cox & Snell R^2 = 0.012. Chi^2 = 26.778, p < 0.001.

[3] R^2 = 0.029 (Nagelkerke). Cox & Snell R^2 = 0.008. Chi^2 = 21.106, p = 0.002.

[4] R^2 = 0.032 (Nagelkerke). Cox & Snell R^2 = 0.016. Chi^2 = 14.378, p = 0.026.

(continued)

@dropout_1year MA—1st year		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp (B)
Birthplace_region	Birthplace—county (NUTS2)	0,018	0,009	4,230	1	0,040	1,018
first_gen	First-generation students	−0,016	0,265	0,003	1	0,953	0,985
gender	Gender	0,553	0,228	5,885	1	0,015	1,739
–	Constant	4,161	5,685	0,536	1	0,464	64,150
@dropout_2years[5] BA—1st year		**B**	**S.E.**	**Wald**	**df**	**Sig.**	**Exp (B)**
age	Age	−0,006	0,012	0,225	1	0,635	0,994
BAC_average	Baccalaureate exam session average	0,261	0,053	24,349	1	0,000	1,298
Birthplace_region	Birthplace—county (NUTS2)	−0,002	0,004	0,136	1	0,712	0,998
first_gen	First-generation students	−0,003	0,136	0,000	1	0,985	0,997
gender	Gender	0,123	0,117	1,106	1	0,293	1,131
–	Constant	−0,214	2,895	0,005	1	0,941	0,807
@dropout_2years[6] MA—1st year		**B**	**S.E.**	**Wald**	**df**	**Sig.**	**Exp (B)**
age	Age	−0,012	0,017	0,515	1	0,473	0,988
BAC_average	Baccalaureate exam session average	−0,046	0,069	0,433	1	0,511	0,955
Birthplace_region	Birthplace—county (NUTS2)	−0,004	0,005	0,648	1	0,421	0,996
first_gen	First-generation students	−0,159	0,163	0,947	1	0,330	0,853
gender	Gender	0,287	0,144	3,999	1	0,046	1,332
–	Constant	−10,861	3,546	9,380	1	0,002	0,000

[5] R^2 = 0.024 (Nagelkerke). Cox & Snell R^2 = 0.014. Chi^2 = 31.572, p < 0.001.

[6] R^2 = 0.023 (Nagelkerke). Cox & Snell R^2 = 0.017. Chi^2 = 15.653, p = 0.016.

Annex 2—Binary Logistic Regression Predicting Dropout Status on Variables Related to the Academic System

@dropout_1year[7] BA—1st year		**B**	**S.E.**	**Wald**	**df**	**Sig.**	**Exp (B)**
@2020_Q1.2	uni_personal_development	−0,111	0,111	1,008	1	0,315	0,895
@2020_Q2.1	tech_resource_access	0,196	0,101	3,761	1	0,052	1,217
@2020_Q2.7	satisfaction_with_learning_spaces	0,005	0,116	0,002	1	0,968	1,005
@2020_Q8.2	online_resource_accessibility	0,084	0,102	0,675	1	0,411	1,087
Q3.6_6_2	recommend_programme	0,147	0,058	6,391	1	0,011	1,158
Q3.6_6_4	university_intent	0,086	0,053	2,591	1	0,107	1,089
Q3.6_6_5	change_study_programme	−0,344	0,053	42,320	1	0,000	0,709
Q3.6_6_6	consider_leaving_HE	−0,084	0,056	2,272	1	0,132	0,919
–	Constant	1,927	0,451	18,232	1	0,000	6,870
@dropout_1year[8] BA—2nd year		**B**	**S.E.**	**Wald**	**df**	**Sig.**	**Exp (B)**
@2020_Q1.2	uni_personal_development	0,131	0,124	1,116	1	0,291	1,140
@2020_Q2.1	tech_resource_access	−0,179	0,124	2,061	1	0,151	0,836
@2020_Q2.7	satisfaction_with_learning_spaces	0,149	0,116	1,644	1	0,200	1,161
@2020_Q8.2	online_resource_accessibility	−0,039	0,117	0,109	1	0,741	0,962
Q3.6_6_2	recommend_programme	0,158	0,071	4,883	1	0,027	1,171
Q3.6_6_4	university_intent	0,052	0,068	0,586	1	0,444	1,053

(continued)

[7] R^2 = 0.094 (Nagelkerke). Cox & Snell R^2 = 0.042. Chi^2 = 130.787, p < 0.001.

[8] R^2 = 0.089 (Nagelkerke). Cox & Snell R^2 = 0.029. Chi^2 = 106.766, p < 0.001.

(continued)

@dropout_1year BA—2nd year		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp (B)
Q3.6_6_5	change_study_programme	−0,283	0,062	20,798	1	0,000	0,753
Q3.6_6_6	consider_leaving_HE	−0,239	0,067	12,787	1	0,000	0,788
-	Constant	3,110	0,501	38,481	1	0,000	22,424
@dropout_1year[9] MA—1st year		**B**	**S.E.**	**Wald**	**df**	**Sig.**	**Exp (B)**
@2020_Q1.2	uni_personal_development	−0,004	0,151	0,001	1	0,978	0,996
@2020_Q2.1	tech_resource_access	0,229	0,137	2,778	1	0,096	1,257
@2020_Q2.7	satisfaction_with_learning_spaces	0,071	0,131	0,298	1	0,585	1,074
@2020_Q8.2	online_resource_accessibility	−0,086	0,147	0,343	1	0,558	0,917
Q3.6_6_2	recommend_programme	0,103	0,080	1,660	1	0,198	1,108
Q3.6_6_4	university_intent	0,093	0,081	1,310	1	0,252	1,097
Q3.6_6_5	change_study_programme	−0,124	0,078	2,527	1	0,112	0,883
Q3.6_6_6	consider_leaving_HE	−0,189	0,076	6,173	1	0,013	0,828
–	Constant	1,275	0,604	4,452	1	0,035	3,580
@dropout_2years[10] BA—1st year		**B**	**S.E.**	**Wald**	**df**	**Sig.**	**Exp (B)**
@2020_Q1.2	uni_personal_development	−0,086	0,085	1,015	1	0,314	0,917
@2020_Q2.1	tech_resource_access	0,086	0,080	1,156	1	0,282	1,090
@2020_Q2.7	satisfaction_with_learning_spaces	−0,021	0,088	0,055	1	0,814	0,980
@2020_Q8.2	online_resource_accessibility	0,057	0,079	0,518	1	0,472	1,059
Q3.6_6_2	recommend_programme	0,130	0,044	8,790	1	0,003	1,139

(continued)

[9] R^2 = 0.051 (Nagelkerke). Cox & Snell R^2 = 0.026. Chi^2 = 35.930, p < 0.001.

[10] R^2 = 0.075 (Nagelkerke). Cox & Snell R^2 = 0.045. Chi^2 = 140.360, p < 0.001.

(continued)

@dropout_2years BA—1st year		**B**	**S.E.**	**Wald**	**df**	**Sig.**	**Exp (B)**
Q3.6_6_4	university_intent	0,049	0,041	1,420	1	0,233	1,051
Q3.6_6_5	change_study_programme	−0,260	0,042	38,764	1	0,000	0,771
Q3.6_6_6	consider_leaving_HE	−0,122	0,045	7,441	1	0,006	0,885
–	Constant	1,533	0,355	18,630	1	0,000	4,633
@dropout_2years[11] MA—1st year		**B**	**S.E.**	**Wald**	**df**	**Sig.**	**Exp (B)**
@2020_Q1.2	uni_personal_development	0,124	0,104	1,414	1	0,234	1,132
@2020_Q2.1	tech_resource_access	−0,166	0,097	2,949	1	0,086	0,847
@2020_Q2.7	satisfaction_with_learning_spaces	0,174	0,088	3,906	1	0,048	1,191
@2020_Q8.2	online_resource_accessibility	0,078	0,102	0,577	1	0,448	1,081
Q3.6_6_2	recommend_programme	0,092	0,054	2,865	1	0,091	1,097
Q3.6_6_4	university_intent	−0,074	0,056	1,729	1	0,189	0,929
Q3.6_6_5	change_study_programme	−0,025	0,059	0,176	1	0,675	0,975
Q3.6_6_6	consider_leaving_HE	−0,180	0,061	8,705	1	0,003	0,835
–	Constant	−0,280	0,434	0,416	1	0,519	0,756

[11] R^2 = 0.042 (Nagelkerke). Cox & Snell R^2 = 0.032. Chi^2 = 43.743, p < 0.001.

Annex 3—Binary Logistic Regression Predicting Dropout Status on Variables Related to the Social System

@dropout_1year[12] BA—1st year		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp (B)
@2020_Q1.4	sense_of_community	0,514	0,119	18,569	1	0,000	1,671
@2020_Q10.3	tutoring_benefit	0,115	0,114	1,012	1	0,314	1,122
Q3.6_6_1	difficulty_expectations	0,168	0,064	6,863	1	0,009	1,183
Q3.6_6_3	belonging_in_HE	−0,141	0,059	5,727	1	0,017	0,868
Q4.19_19_1	financial_difficulties	−0,059	0,070	0,695	1	0,405	0,943
Q4.20	cover_unexpected_expense	−0,001	0,126	0,000	1	0,997	0,999
–	Constant	0,712	0,452	2,482	1	0,115	2,039
@dropout_1year[13] BA—2nd year		**B**	**S.E.**	**Wald**	**df**	**Sig.**	**Exp (B)**
@2020_Q1.4	sense_of_community	0,295	0,126	5,452	1	0,020	1,343
@2020_Q10.3	tutoring_benefit	−0,028	0,120	0,053	1	0,817	0,973
Q3.6_6_1	difficulty_expectations	0,022	0,074	0,087	1	0,768	1,022
Q3.6_6_3	belonging_in_HE	−0,279	0,062	19,990	1	0,000	0,756
Q4.19_19_1	financial_difficulties	−0,098	0,081	1,464	1	0,226	0,907
Q4.20	cover_unexpected_expense	−0,041	0,139	0,088	1	0,767	0,960
–	Constant	3,152	0,522	36,537	1	0,000	23,392

(continued)

12 R^2 = 0.044 (Nagelkerke). Cox & Snell R^2 = 0.020. Chi^2 = 37.720, p < 0.001.

13 R^2 = 0.042 (Nagelkerke). Cox & Snell R^2 = 0.013. Chi^2 = 35.763, p < 0.001.

(continued)

@dropout_1year[14] MA—1st year		**B**	**S.E.**	**Wald**	**df**	**Sig.**	**Exp (B)**
@2020_Q1.4	sense_of_community	0,350	0,147	5,686	1	0,017	1,419
@2020_Q10.3	tutoring_benefit	0,159	0,140	1,297	1	0,255	1,172
Q3.6_6_1	difficulty_expectations	−0,027	0,084	0,104	1	0,747	0,973
Q3.6_6_3	belonging_in_HE	−0,024	0,085	0,079	1	0,778	0,976
Q4.19_19_1	financial_difficulties	0,089	0,088	1,038	1	0,308	1,094
Q4.20	cover_unexpected_expense	0,054	0,143	0,141	1	0,707	1,055
–	Constant	0,557	0,549	1,029	1	0,310	1,746
@dropout_2years[15] BA—1st year		**B**	**S.E.**	**Wald**	**df**	**Sig.**	**Exp (B)**
@2020_Q1.4	sense_of_community	0,292	0,092	10,066	1	0,002	1,339
@2020_Q10.3	tutoring_benefit	0,106	0,085	1,549	1	0,213	1,112
Q3.6_6_1	difficulty_expectations	0,037	0,048	0,617	1	0,432	1,038
Q3.6_6_3	belonging_in_HE	−0,115	0,044	6,746	1	0,009	0,891
Q4.19_19_1	financial_difficulties	−0,041	0,052	0,636	1	0,425	0,960
Q4.20	cover_unexpected_expense	−0,024	0,093	0,068	1	0,794	0,976
–	Constant	0,753	0,350	4,611	1	0,032	2,123
@dropout_2years[16] MA—1st year		**B**	**S.E.**	**Wald**	**df**	**Sig.**	**Exp (B)**
@2020_Q1.4	sense_of_community	0,296	0,108	7,529	1	0,006	1,344

(continued)

[14] $R^2 = 0.029$ (Nagelkerke). Cox & Snell $R^2 = 0.015$. $Chi^2 = 14.609$, $p = 0.024$..

[15] $R^2 = 0.026$ (Nagelkerke). Cox & Snell $R^2 = 0.016$. $Chi^2 = 29.679$, $p < 0.001$.

[16] $R^2 = 0.035$ (Nagelkerke). Cox & Snell $R^2 = 0.027$. $Chi^2 = 25.890$, $p < 0.001$.

(continued)

@dropout_2years MA—1st year		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp (B)
@2020_Q10.3	tutoring_benefit	0,058	0,092	0,402	1	0,526	1,060
Q3.6_6_1	difficulty_expectations	−0,089	0,055	2,553	1	0,110	0,915
Q3.6_6_3	belonging_in_HE	−0,022	0,058	0,136	1	0,712	0,979
Q4.19_19_1	financial_difficulties	−0,083	0,058	2,030	1	0,154	0,921
Q4.20	cover_unexpected_expense	−0,051	0,092	0,300	1	0,584	0,951
–	Constant	−0,319	0,387	0,681	1	0,409	0,727

Annex 4—Binary Logistic Regression Predicting Dropout Status on Variables Related to Teaching

@dropout_1year[17] BA—1st year		**B**	**S.E.**	**Wald**	**df**	**Sig.**	**Exp (B)**
@2020_Q6.1_s	ease_of_understanding	0,095	0,108	0,766	1	0,381	1,099
@2020_Q6.3_s	teaching_techniques_efficacy	−0,029	0,126	0,054	1	0,817	0,971
@2020_Q6.6_s	topic_relevance_professional_training	0,293	0,103	8,054	1	0,005	1,341
@2020_Q7.2_s	quality_feedback_received	0,005	0,090	0,003	1	0,956	1,005
@2020_Q8.3_s	teacher_resource_access	0,007	0,084	0,008	1	0,930	1,007
@2020_Q8.6_s	satisfaction_peer_interaction_support	0,290	0,087	11,028	1	0,001	1,336
–	Constant	0,353	0,223	2,496	1	0,114	1,423
@dropout_1year[18] BA—2nd year		**B**	**S.E.**	**Wald**	**df**	**Sig.**	**Exp (B)**
@2020_Q6.1_s	ease_of_understanding	0,125	0,127	0,967	1	0,325	1,133
@2020_Q6.3_s	teaching_techniques_efficacy	0,127	0,146	0,757	1	0,384	1,135
@2020_Q6.6_s	topic_relevance_professional_training	0,170	0,114	2,238	1	0,135	1,186
@2020_Q7.2_s	quality_feedback_received	0,103	0,106	0,937	1	0,333	1,108
@2020_Q8.3_s	teacher_resource_access	−0,317	0,094	11,295	1	0,001	0,728
@2020_Q8.6_s	satisfaction_peer_interaction_support	0,264	0,100	6,990	1	0,008	1,302
–	Constant	1,604	0,261	37,899	1	0,000	4,973

(continued)

[17] R^2 = 0.045 (Nagelkerke). Cox & Snell R^2 = 0.022. Chi^2 = 75.251, p < 0.001.
[18] R^2 = 0.033 (Nagelkerke). Cox & Snell R^2 = 0.011. Chi^2 = 49.762, p < 0.001.

(continued)

@dropout_1year[19] MA—1st year		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp (B)
@2020_Q6.1_s	ease_of_understanding	−0,096	0,159	0,365	1	0,546	0,908
@2020_Q6.3_s	teaching_techniques_efficacy	0,110	0,186	0,350	1	0,554	1,116
@2020_Q6.6_s	topic_relevance_professional_training	0,098	0,148	0,438	1	0,508	1,103
@2020_Q7.2_s	quality_feedback_received	−0,103	0,141	0,526	1	0,468	0,903
@2020_Q8.3_s	teacher_resource_access	−0,164	0,112	2,142	1	0,143	0,849
@2020_Q8.6_s	satisfaction_peer_interaction_support	0,181	0,132	1,887	1	0,170	1,199
–	Constant	0,807	0,340	5,640	1	0,018	2,242
@dropout_2years[20] BA—1st year		**B**	**S.E.**	**Wald**	**df**	**Sig.**	**Exp (B)**
@2020_Q6.1_s	ease_of_understanding	−0,062	0,083	0,548	1	0,459	0,940
@2020_Q6.3_s	teaching_techniques_efficacy	−0,070	0,097	0,515	1	0,473	0,933
@2020_Q6.6_s	topic_relevance_professional_training	0,171	0,081	4,487	1	0,034	1,187
@2020_Q7.2_s	quality_feedback_received	0,061	0,070	0,777	1	0,378	1,063
@2020_Q8.3_s	teacher_resource_access	−0,077	0,064	1,414	1	0,234	0,926
@2020_Q8.6_s	satisfaction_peer_interaction_support	0,168	0,069	5,912	1	0,015	1,183
–	Constant	0,156	0,185	0,713	1	0,398	1,169

(continued)

[19] R^2 = 0.029 (Nagelkerke). Cox & Snell R^2 = 0.015. Chi^2 = 23.741, p = 0.005.

[20] R^2 = 0.028 (Nagelkerke). Cox & Snell R^2 = 0.018. Chi^2 = 62.268, p < 0.001.

(continued)

@dropout_2years[21] MA—1st year		**B**	**S.E.**	**Wald**	**df**	**Sig.**	**Exp (B)**
@2020_Q6.1_s	ease_of_understanding	0,033	0,110	0,089	1	0,766	1,033
@2020_Q6.3_s	teaching_techniques_efficacy	0,071	0,126	0,320	1	0,572	1,074
@2020_Q6.6_s	topic_relevance_professional_training	0,172	0,105	2,679	1	0,102	1,188
@2020_Q7.2_s	quality_feedback_received	−0,128	0,097	1,724	1	0,189	0,880
@2020_Q8.3_s	teacher_resource_access	0,036	0,073	0,246	1	0,620	1,037
@2020_Q8.6_s	satisfaction_peer_interaction_support	−0,063	0,095	0,440	1	0,507	0,939
–	Constant	−0,957	0,256	13,988	1	0,000	0,384

[21] R^2 = 0.027(Nagelkerke). Cox & Snell R^2 = 0.020. Chi^2 = 32.257, p < 0.001.

Annex 5—Binary Logistic Regression Predicting Dropout Status on COVID-19 Pandemic Impact in Students' Perception (NSS-RO)

@dropout_1year[22] BA—1st year		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp (B)
@2020_Q0.1	university_dropout	−0,477	0,084	32,473	1	0,000	0,621
@2020_Q0.2	impoverished_students	0,219	0,079	7,698	1	0,006	1,245
@2020_Q0.3	HEI_support	−0,198	0,093	4,485	1	0,034	0,820
@2020_Q0.5	online_transition	0,099	0,096	1,082	1	0,298	1,105
@2020_Q0.6	online_resources	0,508	0,116	19,002	1	0,000	1,661
@2020_Q0.7	HEI_information	0,042	0,104	0,163	1	0,686	1,043
–	Constant	1,078	0,375	8,285	1	0,004	2,940
@dropout_1year[23] BA—2nd year		**B**	**S.E.**	**Wald**	**df**	**Sig.**	**Exp (B)**
@2020_Q0.1	university_dropout	−0,509	0,086	34,818	1	0,000	0,601
@2020_Q0.2	impoverished_students	0,062	0,081	0,588	1	0,443	1,064
@2020_Q0.3	HEI_support	−0,007	0,123	0,003	1	0,957	0,993
@2020_Q0.5	online_transition	0,184	0,100	3,402	1	0,065	1,202
@2020_Q0.6	online_resources	0,064	0,119	0,294	1	0,588	1,066
@2020_Q0.7	HEI_information	−0,032	0,101	0,102	1	0,750	0,968
–	Constant	3,265	0,409	63,674	1	0,000	26,175

(continued)

[22] R^2 = 0.57 (Nagelkerke). Cox & Snell R^2 = 0.028. Chi^2 = 75.422, p < 0.001.

[23] R^2 = 0.033 (Nagelkerke). Cox & Snell R^2 = 0.011. Chi^2 = 50.554, p < 0.001.

(continued)

@dropout_1year[24] MA—1st year		**B**	**S.E.**	**Wald**	**df**	**Sig.**	**Exp (B)**
@2020_Q0.1	university_dropout	−0,475	0,114	17,464	1	0,000	0,622
@2020_Q0.2	impoverished_students	0,139	0,108	1,653	1	0,198	1,149
@2020_Q0.3	HEI_support	−0,072	0,122	0,348	1	0,555	0,930
@2020_Q0.5	online_transition	−0,046	0,139	0,109	1	0,741	0,955
@2020_Q0.6	online_resources	0,248	0,174	2,031	1	0,154	1,282
@2020_Q0.7	HEI_information	0,070	0,141	0,250	1	0,617	1,073
–	Constant	1,838	0,530	12,051	1	0,001	6,286
@dropout_2years[25] BA—1st year		**B**	**S.E.**	**Wald**	**df**	**Sig.**	**Exp (B)**
@2020_Q0.1	university_dropout	−0,500	0,066	56,558	1	0,000	0,607
@2020_Q0.2	impoverished_students	0,136	0,061	4,995	1	0,025	1,146
@2020_Q0.3	HEI_support	−0,136	0,074	3,397	1	0,065	0,873
@2020_Q0.5	online_transition	0,057	0,075	0,573	1	0,449	1,059
@2020_Q0.6	online_resources	0,444	0,099	19,943	1	0,000	1,558
@2020_Q0.7	HEI_information	−0,051	0,084	0,374	1	0,541	0,950
–	Constant	0,940	0,316	8,842	1	0,003	2,560

(continued)

[24] $R^2 = 0.032$ (Nagelkerke). Cox & Snell $R^2 = 0.016$. $Chi^2 = 23.150$, $p = 0.001$.

[25] $R^2 = 0.057$ (Nagelkerke). Cox & Snell $R^2 = 0.036$. $Chi^2 = 96.062$, $p < 0.001$.

(continued)

@dropout_2years[26] MA—1st year		**B**	**S.E.**	**Wald**	**df**	**Sig.**	**Exp (B)**
@2020_Q0.1	university_dropout	−0,194	0,084	5,383	1	0,020	0,824
@2020_Q0.2	impoverished_students	−0,073	0,070	1,077	1	0,299	0,930
@2020_Q0.3	HEI_support	0,024	0,081	0,088	1	0,767	1,024
@2020_Q0.5	online_transition	0,133	0,090	2,175	1	0,140	1,143
@2020_Q0.6	online_resources	0,061	0,126	0,233	1	0,630	1,063
@2020_Q0.7	HEI_information	0,027	0,094	0,080	1	0,778	1,027
–	Constant	−0,217	0,385	0,318	1	0,573	0,805

[26] R^2 = 0.018 (Nagelkerke). Cox & Snell R^2 = 0.014. Chi^2 = 19.428, p = 0.003.

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Students with Delayed Transition to Higher Education: An Often Overlooked Group

Sylvia Mandl and Martin Unger

Abstract For the higher education system to be socially equitable, it is commonly agreed upon by European higher education policymakers that the student body should mirror the social structure of the population (EHEA, 2020). Many countries have created alternative routes to higher education, allowing students to enrol alternative credentials to complete traditional upper secondary education or to complete secondary education and start higher education later in life. Such measures have also improved the social mix of the student population. This paper takes a closer look at the background of students with delayed transition to higher education, particularly in Austria, Lithuania, and Romania, using the EUROSTUDENT VII microdata set (Cuppen et al., 2023). Data shows that 23% of students in Austria, 11% in Lithuania and 10% in Romania enter higher education two years after leaving school at the earliest (excluding international students). While these groups show specific characteristics in each country, overall, it is less likely for them to study abroad, and they more frequently report financial issues. Furthermore, students with a delayed transition to higher education are less likely to have parents with a university degree. However, they devote more time to their studies and are happier with their academic environment. The paper further shows educational regulations and policy measures in Austria, Lithuania, and Romania that can affect the situation of students with delayed transition.

Keywords Students with delayed transition · Transition to higher education · Eurostudent

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1 Introduction

In less than 20 years, the number of students enrolled in higher education worldwide has more than doubled (Martin & Godonga, 2020). Most European countries agree that for the higher education system to be socially equitable, the population's social structure should be reflected in the student body's demographic makeup (EHEA, 2020). However, a more varied student body also means a wider range of expectations and requests for greater flexibility (Unger & Zaussinger, 2018).

In addition to students who continue their education after completing upper secondary school, other students who wish to pursue higher education include adult learners, returnees, migrants, people with caregiving duties, and people with special needs (Martin & Godonga, 2020). The international "Education 2030" agenda (OECD, 2018) and the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (United Nations, 2015) both acknowledge the need for education systems to be modified to better support flexible learning pathways to promote fairness and lifelong learning. This pushes nations to create well-integrated educational systems that offer learning pathways for every student, including entry and re-entry at all ages and educational levels. However, students with delayed transition or mature students are an explicit target group of the equity policy in hardly any country (Samil, 2018).

To achieve that goal as part of the Bologna Process, higher education institutions should, among other things, remove barriers to the recognition of prior learning (e.g. professional experience) for admission (EHEA, 2015). However, the recognition of prior learning for admission is currently hardly possible in any country. Fulfilling the countries' standard requirement for accessing higher education (e.g., passing the last year of upper secondary school or succeeding at a specific exam[1]) later in life is therefore often the only possibility to start without a "regular" secondary school leaving certificate. Data from the EUROSTUDENT VII project shows that the proportion of students with delayed transition varies among countries and currently ranges from 3% in Georgia to 34% in Sweden (see Fig. 1).[2] At the start of their studies, students with delayed transition are, on average, eight years older than their colleagues with direct transition across all EUROSTUDENT countries. This age difference ranges from 2.2 years in Georgia to 13 years in the Czech Republic, where students with delayed transition are, on average(!), 33 years old at the start of their studies.

[1] E.g. Matura, Abitur, A-Level, Baccalauréat. In Romania, it is called "Diploma de Bacalaureat"; in Lithuania and Austria, it is the Matura.

[2] Delayed transition is defined here as the earliest start of studies two years after completion of upper secondary school or without such a qualification by non-traditional routes.

Due to its rapid expansion, the higher education sector is now extremely diversified, which is seen in the increased diversity of learners joining the system as well as the wider range of higher education institutions and study programs (Martin & Godonga, 2020). Every country has a distinct socioeconomic, educational, and political setting that can have an impact on students' pathways to higher education. To foster a flexible learning environment, a suitable combination of policies and steering tools, as well as tailored implementation mechanisms, are needed in higher education institutions.

Examining delayed transition to higher education among students from different countries offers the opportunity to gain a thorough grasp of the variables affecting this occurrence. Taking a closer look at three specific countries, Austria, Lithuania, and Romania, with their different student populations and political measures in place, can help advance our understanding of the variables impacting educational transitions and what this specific group of students might need to be better supported. The following research questions will be at the centre of this study:

– Which students experience delayed transitions?
– Where are students with delayed transition found?
– To what extent do students with delayed transition combine study and work?
– How do students with delayed transition perceive their study situation?

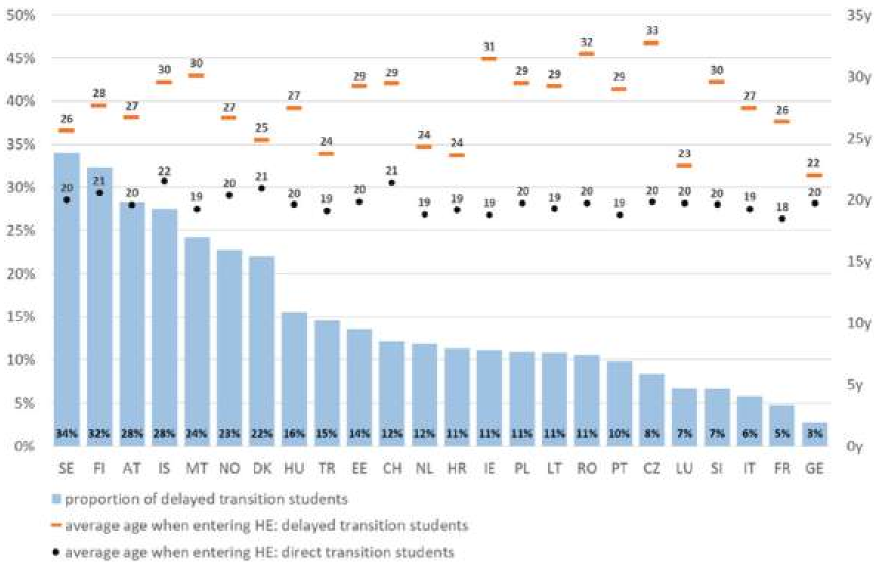

Fig. 1 Proportion of (domestic and international) students with delayed transition AT: Austria; CH: Switzerland; CZ: Czech Republic; DK: Denmark; EE: Estonia; FI: Finland; FR: France; GE: Georgia; HR: Croatia; HU: Hungary; IE: Ireland; IS: Iceland; IT: Italy; LT: Lithuania; LU: Luxembourg; MT: Malta; NL: The Netherlands; NO: Norway; PL: Poland; RO: Romania; SE: Sweden; SI: Slovenia; TR: Turkey. *Source* Database of EUROSTUDENT VII: https://database.eurostudent.eu/drm/

– What educational regulations and policy measures are in place in Austria, Lithuania and Romania that constrain or help students with delayed transition?

The underlying methodology is presented before showing and commenting on the results of this research.

2 Methodology

The microdata set utilised in this research stems from the EUROSTUDENT VII project (2018–2021) (Cuppen et al., 2023) and includes all aspects of modern-day student life, including the students' backgrounds (social and demographic), experiences and learning environments (quality, time, budget, and mobility), and living situations (work, resources, expenses, and housing situation). 16 of the 26 participating countries—AT, DK, EE, FI, FR, GE, HU, HR, IE, LT, LU, NL, PO, RO, SE, and SL—provided their microdata for the study.[3]

Students self-report the data that the EUROSTUDENT project uses. Because of the nature of these data, the EUROSTUDENT dataset contains a substantial quantity of valuable information not found in other sources, such as official statistics. However, it must be kept in mind that the COVID-19 pandemic hit Europe during data collection for EUROSTUDENT VII. While Romania surveyed their students with a reference period during this unusual situation (2020), all the other countries' data included in the used microdata set were collected with a reference period before the pandemic-related constraints (2019).

The study considers **only domestic students**, i.e., those who attended the regular school system (excluding evening classes or schools for adults) in the country of observation, regardless of their citizenship. This is because educational transitions should only be analysed within a national education system (and only for this can proposals for measures be developed if necessary) and because international students may also have other reasons for delayed admission, which may be related to their move abroad, for example. Delayed transition is defined as starting studies at the earliest two years after leaving school. In the analytical sample, 23% of **domestic** students in Austria, 11% in Lithuania and 10% in Romania are classified as students with delayed transition. Pearsons Chi-square and Fisher's Exact tests were used to evaluate the relationship between the variables of interest. A p-value <0.05 was considered significant (*), and <0.001 was considered highly significant (**).

Additionally, guided interviews with policymakers from Austria, Lithuania and Romania were conducted to obtain information on policies in the countries. The interviews (~1 h/interview, two virtually, one in person) have been recorded, transcribed, and thematically analysed (Froschauer & Lueger, 2003). This paper builds on results from the projects "EUROSTUDENT VII" and "Study conditions and motives of

[3] The data set is available at FDZ/DZHW free of charge for scientific purposes: https://metadata.fdz.dzhw.eu/en/data-packages/stu-es7?page=1&size=10&type=surveys.

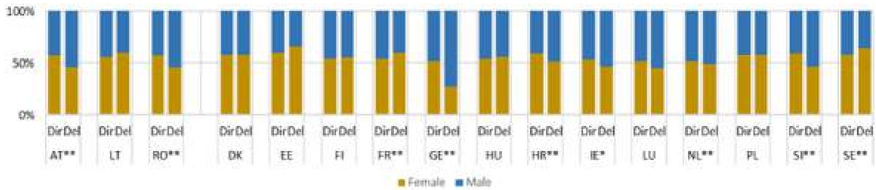

Fig. 2 Proportion of female/male domestic students by direct/delayed transition. *Source* EUROSTUDENT VII Microdata (https://www.fdz.dzhw.eu/en)

non-traditional study beginners in Austria, Lithuania and Romania" (commissioned by OEAD).[4]

3 Characteristics of Domestic Students with Delayed Transition

Students' socioeconomic status, age, gender, and disability are listed as potential impediments to access, participation, and completion of higher education in the EHEA's social dimension principle and guidelines (EHEA, 2020). Giving the chance to start higher education later in life can potentially ease the situation for groups that would not decide in favour of studying otherwise. A closer look at the data allows to check if students with delayed transitions are different regarding their socioeconomic attributes.

Typically, female students make up the majority of students (Gwosc et al., 2021). While this is also the case in all countries under consideration in this research, a different picture is painted for domestic students with delayed transition in several countries, including Austria and Romania. Here, most domestic students with a delayed transition are male (see Fig. 2). This reflects the fact that students with delayed transition can increasingly be found in male-dominated study fields (see Sect. 4).

The age of students frequently plays a role when it comes to laws and regulations relating to their studies. For instance, it might have an impact on one's ability to receive free or subsidised health insurance, more general benefits, or public student assistance. Mature students frequently live in different situations, have different histories and experiences, and have more obligations than younger students (such as those related to family or employment). Generally, the regular student population is mostly younger than 25 years old (Gwosc et al., 2021). Students with a delayed transition are, by definition, already older when they start studying than those who experience a direct transition (see Fig. 1). Nevertheless, the remarkably higher percentage of

[4] See: https://www.eurostudent.eu/ and https://www.ihs.ac.at/ru/higher-education-research/projects/studienbedingungen-und-motive-von-nicht-traditionellen-studienanfaengerinnen-in-oesterreich-litauen-und-rumaenien/.

over 30-year-old students among domestic students with delayed transition indicates that in certain countries, this group is far older: There are ten times more domestic students over the age of 30 among students with delayed transition in Slovenia, nine times more in France, 8.4 times more in Lithuania (64% of all students with delayed transition), 5.5 times more in Romania (67%), and 3.5 times more in Austria (46%). In Finland and Luxembourg, around twice the proportion of students with delayed transition are over 30 years old.

In several countries, there is a higher percentage of students with study-limiting impairments among domestic students who experienced a delayed transition (these conditions are typically either chronic physical illnesses or mental health problems). In France and Slovenia, this proportion was even twice as high (see Fig. 3). Romania, on the other hand, has significantly less students with impairments in the group of students with delayed transition.

Research indicates that students who are the first of their generation to pursue higher education typically face more challenges during the transition to higher education, including limited financial resources, fewer support systems, and a lack of basic knowledge about the process (Mehta et al., 2011; Oldfield, 2012). Therefore, it is not surprising that in nearly every EUROSTUDENT country, students from lower educational backgrounds are underrepresented relative to the population (Gwosc et al., 2021).

The proportion of domestic students with delayed transition whose parents completed higher education (ISCED 6–8) is lower than that with direct transition in all countries of this study except Denmark, where the two proportions are roughly equal (see Fig. 4). In Sweden, a quarter fewer people with delayed transition have parents who have completed higher education. In nine countries, including the three countries we are taking a closer look at in this paper, the percentage of people with parents who completed higher education is, at most, half that of people who underwent a direct transition. In Austria, only 18% of the domestic students with delayed transition have a tertiary education background; in Lithuania 26% and 14% in Romania. It is therefore not surprising that this group less frequently indicates that it was always obvious for them to study in higher education one day.

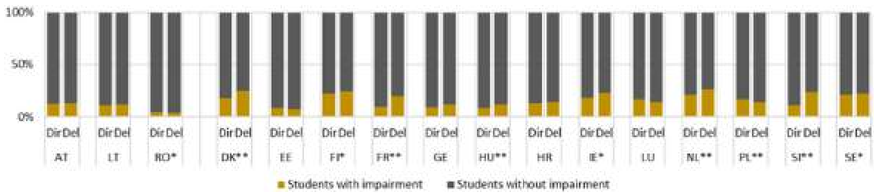

Fig. 3 Proportion of domestic students with/without study-limiting impairment by direct/delayed transition. *Source* EUROSTUDENT VII Microdata (https://www.fdz.dzhw.eu/en)

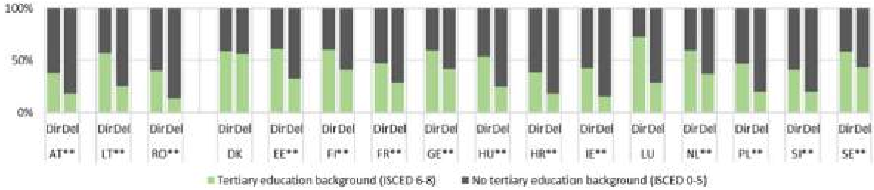

Fig. 4 Proportion of domestic students with/without tertiary education background by direct/delayed transition. *Source* EUROSTUDENT VII Microdata (https://www.fdz.dzhw.eu/en)

4 Where to Find Domestic Students with Delayed Transition?

All EUROSTUDENT countries (except Romania and Sweden) have a substantial "non-university" sector with labour market-oriented higher education institutions, often with a specific focus (e.g., on Health subjects (but not Medicine) or Business/Law). It is significantly more likely for students with delayed transition to be found in the non-university sector. Compared to domestic students with direct transition, nearly twice as many with delayed transition (34% of them) study in the non-university sector in Austria, and more than twice as many (63% of them) do so in Lithuania (see Fig. 5). Moreover, parents of students in the non-university sector are typically less well-off than those of students in the university sector.

Enabling graduates to work in specialised professions is one of the key drivers for investments in higher education. For the selection of study fields, numerous patterns, most notably in relation to sex and socioeconomic status, have been noted in previous research (e.g., Georg & Bargel, 2017; Sobieraj & Krämer, 2019). This raises the question of whether there are also differences regarding types of transitions.

In all EUROSTUDENT countries, Business/Law, Health/Welfare and Engineering are the study fields chosen by the largest proportion of students (Gwosc et al., 2021). Taking a closer look at domestic students with delayed transition, one can see that the popular study field of Business/Law is significantly more frequently selected by them in several countries, including Austria (1.1 times), Lithuania (1.3 times) and Romania (1.3 times). Health/Welfare is selected 1.3 times more frequently

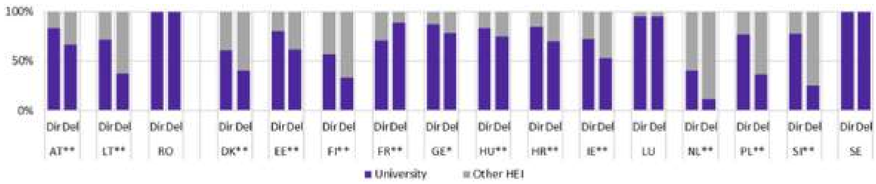

Fig. 5 Proportion of domestic students from universities/other higher education institutions by direct/delayed transition. *Source* EUROSTUDENT VII Microdata (https://www.fdz.dzhw.eu/en)

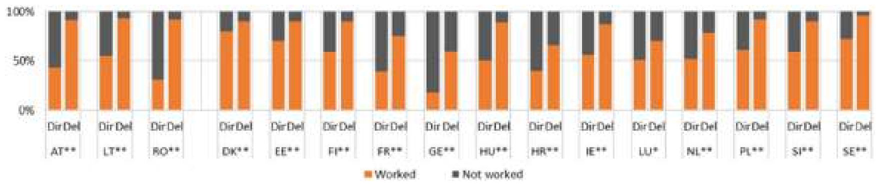

Fig. 6 Proportion of domestic students who worked/did not work before studying by direct/delayed transition. *Source* EUROSTUDENT VII Microdata (https://www.fdz.dzhw.eu/en)

by students with delayed transition in Lithuania but, in contrast, less frequently in Romania (0.7 times).

In seven of the 16 countries, domestic students with delayed transition chose the study field of Education significantly more often than students with direct transition. In Lithuania, this field is 3.2 times more often chosen by students with delayed transition, and in Romania, 1.8 times. Hardly studied by students with delayed transition in Lithuania and Romania is Information and Communications Technology (ICT). However, it is 1.2 times more popular among this group in Austria. This may be due to the fact that in this country, the range of ICT programmes is being continuously expanded, specifically for working professionals. But in general, the choice of study field in Austria differs very little between students with a direct or delayed transition.

Another aspect is that students with a delayed transition are less likely to study abroad temporarily (e.g., ERASMUS+). They more often see financial difficulties, the loss of their paid employment, and separation from their partner or children as the main obstacles to studying abroad.

5 Working Experience of Domestic Students with Delayed Transition

Starting to study later in life often goes along with gaining some work experience before (Mishra, 2016). In Austria, Lithuania, Romania and nearly all other countries under study, about 90% of the domestic students with delayed transition had worked before they started higher education (see Fig. 6).

Working then often continues while studying, which, besides creating an income, can increase the chances of getting a job after graduation and even help secure higher-paying positions (Irwin et al., 2019; Jackson et al., 2018). While part-time work lengthens study time somewhat, it greatly shortens the time needed to find a job after graduation if the employment is connected to the study content (Franzen et al., 2002). Some students decide to work alongside because they are performing exceptionally well in their studies, and others choose to begin working because they are not sure they will able to finish their higher education (Moulin, 2013). In most countries, including Austria, Lithuania and Romania, the proportion of students

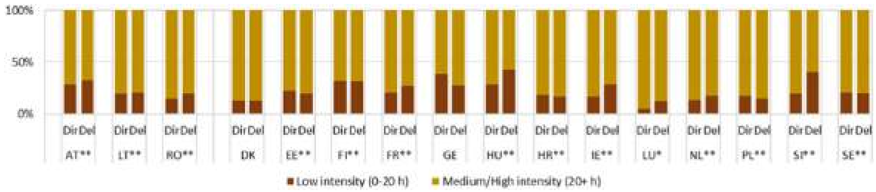

Fig. 7 Proportion of domestic students who study 20 h/more than 20 h/week with direct/delayed transition. *Source* EUROSTUDENT VII Microdata (https://www.fdz.dzhw.eu/en)

working more than 20 h/week is around twice as high (or more) among domestic students with delayed transition.

Sometimes, education is rather seen as an addition to paid employment than the other way around, and the money earned can be required for financing students' expected lifestyles (Beerkens et al., 2011). In Austria, Lithuania, and Romania, the proportion of students who proclaim they depend on self-earned money is twice as high among domestic students with delayed transition who perceive themselves foremost as workers studying aside. However, it is the students with delayed transition who are more likely to experience financial difficulties. In Austria, the proportion of domestic students facing those troubles is 19, in Lithuania 29 and in Romania 10 percentage points higher than among students with direct transition.

Having a restricted overall time budget, working students naturally have less time to devote to their studies (Callender et al., 2015; Creed et al., 2015; Keute, 2017; Maseviăiț tă et al., 2018; Moulin et al., 2013). The percentage of students with delayed transition who study at low intensity (up to 20 h/week for courses and independent study) is significantly higher than the proportion among direct transition students in nine countries, including Austria, Lithuania, and Romania, with proportions of 32%, 21% and 19% (see Fig. 7).

Furthermore, they less often indicate a lack of motivation for their studies as a challenge (34% direct vs. 9% delayed in Lithuania; 32% vs. 7% in Romania[5]).

6 Perceived Study Quality of Domestic Students with Delayed Transition

The growing diversity in student populations has led to a renewed emphasis on teaching standards (Wolter, 2015). Clear instructions have proven central for grades, persistence in learning, and well-being of students (Roksa et al., 2017). The quality of higher education also became a focal point of the Bologna Process with the Berlin Communiqué (EHEA, 2003), and the Bucharest Communiqué (EHEA, 2012) adopted norms and principles for quality assurance.

[5] There is no information on Austria since this question module has not been part of the Austrian questionnaire.

Compared to students who started higher education immediately, domestic students who have experienced delayed transition evaluated their teachers' abilities and the teacher-student interaction far more favourably. In Romania, particularly, students with delayed transition find that teachers can explain well. In a similar vein, students with delayed transition frequently indicate that their teachers listen to them and encourage them to work hard; this is particularly true for Lithuania and Romania. This goes hand in hand with this group typically recommending their study program more frequently in the three countries. Generally, compared to students with direct transfer, domestic students with delayed transition rank several aspects of their study environment as more satisfactory. In Austria, this could be due to the fact that special programmes are offered to working people; in Lithuania, the increased support at non-universities might be the reason for this. Furthermore, it can be speculated that due to their older age, students with delayed transition have a different basis for communicating with teachers and more experience of working in a self-structured way.

Not only is the interaction with teachers relevant for the outcome, but research further shows that students who integrate better with their peers are more driven and persistent (Garza et al., 2021; Hausmann et al., 2007; Noyens et al., 2019; Snyder, 2017; Tinto, 2017). Domestic students with delayed transition feel less alone from their peers in Lithuania and Romania, while in Austria, there is hardly any difference between the two groups. However, students with delayed transitions often rate their own study performance as equal to that of their peers, whereas students with direct transitions more often believe that they are better performing than their peers in Austria, Lithuania, and Romania.

7 Educational Regulations and Policy Measures in Austria, Lithuania, and Romania

In this section, the three countries that are the focus of this research are presented in more detail, showing what opportunities exist to start a degree programme later in life and what political priorities are set in the countries that can have an influence on the decision to study later in life as well as the perceived study quality.

7.1 Austria

In Austria, 23% of domestic students started higher education at the earliest two years after leaving upper secondary school. Besides regular admission, there are three alternative options to start tertiary education in Austria. The "Berufsreifeprüfung" is a fully-fledged Matura (second-chance education) that entitles you to study any subject at any university in Austria and the European Union. The university entrance qualification examination ("Studienberechtigungsprüfung") allows you to study selected subjects that correspond to your professional background. At the Universities of Applied Sciences, it is possible to study without a Matura but with a vocational qualification if additional examinations (usually German, English, Maths) are taken.

In Austria, some policies support mature students and those with prior work experience. For individuals who have worked at least four years (earning money above a certain threshold) and who are no older than 32 years old at the start of their studies a study grant, independent from parental income, of at least 943 €/month is available. Over the past few years, the maximum age to receive this support has been progressively raised.[6] Of all students with delayed transition, 28% receive such a scholarship; among beginners with delayed transition, the figure is even 34%.

While part-time studies are an option to encourage (older) people who are working to start higher education in several countries, there is no established program for part-time study in Austria.[7] However, it is possible to study according to individual semester plans at many higher education institutions (especially public universities). As a result, many students acquire significantly fewer than the 60 ECTS credits per academic year, which extends the duration of their studies accordingly (and can lead to the loss of student funding and to the obligation to pay tuition fees). Thus, effectively, many students in Austria study part-time in full-time programmes.

There are very few 100% online programmes (including a very popular law programme). However, there is a cooperation with the Distance-Learning University in Hagen (Germany), for which there is an examination centre in each federal state.

7.2 Lithuania

11% of the domestic students in Lithuania can be classified as students with delayed transition. In order to gain entry into the Lithuanian higher education system, candidates must pass at least one state Matura exam and achieve minimal learning outcomes, as determined by performance outcomes, entrance exams, and additional standards set by the higher education institution (Eurydice, 2023a). Prior learning is sometimes recognised as credits for a qualification but cannot be used for admission, which makes it harder to access higher education later in life.

Lithuania presently has a voucher program in existence that enables some students to get free education. The government is planning to introduce a measure in 2024 that might encourage more people to start studying later in life. 10% of the vouchers

[6] Up to the age of 37 at the start of studies, the study grant can be drawn if an additional year of self-support is proven for each age over 32.

[7] Universities of Applied Sciences offer "part-time" programmes that require fewer hours per week but last more weeks per year and thus involve the same annual workload as full-time studies and are therefore also classified as such.

will be awarded to students in each study field who have worked for a few years, encouraging them to continue their education later in life.

In Lithuania, part-time study programmes exist officially. Their duration is 1.5 times longer than a full-time program, allowing students to pay the same tuition for the entire program but with a reduced workload each semester. However, (especially since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic) more programs now offer night-time study, blocked classrooms, and partially distance learning (at least 5% of instruction must be in-person). For this reason, fewer part-time study programs have been offered recently. By making their programs more flexible, many higher education institutions aim to attract non-traditional students, such as those who entered the field later than usual or who work part-time in addition to their studies.

7.3 Romania

In Romania, 10% of the domestic students had a delayed transition to higher education. However, as in Lithuania, it is not possible to access higher education without an upper secondary certificate (Eurydice, 2023b), limiting the possibilities to study later in life. While there has been some talk about microcredits, and the 2015–2020 National Strategy for Tertiary Education contains some commitments to flexibility, there is currently no prior learning assessment and recognition system in place in Romania, which would make it easier for students to enrol in alternate pathways to higher education (Dervis et al., 2022).

Recently, Romania passed new education regulations that include a nationwide initiative to address higher education dropout rates, with a particular emphasis on students who experience a delayed transition. Prior research conducted in the nation revealed that older students (primarily those with delayed transitions) have higher dropout rates than younger students.

Although they are not very prevalent, part-time study programs are also available in Romania. Higher education establishments are free to set their own tuition rates, while they typically give reduced rates (per semester) for courses taken part-time, which take longer to complete. There is no financial help available for working students in Romania because they are not a defined target group for political measures. However, some universities try to assist working students by providing evening classes, for example. Like in Lithuania, full online programs are prohibited; however, blended learning options with some in-person lectures are permitted.

8 Summary: Domestic Students with a Delayed Transition in Europe, Particularly in Austria, Lithuania, and Romania

Students with delayed transition are a group that has received little attention so far and is often not the target of political measures. Nevertheless, they sometimes represent a remarkable proportion of all domestic students: in the EUROSTUDENT countries, an average of 13% (with a standardised number of cases per country, i.e., regardless of the population or sample size), in Austria 23%, in Lithuania 11%, and in Romania 10%.

A logistic regression (direct vs delayed transition), which cannot be presented in detail here for reasons of space, shows across all EUROSTUDENT countries[8] on which microdata are accessible ($R^2 = 0.480$) that regular employment before starting university (min 20 h/week for at least one year), older age (especially over 25), and the rejection of the statement that "it was always clear I would study in higher education one day" provide the highest explanatory contributions for those who study with delayed transfer. A higher educational background of the parents, on the other hand, has a significantly negative effect (i.e., the higher the parents are educated, the lower the probability of studying with a delayed transition). The fields of study (reference = Humanities) Education, Business/Law, Health and Services have a weakly positive effect, while Sciences has a negative effect. Gender and the other fields of study have no significant effect. The extent of employment only has a bivariate positive effect; in the multivariate model, this becomes negative.

This "European model" can also be seen across the board in our three countries of comparison, particularly age and work experience before studying. In addition, in Austria ($R^2 = 0.631$), being female has a significantly lower effect on studying with delayed transition, as well as (compared to Humanities) the fields of Education, Business/Law, Sciences, ICT, and Engineering, while all other fields of study have no significant effect. The parents' educational background also has no significant effect. In Lithuania ($R^2 = 0.573$), Agriculture/Fishery/Veterinary medicine has a strong positive effect, and tertiary background of parents has a strong negative effect, as well as Social Sciences and Engineering. Gender has no significant effect. In Romania ($R^2 = 0.482$), the educational background of the parents also plays a strongly negative role. The smaller the extent of studying, the more likely someone is to study with a delayed transition, and being male also has a very small positive effect. However, no field of study has a significant effect (Table 1).

Even though in EUROSTUDENT delayed is defined as "only" at least two years after the regular upper secondary school leaving certificate, most domestic students with delayed transfer are significantly older. In Austria, 80% are over 25 years old (46% over 30 years old), in Lithuania, 88% (over 30 y: 64%) and in Romania

[8] Number of cases per country standardised in order to compensate for the different population and sample sizes.

Table 1 Logistic regression: probability of being a domestic student with delayed transition

	EUROSTUDENT	Austria	Lithuania	Romania
Work experience before studying	↑↑	↑↑	↑↑	↑↑
Older age	↑↑	↑↑	↑↑	↑↑
"It was always clear I would study in higher education one day"	↓↓	↓↓	↓↓	↓↓
Female		↓		↘
Higher educational background of the parents	↓↓		↓↓	↓↓
Extent of employment	↘	↘		
Extent of studying	↘	↘		↘
Fields of study (Ref: humanities)				
Education	↗	↓		
Social sciences			↓↓	
Business and law	↗	↓		
Sciences	↓	↓		
ICT		↓		
Engineering		↓	↓↓	
Agriculture/fishery/veterinary medicine			↑↑	
Health and welfare	↗			
Services	↗			
Financial difficulties		↗		
Impairment	↗			
Not living with parents	↗			
R^2	*0.480*	*0.631*	*0.573*	*0.482*

Source EUROSTUDENT VII Microdata (https://www.fdz.dzhw.eu/en)

86% (over 30 y: 67%). It is therefore not surprising that in the multivariate analysis, biographical characteristics (age, employment before starting university, self-assessment that it was *not* always clear to study one day and, except for Austria, the educational background of the parents) show the greatest effects.[9] Gender and the

[9] In Austria, students with delayed transition are roughly made up of two groups: (1) those who have not completed upper secondary education in the regular school system, have often completed vocational training ("apprenticeship") and come to university via the 2nd educational pathway; and (2) those who have completed five years of upper secondary vocational education (with a Matura), have then often entered the labour market, and later go on to study. Their parents often have a higher education degree (albeit less often than in the academic upper secondary schools). Therefore, parental education differs less between students with direct and delayed transition than in other countries—at least in a multivariate model in which everyone has the same age, work experience, gender, and field of study when parental education is compared.

positive or negative demand for individual fields of study are also added in individual countries. However, numerous other variables do not show any significant effects.

Not included in the model are non-traditional higher education admissions (because they are implicitly part of the definition of delayed) and non-university higher education sectors because they do not exist in all countries. But both non-traditional approaches and a preference for the non-university sector are visible in all countries where this is possible or exists. It is assumed that because students with delayed transition often are already in professional life, they tend to choose a career-orientated education, which increasingly takes place at non-universities. In addition, some subjects (which are predominantly found at universities) are less likely to be started at an older age due to their longer duration (e.g., medicine). In addition, non-universities are generally more widely distributed throughout the country and, therefore, easier to access for working students.

Of the three countries, only Austria (the country with the highest proportion of students with delayed transition) offers **alternative options to standard admission** to higher education. While **prior learning** (e.g., working experience) cannot be used (or seldomly be used in Austria) for admission to higher education in the three countries, it is sometimes possible to get professional experience recognised for credits of single courses.

In none of the three countries are there comprehensive (financial) measures in place directly targeting students with delayed transition. However, in Austria, there are policies specifically for older students and those who have worked before. For the latter, Lithuania plans to offer **particular funding** as well. In Romania, there is a focus on decreasing dropout rates, also considering students with delayed transition.

Since many students with delayed transition are working, **offering greater flexibility** for their studies can benefit their situation. Official **part-time programmes** are available in Lithuania and Romania. With no (complete) distance learning in place, students in all three countries have benefited from the fact that **online programmes**—or at least individual online courses within a degree programme—have been expanded during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In any case, it is valuable to further research the group of students with delayed transition and, if necessary, develop political measures to support them, as they have special requirements, but also increase their numbers in terms of lifelong learning. On the other hand, further research should also be conducted into why these people did not or could not come directly to university but first had to take a "diversion" via the labour market.

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Connecting Academia and Business on the Quadruple Helix. Employers' Support to Optimise Training in Higher Education

Venera-Mihaela Cojocariu, Elena Nechita, Gabriel Mareş, and Liliana Mâţă

Abstract Following the COVID-19 pandemic, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have been increasingly confronted with significant challenges at the international, national, and regional levels, such as the difficulty of switching back from online to face-to-face education, the major trend towards digitalisation and its integration into the academic education process, the increasing use of hybrid modes of teaching delivery, the energy crisis, the need for sustainability, the disruption and obstruction of communication with labour market representatives, the job insecurity, the increasing importance of digital skills for graduates, the identification of new ways of providing practical training for students. Under these circumstances, improving the training of the graduates for the needs of the labour market and their adaptability to international standards remains the focus of the universities. The research question addressed in this study was to identify the opinion of employers' representatives concerning some possibilities to complement their specific actions and to make them consistent with the academic community actions in their joint endeavour to provide efficient and relevant training for students. The results presented in this paper are part of a wider research conducted between April and September 2023, based on a mixed methodology (quantitative and qualitative—questionnaire and focus group), which aimed to analyse the various facets of university relations with the labour market. Our study methodically presents the results of the qualitative analysis derived from the data collected, focused on the proposals made by employers, expressing their beliefs, hopes, and expectations for improving the initial training of students. Universities, as pillars of training, and the business sector, as beneficiaries, should communicate and collaborate constantly, systematically, and in a more practical way in order to

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attract, train, and value qualified human resources at a higher level. The suggestions integrated in this study could also be the basis of new strategic initiatives in higher education. Furthermore, the implications of successful university training are anticipated to exert a substantial influence on innovation and research, thereby reinforcing the connection between academia and business within the quadruple helix ecosystem. This, in turn, enhances the role of HEIs in regional development and aligns the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) with the European Research Area (ERA).

Keywords Higher education · Employability · University-business cooperation · Quadruple helix model · Skills development · Labour market

1 Introduction

In line with other European countries, Romania is following a dynamic trajectory while encountering diverse internal and external challenges, ranging from politics to public health, from economy to culture, and from infrastructure to education. While the European Education Area (EEA) exhibits openness and dynamism, there are significant disruptive factors manifesting on a global scale, as highlighted by Bughin and Woetzel (2019). These include the rise of emerging economies, challenges associated with globalisation, digital advancement in technologies, and an escalating disparity between those who have access to these tools and those who are left behind. Governments are dealing with unprecedented situations as they endeavour to navigate these complex issues. Educators, among others, are faced with new contexts, as exemplified by the rapid decisions made by educational institutions to adapt to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the perception that tertiary education is now more accessible than ever, the figures present a contrasting reality. In 2019, there were 20 million students in tertiary education in the EU-27, but by 2021, this number decreased to 18.5 million, with 59% pursuing bachelor's degrees (Eurostat, 2021). Meanwhile, the demand for skilled and competent professionals has risen. Several recent studies by Birtwistle and Wagenaar (2020), Green and Henseke (2021), and Souto-Otero and Białowolski (2021) reveal a discrepancy between the skills needed in real-world scenarios and what graduates can effectively deliver once employed.

The labour market is currently experiencing structural changes, with new ways of organising work and employment now coexisting alongside traditional models (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2021), influenced by two long-term economic trends, such as digitalisation and globalisation of value chains. In light of these transformations, crucial questions arise: whether universities are prepared to contribute to these systemic shifts and whether these contributions are tailored to the specific local and regional needs. Initiatives like the large-scale Higher Education for Smart Specialisation (HESS) project launched in 2016 by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre and the Directorate General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture have taken some significant steps towards these ambitious goals. Similar to other HEIs across Europe, Romanian universities are expected to tackle societal challenges and provide solutions to pressing issues. The key question lies in how effectively these Romanian HEIs are establishing connections with the various stakeholders in society to deliver those solutions.

As part of the EHEA, the Romanian Ministry of Education undertook several initiatives to improve cooperation between HEIs and labour market representatives, with the aim of identifying ways to update curricula and the educational process (Yerevan Ministerial Communiqué, 2015). In 2017, the EU Council also recommended the importance of gathering quality data on the professional trajectory of graduates in order to enhance their integration into the labour market (European Commission, 2017).

A study conducted in Romania (Deaconu & Hâj, 2022a) integrates several national research initiatives regarding the employability of higher education graduates in Romania, mining data from 2021. The study examines two generations of graduates: one from 2016 (five years post-graduation) and another from 2020 (one year post-graduation). The data analysis reveals the following findings:

– 92.4% of the 2016 graduates and 81.1% of the 2020 graduates were employed at least once since their graduation until November 2021, including keeping their first job. This indicates a strong job market integration capacity with nine out of ten graduates securing employment after completing their studies or maintaining their student jobs.
– In the short term, graduates originating from rural area exhibit a higher employability rate; for master's graduates, these distinctions become less pronounced.
– Engaging in internships positively enhances graduates' employability, particularly in the near future, irrespective of their academic level (bachelor's or master's).
– The overall employability rate varied across study domains, ranging from 90% in Education, Humanities, and Arts to 90% for bachelor's studies in ICT and from 88.2% in Humanities and Arts to 98.7% in ICT for master studies.

The data reflects a favourable employment rate in Romania. According to the Eurostat database, the employment rate of higher education graduates (aged under 34) was 87.1% for the 27 EU member states in 2021, while in Romania, it reached 88.9% (Eurostat, 2022). However, this positive outcome must be contextualised alongside the relatively low proportion of Romanians aged 25–34 holding a tertiary education degree. As of 2022, this rate was only 24.7% in Romania, compared to the EU average of 42%, as reported by the Education and Training Monitor (2023). Although the EU-level target is achieving a high 45% tertiary education participation rate, Romania faces challenges in this regard due to multiple factors, such as early school dropout rates, low passing rates in the baccalaureate exam, high tertiary education dropout rates (especially during the first year of study) and, to a smaller extent, emigration (Education and Training Monitor, 2023). For recent graduates (also aged under 34), the employment figures were 84.9% for EU-27 and 83.0% for Romania.

The study on students' satisfaction regarding the quality of higher education (Deaconu & Hâj, 2022b) highlighted the North-East Development Region as one of the Romanian areas demonstrating a superior dynamic of graduates' employability. Despite a 26.2% at-risk-of-poverty rate in 2022 (Eurostat, 2023), this region boasts a well-established HEIs network committed to contributing to the smart specialisation of the area (ADR-NE, 2023).

Our study explores the practical aspects of these issues in the context of a medium-sized university in this region—"Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău (UBc), looking at how the University has developed relationships with employers. Furthermore, it investigates how various organisations (companies, public institutions, NGOs, and other education institutions such as high schools) engage with the university's endeavour. Given the close collaboration between UBc and the North-East Development Region in implementing the Research and Innovation Strategy for Smart Specialisation of the North-East Region (ADR-NE, 2023), we have adopted the Quadruple Helix model (Grigorescu et al., 2023; König et al., 2021) which provides a collaborative framework involving key stakeholders in the socio-economic development sphere—economy, education, society and government. Past experiences with this model have demonstrated that integrating external stakeholders into curriculum co-design enhances the innovativeness, entrepreneurial spirit, and societal relevance of study programmes thus acknowledging the crucial role of universities in sustainable development of the regions they inhabit (König et al., 2021).

The project "INSERT UBc: Students—Employers—University—Together for the Labour Market" was implemented at "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău, Romania, by the Department of Professional Counselling, between April and December 2023. The initiative is embedded in a comprehensive framework proposed by the Romanian Ministry of Education, facilitated through an Institutional Development Fund, aiming to support public universities in their effort in aligning students' training with job market requirements and to increasing employability in Romania. Additionally, UBc demonstrates a commitment to researching employment-related topics, as evidenced by its portfolio of projects (Cojocariu & Damian, 2012; Cojocariu et al., 2017, 2019a; Galiţa et al., 2021; Mareş et al., 2021).

2 Employers' Requirements from UBc Graduates—A Quantitative Study

This section presents the findings of a quantitative study conducted as part of the project. The methodology involved a *Questionnaire of the employers' requests*, administered to a sample of economic and social organisations, varying in size, situated (with one exception) within the North-East Development Region of Romania. These organisations operate across various domains and have either hired UBc's graduates or have been identified as potential employers.

The invitations to participate in the study were distributed in three rounds (between May-and July 2023) to 177 organisations. The questionnaire was filled in by 65 of these, leading to a participation rate of 36.73%.

2.1 Sample Characteristics

The respondents were analysed across four key indicators: geographical distribution, area of expertise, ownership, and organisation size.

Regarding the first indicator, the participants' location is presented in Table 1.

As expected, the significant proportion of employers was from Bacău County, with four out of the five counties listed belonging to the North-East Development Region. This underlines, once more, the pivotal role of the University in this region, which is recognised as one of the poorest in Europe, according to the data released by the regional authorities (ADR-NE, 2023). Galaţi, being a neighbouring county, also drew participation, while Bucharest attracted UBc's top graduates seeking career advancement and the vibrant opportunities the capital city provides. For UBc, fostering collaboration with a larger number of employers from other counties than Bacău in activities related to the university's study domains and promoting such initiatives are crucial steps towards increasing the insertion employability rate of its graduates in the labour market.

According to the second indicator—organisations' area of expertise—the respondents were categorised into five distinct domains, aligning with the five faculties of UBc. This breakdown resulted in the organisations distribution presented in Table 2.

Notably, the organisations associated with the first two categories correspond to the faculties with a higher student enrolment compared to the other three. Additionally, the graduates from Physical Therapy and Occupational Therapy address pressing challenges in the region, particularly concerning the elderly population, while the Engineering graduates have a wide array of companies to engage with due to the diverse range of specialisations available.

The distribution of respondents according to the ownership form (Table 3) is in line with the findings from UBc previous studies related to employability of its graduates.

Table 4 presents the distribution by organisation size. When examining these results, we have noticed that 29 very small organisations, representing almost half of the surveyed sample, demonstrate significant interest in the activity of UBc. Consequently, their expertise should be recognised and promoted. Small and very large

Table 1 "Distribution of respondent employers by location"

Location	Frequency	Percentage
Bacău county	53	81.54
Neamţ county	7	10.77
Galaţi county	2	3.07
Vaslui county	1	1.54
Iaşi county	1	1.54
Bucharest	1	1.54
Total	65	100

Table 2 "Distribution of respondent employers by area of expertise/faculty"

Faculty	Frequency	Percentage
Faculty of movement, sport and health sciences	21	32.32
Faculty of engineering	17	26.15
Faculty of letters	11	16.92
Faculty of economic sciences	9	13.84
Faculty of sciences	7	10.77
Total	65	100

Table 3 "Distribution of respondent employers by ownership form"

Ownership form	Frequency	Percentage
Public/state	33	50.77
Private	32	49.23
Total	65	100

organisations have almost equal share, and together accounting for the number of very small ones. The collaborations between the University and these employers should involve them more in students' training. Finally, while the medium and large organisations shares are smaller, it indicates a demand for specialists trained at UBc, and partnerships with these entities should not be overlooked.

Table 4 "Distribution of respondent employers by organisation size"

Organisation size (no of employees)	Frequency	Percentage
Very small (less than 50)	29	44.60
Small (51–100)	14	21.50
Medium (101–250)	4	6.20
Large (251–500)	3	4.60
Very large (more than 500)	15	23.10
Total	65	100

2.2 *Local and Regional Labour Market and Its Relationship with UBc Graduates*

The data collected by the questionnaire display the following:

a. In the past year (2022), the respondents hired a total of 3.251 people. Among them, 65.85% were university graduates and 21.20% (equivalent to 454 employees) were UBc graduates. These statistics present an optimistic perspective, especially considering that approximately one fifth of UBc graduates secured employment within a year. The most relevant employers included the General

Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection, two secondary schools in Bacău, Hidroelectrica SA (an energy company), SCC Services Romania (an IT company), and Bacău Municipal Sports Club. Together, these entities accounted for more than half (57.92%) of the individuals employed in the previous year. This situation is in line with the information presented in the earlier Sect. 2.1, concerning the most pressing challenges in our county/region, and corresponds with the numerical distribution of students across the five faculties of UBc.

b. The respondents have identified a demand for 98 specialists in the year 2024. Per faculty, the distribution of these positions is as follows: 27.55% for the Faculty of Engineering, 11.24% for the Faculty of Letters, 16.32% for the Faculty of Sciences, 21.42% for the Faculty of Economic Sciences, and 23.46% for the Faculty of. Movement, Sport and Health Sciences. The analysis of these data show that the total number of the offered positions (98) is relatively modest, even when considered in relation to the organisations participating in the study (65). On average, each organisation needs to hire approximately 1.50 graduates in the coming year. However, there is a job offer available for all faculties, while the extent of the offer is directly proportional to the size of each faculty, considering the number of their study programmes and students. The majority of positions are in the field of Engineering, with Economic Sciences and Sports following closely behind. The demand for specialists for the other two faculties is almost half that of the mentioned faculties. Based on these results, we infer that a permanent update of the academic offer is essential, ensuring better alignment with the dynamic needs of the labour market, in terms of study programmes and number of students. Additionally, expanding the employability area to include neighbouring counties (Vrancea, Harghita) could prove beneficial.

c. When projecting the specialists' hiring needs over a 5-year period, the estimated distribution is as follows: 23.90% for the Faculty of Engineering, 15.04% for the Faculty of Letters, 17.70% for the Faculty of Sciences, 25.66% for the Faculty of Economic Sciences, and 17.70% for the Faculty of Movement, Sport and Health Sciences. This perspective indicates a modest demand for positions (113 in total), relatively evenly distributed across the faculties of UBc. Despite the close percentages between Economics and Engineering, the graduates in Economic Sciences have a better offer (both in terms of quantity and quality), given the faculty's number of study programmes compared to the Faculty of Engineering, namely five times smaller. Following closely are Sciences and Sports, with similar shares (and almost equal numbers of study programmes), while the availability of positions for the domains of the Faculty of Letters is slightly reduced.

d. Only 26.15% of the respondents mentioned a need for skilled labour in specialties not currently offered at UBc. The following 16 qualifications were identified as experiencing a shortage of experts: procurement, human resources, social work, tourism, public food, teachers for practical training, robotics, engineering and management in agriculture and rural development, landscaping, topography and land registry, geography, agronomy, horticulture, forestry, law, and medicine. We notice that the majority of these qualifications (the initial 10, constituting 62.50% of the total) align with study domains already accredited at UBc. Geography was once part of UBc's curriculum but it eventually became impractical. Some qualifications, such as robotics or those related to rural development necessitate an interdisciplinary approach. As of now, the final five suggestions are not currently considered feasible possibilities to be included in the UBc's academic offer.

e. With respect to the components or competencies that UBc graduates should enhance, Table 5 displays the responses from participants in terms of absolute frequencies. For each component, respondents were given a choice among seven categories, ranging from "very important" to "no answer".

The data reveal the employers' keen interest and differentiation in developing various skills or training components. However, a notable proportion comprising 8.27% of the respondents did not assess all competencies. When cumulated, the data underscore a significant need for development. The organisations considered that practical training, teamwork, time management, and prospective thinking should be developed with high priority (23 points). This once again highlights the importance of addressing practical issues and the graduates' capacity to effectively navigate in real-life situations. Although UBc is highly committed to digitalisation, students' proficiency in digital environments is emphasised (16 points). Professional use of foreign languages (with 26 points) and theoretical specialised training (with 25), as well as resources management, critical thinking and entrepreneurial skills (each with

Table 5 "Skills to be improved at UBc graduates"

Components of training/skills to be improved	Very much	A lot	To some extent	To a small extent	To a very small extent	No answer	Total
1. Specialised training (theoretical)	8	10	**25**	7	5	10	**55**
2. Specialised training (practical)	**23**	18	15	3	1	6	**60**
3. Use of digital or ICT tools	13	**16**	15	10	5	6	**59**
4. Professional use of foreign languages	5	15	**26**	10	2	7	**58**
5. Communication and presentation	10	17	19	8	3	8	**57**
6. Teamwork	**19**	13	15	6	5	7	**58**
7. Resources management	12	13	**18**	8	6	8	**57**
8. Time management	**16**	14	15	5	5	10	**55**
9. Critical thinking	15	9	**18**	10	4	9	**56**
10. Entrepreneurship	8	10	**18**	11	7	11	**54**
11. Prospective thinking	**16**	12	**16**	7	5	9	**56**
Total	**145**	**147**	**200**	**85**	**48**	**91**	**625**
Average	**13.18**	**13.60**	**18.18**	**7.72**	**4.36**	**8.27**	**57.04**

18) are deemed important "to some extent". Placing the theoretical training at this level underlines the employers' emphasis on the practical training and the need to augment its presence and content within the curriculum.

Employers' suggestions with respect to additional areas of training which should be improved include a variety of aspects, most of which are mentioned only once. These include positive thinking, problem solving, management of industrial processes, assertiveness, initiative, organisation, planning, professional responsibility, financial education, communication skills, discipline, fieldwork, active involvement, self-development skills, intensive and perseverant work capacity, and engagement in research projects, personal development, and change. Almost a quarter of the respondents (23.33%) expressed satisfaction with UBc graduates' training, considering that there is no need for changes in the educational process. Overall, only 46.15% of the respondents completed this item, falling short of our expectations for greater participation. Nonetheless, the extensive list of skills to be improved by the university in its students remains noteworthy. Many of these skills fall within the area of transversal competencies or soft skills, all of which are highly valuable in any position designed for a university graduate. The emphasis on *teamwork* and *professional responsibility* underscores the keen interest and increased training requirements as perceived by several employers.

Another item of the questionnaire inquired about new study programmes that UBc should consider offering in the future. Only half of the respondents (51%) addressed this item. Among them, 27.22% appreciated that there is no necessity for new study programmes, and 6% could not formulate potential developments. The remaining respondents suggested 19 possible directions for the university to consider, such as: Multimedia and Design, Insurance, Social Work, Psychology, Tourism, Land Management, Geography, Genetic Engineering, Biotechnology, General Nursing, Physics, Chemistry, Personal Development, New Technologies of Knowledge, Water Supply Systems, Counselling and Orientation for the Didactic Career, Management of the Education Institutions, Childcare, and Wrestling. The majority of them (78.94%) align with the domains already covered by UBc's five faculties, while some (15.79%) are interdisciplinary. However, certain areas, such as Physics and Chemistry, representing 10.53%, may have lost their sustainability or attractiveness among UBc's target candidates.

2.3 Strategies Proposed by Employers

The respondents advanced a significant number of 41 suggestions aimed at enhancing strategies to facilitate the employability of UBc graduates. These concrete solutions have been categorised into five directions of action, beginning with the highest priority as follows:

– *Development of the practical dimension of the students' training, focusing on both duration and specificity of activities*: forging additional partnerships with

the private sector for practical internships; augmenting the practical segment of students' training (laboratories and other practical activities); fostering partnerships for practical training opportunities with the potential employers; implementing activities to overcome students' apprehension towards unfamiliar tasks/ fear of unknown; exploring new locations and activities for practical training.
– *Improvement and extension of collaborations and partnerships between the academic community and the business environment*: establishing new collaborations with distinct employers, including training programmes tailored to meet their competency needs; organising "job fairs" and "hiring events"; inviting specialists from relevant economic entities to address topics of interest to students; fostering partnerships with organisations operating within the university's domains.
– *Improvement of the quality of students' training, refining the training and learning processes*: adopting teaching and learning methods aligned with the contemporary communication tools and student interests; upgrading the infrastructure to meet the specific requirement of the study programmes and the demands of the labour market; offering study programmes delivered in foreign languages; implementing a more rigorous admission process for UBc candidates and administering more demanding exams for students.
– Implementation of a proactive marketing campaign to boost the university's visibility, leading to its recognition among the stakeholders in the business, social, political, and cultural environments.
– Active promotion of companies and organisations in Bacău County to students, parents, graduates, including the dissemination of available job opportunities on a national platform, available online.

The questionnaire also sought the employers' perspectives regarding the effectiveness of conducting selection and recruiting sessions while the candidates are still students. All the 65 respondents unanimously agree that this is a beneficial strategy: 35.38% of them regard it as highly useful, 32.30% consider it useful, while the remaining (32.32%) express varying degrees of certainty regarding utility, ranging from small to very small. Moreover, 98.46% of the respondents agree that having a designated individual responsible for maintaining permanent communication with UBc is vital for the student/graduate recruitment process.

A third direction of interest considered the employers' suggestions concerning the collaboration with UBc on the university's training offer. They mentioned 38 measures deemed necessary for better alignment in this regard. Upon a qualitative analysis of these suggestion, several recurring points emerged in answers, indicating collective interests and key efforts: communication—dialogue, practical training again, collaboration, partnership, meetings, exchange of good practices, information and promotion.

While no activities outside the UBc's current scope were identified, we can highlight some nuanced improvement such as better organisation of the activities (facilitating meetings between students, graduates, academic staff, and employers); ensuring continuity of events allowing students to acknowledge the employers' requirements; stimulation of certain activities such as volunteering; increasing the prominence of practical activities, and intensifying engagements that bridge the academic community and the labour market representatives (such as work visits, contests, meetings, workshops, conferences, etc.); assigning dedicated staff for the relationship between the university and the labour market.

Indeed, these suggestions underscore various activity categories that have already been implemented, albeit with varying frequency across different study programmes. Both the employers and the university are interested in shifting the focus of these activities towards establishing an institutional-level action unit. This transition would entail a notable enhancement in systematicity, continuity, regularity, and intensity, transitioning from occasional occurrences, sometimes present in certain study programmes, to a permanent, organised framework across all programs. Simultaneously, there is a desire to introduce and expand any new categories of desirable and feasible activities aimed at better equipping graduates for the demands of the labour market.

The questionnaire is available on the University website (UBc, 2023a), in Romanian and in English. The ethics of research and protection of personal data have been carefully addressed, in accordance with UBc's regulations.

3 Employers' Requirements—A Qualitative Examination of the Ideal Graduate, as Perceived by Participating Organisations

The synthesis of the data collected during the focus groups conducted across the five faculties of UBc between May and June 2023 has enabled us to outline the profile of an "ideal graduate". These insights align with the findings from a comprehensive study encompassing company data from 31 European countries conducted by Souto-Otero and Białowolski in 2021, revealing the crucial skills sought after during the recruitment processes.

3.1 Key Attributes of a Prospective Employee

Employers' representatives highlighted various elements falling into the following categories considered relevant, including general competencies, attitudes, values, expectations, and interests.

Under the umbrella of general competencies, the focus was placed on communication skills (including proficiency in one's native language), independent and critical thinking, teamwork and ICT skills. Complementary to these, attitudes such as self-confidence, flexibility, empathy (especially in client interactions), patience, seriousness, perseverance, commitment, curiosity, tenacity, and engagement were mentioned.

Several important qualities include a desire for learning new things, discipline, self-adaptability, and reflective capacity. Moreover, self-motivation, dedication, resilience, willingness to understand tasks and contexts, and effective stress management make an important difference. Employers expect for the future employees to be disciplined, proactive, and capable of becoming independent quickly. They also value creative thinking, quick adaptability in the workplace, good organising and collaborative skills.

In terms of personal interests, employers seek employees who are passionate about their work in the chosen field, and determined to apply their acquisitions. Other desirable interests are connected to self-improvement, self-training, continuous search of information and opportunities related to their professional and personal development. Employers' representatives also emphasised the importance of graduates manifesting a genuine vocation and passion for their field of work, while remaining attentive to the needs and particularities of the beneficiaries they serve.

In summary, employers in today's labour market consider that employees should be adaptable to team dynamics and specificities, while also demonstrating relational availability and ability to discover, learn, and solve problems. The ideal candidate, as highlighted by most of the employers interviewed during the focus groups, should be someone who is willing to evolve, ready to invest time and psycho-emotional resources to deal with the daily challenges, and capable to keep up with evolving contexts and approaches within their field of work. Additionally, most of the participants in the focus groups mentioned those sets of competencies that facilitate balanced and effective interactions not only among team workers, but also with the beneficiaries and clients of the companies as desirable traits.

3.2 What (New) Topics Should the University Courses Include?

Enhancing the academic training strategy for future graduates was one of the desired outputs of the focus groups, with particular emphasis on identifying topics to be included in the curricula and/or the syllabi across various disciplines.

Some employers referred to the Finnish pedagogical model (Finnish Ministry of Education & Culture, 2023) oriented towards developing meta-competencies such as those for building a sustainable future or for ethical purposes. Additionally, key-competencies highlighted include proficiency both in the native language and an international language, and human-centred design principles as well.

A synthesis of the essential contents considered to be compulsory is presented in Table 6.

Table 6 "Suggestions to improve the academic training—new content"

Course	Topics to be included in the course
Risk and conflict management	Conflict typologies and identification techniques Emotional management
Crisis management	Crisis recognition and identification strategies Innovative approaches to issue management
Negotiation techniques	Conflict prevention strategies Alignment issues management Harmonisation methodologies
Challenges and solutions related to digital education	Digital literacy, digital education Digital security
Expert communication	Communication competencies Communication with clients and negotiation
Social work classes	Interdisciplinary activities
Education for health and first aid courses	Food and nutrition programmes/courses
Technical design	Technical drawing, interpretation of blueprints
Field-specific practical training in organisations	Integrated practical-theoretical training
Communication in foreign languages	Language and technical terminology in foreign languages
Personal development courses	Creative expression Resources for personal development
AI courses	Ethical issues in AI AI in healthcare, AI applications to address societal challenges
Development of the business environment	Influential factors in business Business analysis, brand identity

The field of communication appears to be a priority for employers, evident from the topics they proposed. Additionally, the disciplines closely connected to ICT issues are also emphasised. Furthermore, there is a distinct category dedicated to the disciplines targeting highly specific professional competencies. Other aspects that UBc seeks to improve are aimed at developing students' transversal skills. Given the speed of change brought about by emerging technologies and their effects on the nature of jobs, these skills are sorely needed.

3.3 Employer Expectations: Professional Competencies and Personal Qualities

The analysis of the employers' answers concerning professional competencies and personal qualities has revealed their tendency to formulate general competencies, proving that the professional component is strongly connected to personal qualities. A consistent set of desirable personal qualities or attitudes was mentioned among the prospective employees, including: constancy, curiosity, capacity to focus, openness, patience, perseverance, altruism, objectivity, ethical sensibility, punctuality, and the ability to maintain a clear distinction between private and professional life. We can conclude that certain human qualities hold greater significance than purely professional skills, because the latter can often be cultivated starting from the educational support offered during the initial training, whereas personal qualities related to character are more challenging to develop once in a workplace setting.

Personal values must align with the chosen job of the graduate, as well as resonate with the values and organisational culture. These need to be instilled, cultivated and modelled during academic training and strongly linked to social realities and to the dynamic changes within society and the economic sector.

In conclusion, it is crucial for employers to identify in their future employees the ability to integrate theory with practice and with the constantly changing demands of the economic environment.

3.4 Employers—University Collaboration on Training Prospective Employees

All the employers' representatives agreed upon the establishment or strengthening of their organisations' collaboration with the university. Discussions revealed that in instances where a tradition of collaboration exists, students demonstrate a higher level of professional quality as UBc specialists take into account the specific needs and particularities the future employers need, in their training programmes. The following are several examples of mutually beneficial actions for both university and employers, extracted from the five focus groups:

- Constant, bidirectional communication regarding the training needs, during the practical placements, and concerning recommendations for hiring.
- Companies' involvement in proposing topics for the graduation theses, based on case studies.
- Students' engagement in addressing situations identified by companies varies depending on whether they are participating in practical compulsory internships as required by their academic programme or volunteering for internships.
- Scholarships awarded to hard-working students.
- Joint collaboration in teaching activity, including workshops featuring specific case studies, simulations of real-world, significant situations encountered by specialists.
- Launching and collaborating on projects during their implementation.
- Adoption of mentoring and supervision models, tailored to the study programmes of each faculty.

– Organisation of courses, competitions, projects by both companies and the university, followed by job offers.
– Development of a postgraduate course by the university for newcomers/debutants, addressing their need to adapt to their new workplaces.

The consultation process between UBc and employers should be systematic and iterative, so that the connection between the two entities to be updated. This ensures the institutional resilience of UBc, while addressing the ongoing need of employers for specialised skills and adequate training.

3.5 Exploring Partnership Opportunities for Enhancing Social Inclusion of Disadvantaged Students

Approaching the inclusion issue from the perspective of a partnership between UBc and the employers revealed an openness towards preventing exclusion and developing joint concrete initiatives. These include:

– Projects focused on raising awareness of inter-culturalism, social integration, exclusion, and marginalisation, potentially involving EU-funded projects.
– Partnership including social services assistance, to address university dropout resulting from economic challenges faced by UBc students' families.
– Courses delivered by organisations for their employers so they can understand the specific needs of the disadvantaged, including considerations for creating a more inclusive and accessible work environment for individuals with disabilities.
– Both UBc and organisations' websites should become adaptable and accessible to individuals with special needs, while infrastructures, including education and training facilities, should become more available.
– Implementation of sub-structures to facilitate, monitor, and enforce inclusive approaches is encouraged.
– Creation of contextual strategies and mechanisms is essential for fostering organisations' readiness to employ disadvantaged categories, overcoming outdated mentalities.

The focus groups highlighted a need for further information concerning the specificity of different disabilities and the potential strategies for organisations to enhance inclusion and adapt their organisational practices to better support disadvantaged individuals and reduce exclusion. Similarly, within UBc, efforts to address the dropout rate have been discussed, with specific guidelines already proposed (Cojocariu et al., 2019b).

3.6 Partners' Perspectives on Study Programmes Design

The majority of respondents considered that the university should engage in an inclusive, long-term strategy to support all the categories of individuals enrolled in the educational system. Additional suggestions included the following:

- Encouraging students' participation in creative and practical activities conducted either at the university, partner locations, or within the community.
- Facilitating early exposure of students to the working environment, ideally during their first year of study.
- Providing support and resources to aid students' involvement and adaptation, insisting on developing key competencies; promoting internships was also emphasised.
- Incorporating courses that align with emerging technologies, modern methodologies, and the current state of economy.
- Using non-traditional spaces, both within and outside the university (such as museums, laboratories, plants, hospitals, etc.) for hosting classes can enhance the attractiveness of learning, connect it to real context, and provide a more engaging experience for trainees.
- Organising counselling activities in collaboration with companies can provide insights and support to students.
- Enhancing the university's visibility and engagement within the community can be achieved through increased participation in public events and volunteering programmes.
- Encouraging students to pursue continuous learning and specialisation within their desired field through supplementary courses that complement the university curriculum.
- Providing students with a significant number of practical training hours, with the possibility to choose additional hours if desired.

The representatives' suggestions reveal their aspiration for the university to be constantly and intensively involved in both the academic and professional training of students, as well as in the local and regional community life. Education providers are challenged to put new emphasis on creativity, critical and systems thinking, and long-life learning. On their side, the employers can drive training—they could gain a lot from playing a more active role in education.

4 Connections with UBc Internationalisation and Perspectives for a More Integrated Approach

Since 2022, UBc has been a member of a European university consortium comprising seven universities located in non-capital cities across Austria, Belgium, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Romania, and Spain (UBc, 2023b). This consortium aims to achieve European University status by 2024. Together, these HEIs have committed to pooling their resources and efforts to prepare their students to address global and European challenges, such as the energy crisis, labour shortages, and the escalating threat of societal polarisation (de Wit & Deca, 2020). Under the slogan “Responsible Living for the Next Generations”, the consortium emphasises the exchange of best practices and mobility between member universities as initial steps in their collaboration. However, the partnership is envisioned to extend across multiple levels, including virtual mobility and collaborative online learning, which are approaches to internationalisation at home that UBc initiated almost a decade ago (Nechita et al., 2014).

At UBc, research activities are part of the students’ educational journey. Opportunities such as traineeship mobility at partner universities and the benefits arising from UBc’s membership in the consortium, such as joint projects, innovation hubs serving as learning spaces, and the use of micro-credentials, double or multiple degrees to be developed, will facilitate the acquisition of the most useful sets of competencies aligned with the requirements of emerging job profiles, therefore increasing UBc graduates’ employability. The approach adopted by the HEIs within the consortium, focusing on positively impacting life in their respective regions through innovative, multidisciplinary, and interdisciplinary collaborative efforts to address societal needs, will equip students with valuable skills and expertise. Furthermore, the innovation hubs within the consortium, being in strong connection with the stakeholders, including government, business, and community, are expected to boost research and technological transfer in the UBc community. These endeavours align with recent initiatives endorsed by the European Commission, particularly in areas such as the Knowledge square, encompassing Education, Research, Innovation and Service to society for a future stronger Europe in the world (Mitchell, 2020).

5 Summary of Study Findings and Conclusions

The collected data underline several significant observations:

- All employers involved in this study, regardless of their geographical location, industry, size, or ownership structure, show a keen interest in establishing consistent collaboration with the academic environment, starting from the initial training period of students, in order to ensure that graduates are thoroughly prepared to meet the needs and challenges of the companies.
- Among UBc graduates’ employers, those in the public sector (pre-university education institutions, public administration, health units and other public institutions) are well represented. Particular attention is paid to this sector as it accounts for a large percentage of the Human Development Index.
- Representatives of employers demonstrate an awareness of various difficulties and limitations inherent in the academic environment, openly expressing their willingness to provide systematic and organised support for students’ training,

particularly in practical, hands-on experiences, in order to better prepare them for entry into the workforce.

– Regardless of how they assess their demand for a highly educated workforce or how they foresee it in the future, employers possess a clear understanding of the essential skills graduates must exhibit. At the same time, they acknowledge that graduates are at an entry-level stage and recognise the necessity for ongoing development through collaboration, both within companies and by re-entering the academic environment such as pursuing master's or doctoral degrees, professional conversion programmes, second-degree programmes, and lifelong learning courses. Employers are prioritising the development of specialised practical training, teamwork, time management, and forward-thinking skills at a significantly high level.
– The recommendations for enhancing components/competencies beyond the foundational ones in the training of our graduates emphasize 21 skills that the university should continue to cultivate and refine. These skills encompass aspects of transversal competencies (soft skills), invaluable in any professional capacity for a higher-education graduate. These skills include critical thinking, teamwork, problem-solving, assertiveness, initiative, organisational process, planning proficiency, communication skills, self-improvement capability, active involvement, sustained and perseverant work ethic, and adaptability to change. Notably, two suggestions (teamwork and professional responsibility) stand out, indicating a heightened interest and increased training needs from the perspective of certain employers.
– The recommendations from participating employers on essential measures for effective collaboration with the university in training programmes underscore several crucial aspects and shared interests across multiple responses. These include communication through dialogue, practical training, collaboration, partnership, meetings, the exchange of best practices, information sharing, and promotional activities.

It is clear that the economic progress of the EU countries depends on highly qualified professionals. The job market is rapidly evolving, displaying new employment opportunities. Both economic competitiveness and personal satisfaction among employees depend on innovations in education and training. We believe that further research in this area is imperative. The guiding principles should be the needs of learners and society (Birtwistle & Wagenaar, 2020).

HEIs are under pressure to produce "job-ready" graduates (HolonIQ, 2023). Since employers are increasingly implementing skills-based hiring policies, universities are compelled to embrace models centred on skills and competencies for teaching and learning. Consequently, university partnerships with stakeholders are evolving, placing a greater emphasis on student experiences and outcomes. This heightened attention to partnerships is embedded into the strategic plans of HEIs.

Researchers in education argue (UNESCO, 2021) that individuals within European societies are not heading towards "a unique future"; instead, they face multiple paths that each individual can explore according to her/his aspirations. Education has the power to support people's aspirations and to transform societies.

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Ascending the Social Ladder: Exploring Professional Advancement and Employability Among First-Generation Graduates

ţ tefan Marius Deaconu and Alina Roiniăă

Abstract This study explores the impact of higher education on the employability of first-generation students, with an analysis of the interplay between education, socio-economic background, and career prospects. The National Survey on the Employability of Higher Education Graduates (CNAAIS) data is analysed in order to gain insight into the employability of higher education graduates. The discussion primarily focuses on employability outcomes, identifies influential factors, and evaluates institutional interventions to shed light on the employability gap that first-generation students often face. The study uses the CNAAIS data as a reference to answer the research questions. The results of the survey demonstrate that the employability process of a higher education graduate can be correlated with different types of influencing factors, including educational-related, socio-economic-related, general, or specific variables, such as other types of professional experiences during university studies. However, a particular conclusion that can be drawn from the data is that first-generation students tend to earn lower median incomes and have higher rates of underemployment than their peers with at least one parent with a higher education degree. Despite this, first-generation college students tend to develop more in-depth skills in some areas, such as foreign languages or introductory and advanced IT, than their colleagues from a more educated family background. However, these skills are not sufficiently leveraged to overcome the discrepancies that appear among first-generation students and those with a history in education. Hence, it is crucial to consider variables such as networking, professional mentoring, and coaching, or simultaneous development of other types of highly needed skills for the labour market, such as the capacity to negotiate. Additionally, discrimination that might arise against first-generation students when it comes to employability due to their socio-economic status or biased hiring practices should also be considered.

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Keywords First-generation students · Inequality in education · Vertical mismatch · Employment

1 Introduction

1.1 What Are First-Generation Graduates?

Access to higher education and the outcomes of university studies are well-represented subjects in the academic literature. This study aims to investigate the challenges first-generation graduates face regarding professional advancement and employability. The term 'first-generation graduates' refers to those whose parents never enrolled in post-secondary education. (Nunez et al., 1998). In order to have a better understanding of their context, the article will also explore topics concerning first-generation students, as the educational experience is relevant to their employability (Pascarella et al., 2004).

The academic literature shows great interest in first-generation students or graduates. However, these studies refer more often to US colleges, representing up to a third of the student body (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020). Studies on first-generation students typically consider a comparison with students whose parents attended tertiary education, aspects related to their access to higher education, and student attrition and graduate perspectives (Hirudayaraj, 2011).

1.2 Importance of Parental Education: Cultural Capital and Access to Higher Education

Parental education is a significant factor in theories of social and cultural reproduction. First-generation students face challenges within their academic journey since education systems can reflect and exacerbate existing inequalities. Though it holds an inherent promise for social mobility, the education system usually favours and transmits dominant social classes' cultural norms and knowledge. Students from less privileged classes, such as first-generation students, lack the cultural capital, including support at home or exposure to literature and art, leading to an 'uneven' situation within schools and universities field (Bernstein, 1981; Bourdieu, 2018).

Edgerton and Roberts (2014) underlined that inequality is repackaged as meritocracy, attributing differences in socio-economic outcomes to an individual's abilities or inherent worth rather than deeply entrenched inequalities. Under the "hierarchy of gifts or merit", societal mechanisms perpetuating the inequalities are masked, further disadvantaging those already behind.

While economic and social capital is more easily understood, the definition of cultural capital generates debates and disagreements. Bourdieu (1984) contends that cultural capital has three primary forms, namely (1) institutionalised cultural capital, formally recognised and legitimised through institutions such as universities; (2) objectified cultural capital, embodied in material objects that can signal one's cultural taste and status and (3) embodied cultural capital, exemplified through linguistic competence or manners. Academic success is determined not only by effort or inherent ability but also by how society and the education system value signals of wealth and social class alongside actual skills. Bias can arise when teachers misinterpret valid knowledge presented in an unfamiliar way. First-generation students could encounter less encouragement simply because it doesn't match the unspoken mould of a 'star student'. Also, their intelligence or contributions may be undervalued due to access, communication style, or less polished manners within the specific setting of academia. In addition, bias against first-generation students, particularly those from rural backgrounds, may be influenced by "geographical stereotyping". This is because "geographical location is often seen as an indicator of certain psychological characteristics" (Rentfrow et al., 2008), such as the perceived quality of education. For example, students from rural areas may be assumed to have had substandard education than their urban counterparts, leading to prejudicial attitudes and biases based on their background. Therefore, socio-economic barriers can exacerbate the negative impact of a lack of cultural capital on the academic success of students with less of it.

Dumais and Ward (2010) argue that the above-mentioned are noninheritable but rather represent a type of *cultural capital*. This type of cultural capital is "unrecognized as capital and recognized as legitimate competence" compared to the other types of capital. Due to this status quo, they reason that educational systems reward peers for their cultural capital rather than their 'natural academic talents', as claimed. This affects first-generation students compared to their non-first-generation peers, as cultural capital is cultivated in time through the "*right* kinds of cultural training" (Bourdieu, 1973). Opportunity gaps may be reflected in the distribution of scholarships or internships, favouring those already advanced. Additionally, students without a higher cultural capital may doubt their abilities and limit their aspirations, resulting in a loss of diverse talent.

Parental education is a crucial factor in inter-generational educational attainment (Black & Devereux, 2011), particularly in higher education (Burnhill et al., 1990). However, some scholars question the significance of cultural capital in terms of access to higher education (Dumais & Ward, 2010). According to Solon (2004), children with higher-income parents have a greater chance of earning more due to a more significant investment in their human capital and education. This investment makes them more likely to graduate from higher education than their peers with limited economic capital. In France, a study conducted by Bonneau and Grobon (2022) found that a 10-percentile increase in parental income is associated with a nearly six percentage-point increase in the likelihood of children obtaining higher education.

Education systems can often inherently favour students from dominant social classes, valuing specific cultural knowledge and expectations aligned with traditional social power holders. This can create bias and inequality in education. Subsequently, students with lower levels of cultural capital, such as first-generation students, may face systematic disadvantages and additional barriers. The understated role of cultural capital can be challenging to identify and may be mistaken for competence rather than accumulated advantage.

2 Methodology

2.1 Data Source

This analysis concerning first-generation graduates relies on both administrative data from the National Student Enrolment Registry (RMUR) and the National Survey on the Employability of Higher Education Graduates (CNAAIS) that are relevant for Romania. The survey was conducted by the Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding (UEFISCDI) using the same infrastructure (Deaconu & Hâj, 2022a) and data processing techniques (Deaconu & Olah, 2022) as in the case of the National Student Survey in Romania (NSS-RO). The total number of survey respondents was 8,857 between 17 November 2021 and 28 February 2022.

Respondents who did not fully answer the relevant questions were taken out of the database. After database cleaning, the total number of cases that were taken into consideration was 6,636 due to some additional filters (e.g., respondents from military universities were excluded, the cases were limited only to bachelor's and master's degrees, and only full-time students were considered). The survey covered two graduates' cohorts: 2021 (T + 1) and 2016 (T + 5). Data was weighted to reduce sampling error and potential non-response bias based on gender and study field (Deaconu & Hâj, 2022b).

2.2 Limitations of the Study

The limitations of the study concern especially data collection as there were several constraints addressed through data cleaning and consideration of only relevant cases for some variables (Deaconu & Hâj, 2022b):

- Lack of personal administrative data (e.g., e-mail address) for more than 50% of higher education graduates in the years analysed (2016 and 2020) determined self-selection bias.
- Insufficient knowledge of the occupations practised in the national economy has caused confusion for some respondents.
- Lack of administrative and/or collected data on current tax residence and type of employer.

- Net incomes delivered by the respondents led in several cases to errors starting from the wrong entry of some amounts they received which became maximum outliers.
- The effect of survey fatigue in the context of the significant increase in the number of online surveys contributed to a decrease in the pool of potential respondents without being able to estimate an exact percentage.

The data presented by CNAAIS on first-generation students sheds light on the profile of such students, who lack a familial history of higher education. However, it is worth noting that the analysis did not factor in variables such as the enrolment or graduation status of the student's siblings in university courses. This highlights the need for a more comprehensive approach in the future to better understand the challenges and opportunities faced by first-generation students in pursuing higher education.

2.3 Data Analysis

To gain a deeper understanding of the educational experience and labour market integration of first-generation graduates, various categories of variables gathered from administrative data and surveys were analysed. The methodology outlined in the CNAAIS Report (Deaconu & Hâj, 2022b) includes the following elements:

- **Social and background**: gender, age (at the moment of graduation), county (NUTS-3) or development region (NUTS-2) for birthplace or at enrolment, the environment of the residence (rural or urban), marital status, precarious social and economic status (if a student has a social scholarship or special social status—e.g., orphanage), highest educational attainment in family, first-generation student profile, average score at upper secondary final examination (Baccalaureate).
- **Educational status**: study degree, study field (ISCED-F 2013), means of financial support, scholarships, student accommodation, on-time graduation.
- **Perception of personal and professional experience during studies**: internships, volunteering, study mobilities, the perceived role of education in employment, the perceived role of university prestige in employment.
- **Transition and insertion into the labour market**: employment during studies, employment after graduation (for both generations), vertical mismatch, net average income (at the time of the survey).

The employment status of undergraduate and graduate students was defined as engaging in an economic activity that generates income through salaries, benefits, or other forms of compensation. Various types of employees have been identified based on their contractual arrangements (e.g., unlimited term, fixed term) and sector of work (public, private, self-employed) as well as individuals who may not be currently employed, such as those who volunteer, take parental leave, are medically incapacitated or are solely focused on education. This category also includes housewives and husbands staying at home.

The study also deals with the concept of occupational vertical mismatch, more commonly referred to as overqualification. This is when a university graduate is employed in an occupation that is classified outside the Romanian Classification of Occupations (COR) Major Groups 1 and 2. These major groups are designated by Romanian law as those that could require higher education qualifications. Therefore, working in any other COR group indicates that the educational level of the graduate exceeds the job's typical requirements. The data is subject to international comparability as COR correlates with the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-08).

When processing data, the analysis considered several factors to ensure data quality:

- The net monthly income was limited to 25,000 RON (5,060 Euro) during the tests due to statistical relevance.
- A maximum of 16 h worked per day was considered relevant for the tests.
- All amounts were expressed in Euro, using the exchange rate between Euro and Romanian Lei (RON) on November 17th, 2021 (1 RON = 4.94 Euro), and represent either averages or medians, as appropriate, of net monthly earnings.
- The average hourly rate describes the income earned by a graduate in one hour's work, based on a 40-hour week and 21 working days per month.

2.4 Research Questions

The study aims to explore various characteristics and outcomes of first-generation graduates, with a focus on their educational journey and transition to the labour market. It is hypothesised that the fact that these graduates' parents have not studied at the post-secondary level significantly impacts their academic and post-graduation experiences (Hesketh & Brown, 2004). To shed light on this issue, three research questions were considered.

- RQ1: Are there significant social and economic differences between first-generation graduates and their peers?
- RQ2: What disparities exist between first-generation graduates and their peers whose parents have attained higher education, particularly regarding their perceptions of personal experiences during their studies and transition into the labour market?
- RQ3: If there are indeed variations, how long do they tend to last? Do they have significant implications in the short or medium term?

This research aims to investigate the relationship between educational attainment, socio-economic background, and professional trajectories, with a particular focus on first-generation graduates. Thus, the study will provide insights into the employment outcomes of this group, aiming to identify the main factors contributing to their professional success. Although it is premature to assess the efficacy of potential institutional measures within the Romanian policy framework due to limited data, the study discusses the national state of the art ahead of the Ministry of Education's upcoming initiative to implement a specialised support scheme for first-generation students (Ministry of Education, 2023).

3 Results

3.1 Characteristics of First-Generation Students

Almost one in two higher education graduates in Romania had a first-generation profile (48.8%). The percentage of first-generation graduates is increasing, from 46.2 to 51.9%, a fact that underlines the low overall undergraduate education attainment and the prospects of a significant number of potential students from such a social and educational background. Females are more likely to be the first-generation graduates in their family (up to 5.1% in comparison with male students), as the share of first-generation graduates that live in rural areas is significantly higher (+9.9%) than in urban areas. There are no significant differences between first-generation graduates in terms of study cycle. There are no significant differences between first-generation graduates when related to the study cycle (Table 1).

First-generation graduates are typically older than those whose parents have higher levels of education. This age difference has increased over time for both bachelor's (from 0.17 years in 2016 to 0.66 in 2020) and master's degree holders (from 0.47 years in 2016 to 0.81 years in 2020). This suggests that first-generation graduates often do

Table 1 General characteristics of first-generation graduates and their peers include cohort, study cycle, gender, and residence environment

		First-generation graduates	
		No (%)	Yes (%)
Total		51.2	48.8
Cohort	2016	53.8	46.2
	2020	48.1	51.9
Study cycle	Bachelor	50.9	49.1
	Master	51.7	48.3
Gender	Male	54.3	45.7
	Female	49.2	50.8
Residence environment	Rural	51.0	49.0
	Urban	41.1	58.9

Table 2 Average age and Baccalaureate score for first-generation graduates and their peers on study cycle, gender, and residence environment[1]

		First-generation graduates			
		No		Yes	
		Avg. age	Avg. score BAC	Avg. age	Avg. score BAC
2016 generation (T + 5)	Bachelor	23.80	8.32	23.97	8.15
	Master	25.84	8.45	26.31	8.17
2020 generation (T + 1)	Bachelor	24.00	8.52	24.66	8.28
	Master	26.94	8.39	27.75	8.30
Gender	Male	25.44	8.12	26.38	7.80
	Female	24.24	8.61	24.57	8.44
Residence—environment	Urban	24.71	8.46	25.61	8.25
	Rural	24.59	8.25	24.24	8.20

not pursue higher education immediately after completing secondary school and are more likely to be mature students (Table 2).

Significant disparities exist in the average scores on the upper secondary final examination (Baccalaureate) between first-generation graduates and their peers. These disparities are consistent across both study cycles and persist over time. For example, the differences among bachelor's degree graduates increased from 0.17 points in 2016 to 0.24 in 2020. However, among master's degree graduates, the difference decreased from 0.28 points in 2016 to 0.09 points in 2020. It's important to note that in Romania, the minimum average score required for higher education is 6, while the maximum score is 10, leaving a range of just 4 points. For bachelor's degree graduates, the differences can be as high as 6%. This is particularly significant in the Romanian context, where many higher education institutions use Baccalaureate scores as a basis for admission, negatively impacting first-generation graduates (Table 1).

On average, male and female first-generation graduates are older than their peers by 0.94 and 0.33 years, respectively. Additionally, male first-generation graduates obtain an average score of 0.32 points less than their colleagues with a higher education capital, while female first-generation graduates obtain an average score of 0.17 points less than their peers on the upper secondary exam. The situation is similar when discussing female first-generation graduates who are, on average, 0.33 years older and achieve a lower score on the upper secondary exam by 0.17 points compared to their peers. It should be noted that there is a significant difference in the performance of first-generation graduates and their peers between rural and urban areas.

[1] The Baccalaureate, also known as *Bacalaureat* in Romanian, is a set of standardised exams taken at the end of high school in Romania. The exams are designed to assess the knowledge and skills acquired by students during their upper secondary education. The results of these exams are crucial in determining a student's eligibility for admission to Romanian universities in various study programs. Admission to universities requires possession of a Baccalaureate diploma.

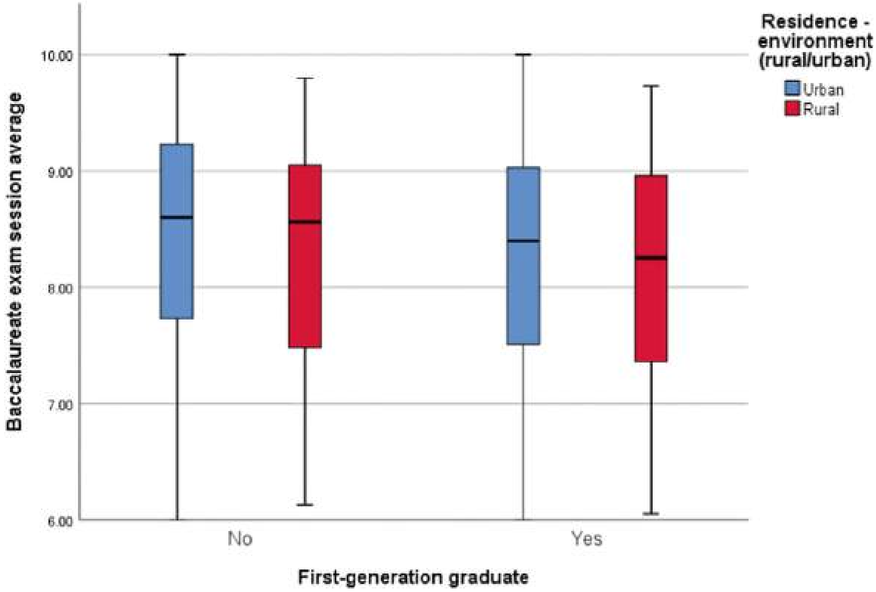


Fig. 1 Baccalaureate average score distribution between first-generation graduates and their peers based on residence environment

In particular, the difference in Baccalaureate scores is 0.21 points in urban areas, compared to only 0.05 points in rural areas. Furthermore, the age difference is more pronounced in rural areas, with a gap of 1.37 years, compared to just 0.12 years in urban areas (Fig. 1).

The analysis compared the differences between first-generation graduates and their peers based on residency using the Local Human Development Index (LHDI). Sandu (2011) developed this index, which was later expanded by Ionescu-Heroiu et al. (2014) to measure community capital in terms of human, health, vital, and material factors. Data from the 2011 census assessed nearly all administrative units in Romania. The data's age is still relevant for the two cohorts of graduates surveyed, who began their higher education studies no later than 2017 (for bachelor's degrees) and 2018 (for master's degrees). The LHDI methodology categorises administrative units into six types of social development: communities of comprehensive poverty, poor-old communities, poor-young communities, middle development communities, communities of structural poverty, and communities of comprehensive development. The categories were obtained through nearest neighbour cluster analysis, squared Euclidean distances, and z-score standardised variables by urban and rural population-weighted geographic location development indicators (Sandu, 2011, 28).

The percentage of first-generation graduates from communities of comprehensive poverty (0.7%) is more than double that of their peers (0.3%), though both values are small. This pattern is also observed in poor-young communities (5.2% compared to

2.5%) and poor-old communities (3.8% compared to 2.1%). First-generation graduates are more prevalent in middle development communities (20.2% compared to 13.2%) and communities of structural poverty (5.5% compared to 2.7%). However, the proportion of first-generation graduates residing in communities of comprehensive development is significantly higher in the case of graduates with more educated parents (79.2% compared to 64.6%).

The data reveals a higher representation of first-generation graduates in communities characterised by poverty and underdevelopment compared to their peers from more educated families. 71.0% of students living in communities of comprehensive poverty, 66.8% of students in poor-young communities, and 63.9% of students from poor-old communities are first-generation graduates. Although most individuals in both groups come from communities with comprehensive development, first-generation graduates are less concentrated in such areas, indicating a wider socio-economic distribution compared to their non-first-generation counterparts (Table 3).

Economically disadvantaged first-generation graduates tend to perform better academically in pre-university education than those with a more favourable personal situation (Fig. 2). One possible reason for this could be the awareness of financial constraints that put additional pressure on students to succeed, as education holds the key to a better future for themselves and possibly their families. This could be a significant factor. Additionally, students from socio-economically comfortable backgrounds may not feel the same urgency to excel. They could rely on family connections or social advantages instead of focusing on educational attainment.

Conversely, the opposite trend is observed for students who do not come from a disadvantaged social and economic background. Students from families with a history of higher education are more likely to receive guidance on preparing for high-stakes exams, understand assessment expectations, and develop effective study habits tailored to enhance their educational levels. First-generation students may lack familiarity with the norms and expectations of educational environments, while pupils with parents who attended university have an advantage (Fig. 3).

Table 3 Average Baccalaureate exam scores of first-generation graduates and their peers from precarious social and economic backgrounds

	Precarious social and economic status			
	Yes		No	
	First-generation graduate		First-generation graduate	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Baccalaureate exam session average	8.31	8.19	8.21	8.44

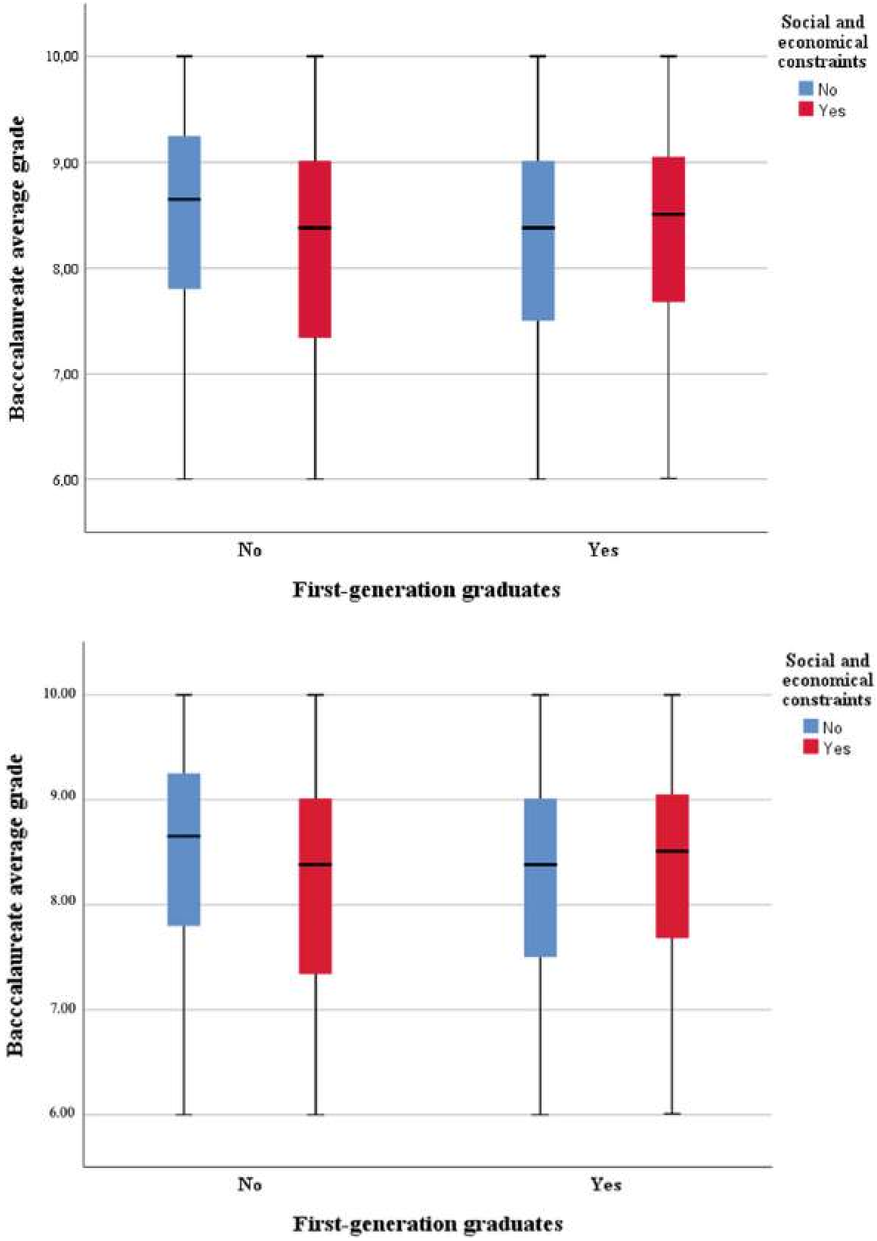


Fig. 2 Baccalaureate average score distribution between first-generation graduates and their peers with social and economic constraints

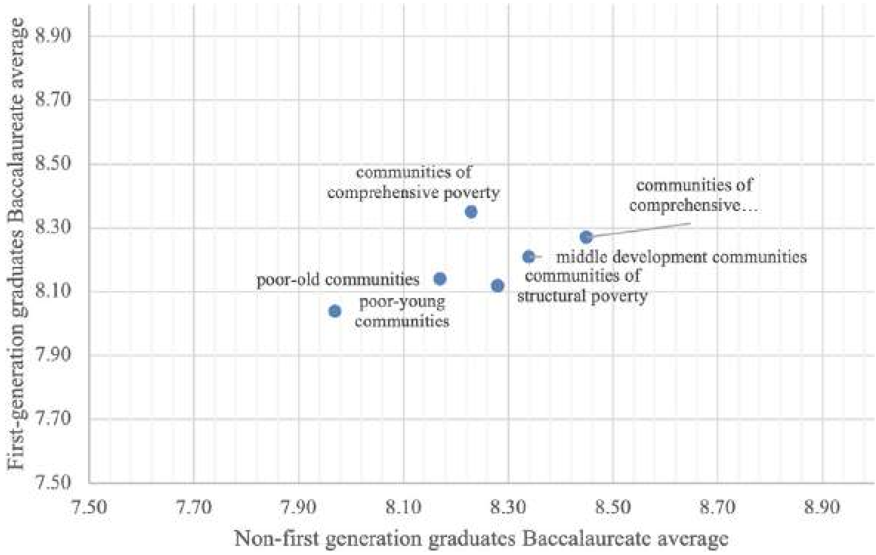


Fig. 3 Scatterplot of the average Baccalaureate score of first-generation graduates and the local human development index typologies based on the graduates' residence

3.2 Educational Access: Housing, Financial Support, and Study Fields

Compared to their peers, first-generation graduates are more likely to relocate from their birthplace, with 59.3% doing so. Additionally, 8.7% of first-generation graduates received student housing, which is 1.5 times higher than their colleagues with parents with a higher educational attainment (5.7%).

As government funding represents a significant source of financial support for university students, it is worth noting that first-generation graduate students are more likely to receive funding for their studies (85.4% compared to 82.7%). For example, in 2022, 64.64% of bachelor's degree students and 76.89% of master's degree students in public universities did not pay tuition fees as they were admitted to a government-funded study place. This subsidy covers the tuition fee. Students may also be eligible to apply for academic or social scholarships, but these are not automatically granted. It is important to consider that the admission process in higher education is based mainly on academic criteria. Therefore, the determination and resilience of first-generation graduate students during their studies should be acknowledged.

The percentage of first-generation graduates who have to pay tuition fees is 38.5% lower than that of previous students with a precarious social and economic status. When referring to government-funded study places, there are no significant differences between first-generation students and their peers.

The data indicates that first-generation graduates tend to pursue study fields such as *Engineering, Manufacturing, and Construction* (+4.6%), *Education* (+1.8%), or *Natural Sciences, Mathematics, and Statistics* (+1.6%). In contrast, study fields such as *Health and Welfare* (−5.8%) or *Information and Communication Technologies* (−0.6%) are less represented among graduates from families with lower educational capital. Notably, a considerable proportion of first-generation students successfully complete their academic programs within the stipulated timeframe. However, the difference in graduation rates between this group and their non-first-generation peers is marginally significant, with the former trailing behind by a mere 1.1%. Despite this, both categories have a high representation, with over 90% of graduates completing their studies on time (Table 4).

Table 4 Distribution of study fields (ISCED-F), financial support structures, dormitory residency, and timeliness of graduation among first-generation graduates compared to peers

		First-generation graduates	
		No (%)	Yes (%)
Study field ISCED-F	Education	3.8	5.6
	Arts and humanities	10.8	10.3
	Social sciences, journalism, and information	10.7	10.2
	Business, administration, and law	23.4	22.9
	Natural sciences, mathematics, and statistics	6.3	7.9
	Information and communication technologies	2.7	2.0
	Engineering, manufacturing, and construction	23.2	27.8
	Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	4.6	4.4
	Health and welfare	14.7	8.9
Form of financing university studies	Government funding	82.7	85.4
	Tuition fee	17.3	14.6
Dormitory resident	Not a dormitory resident	94.3	91.3
	Dormitory resident	5.7	8.7
On-time graduation	No	7.2	6.1
	Yes	92.8	93.9

3.3 Student Experiences: Shaping Personal and Professional Identity

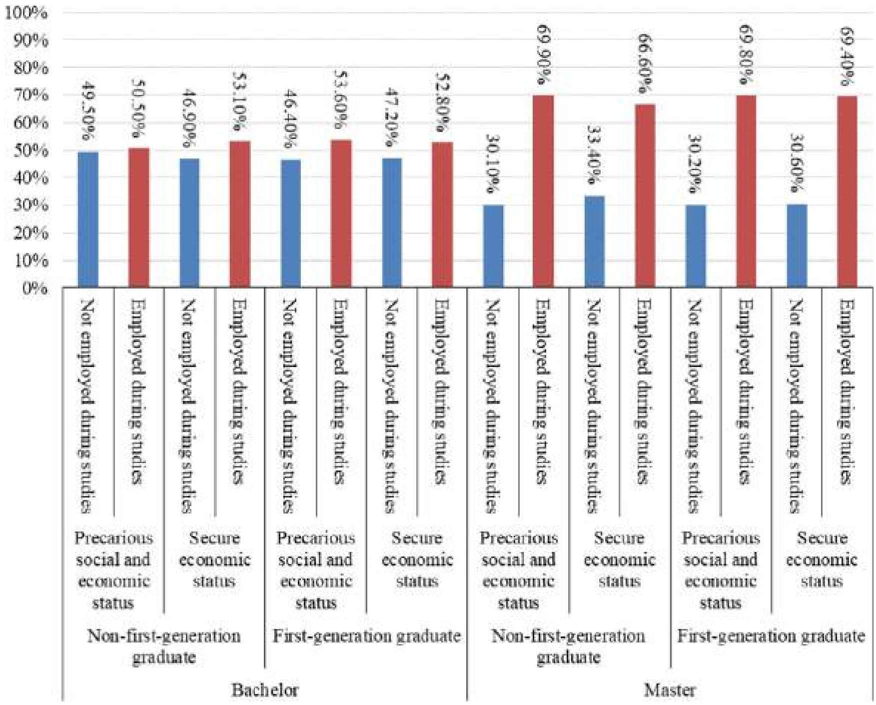
Chi-square tests reveal a statistically significant correlation between first-generation graduates and increased participation in internships, volunteering, and external mobility programmes. Although the level of correlation is modest, it strongly suggests that first-generation students are more likely to proactively seek out these skill-building activities than their non-first-generation peers. Further research may reveal possible factors contributing to this increased engagement, such as a unique drive to compensate for a lack of existing professional networks or different student life experiences (Table 5).

When graduates were asked about their perceptions of the role of education (with a score of 2.53) and university prestige (with a score of 3.27) in employment using a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 (with 1 being very little and 5 being very much), it was found that there were no discernible differences between the mean scores of first-generation graduates and their peers.

Both first-generation bachelor's graduates (53.5%, compared to 50.8% for their peers) and master's graduates (69.8% compared to 69.4%) were more likely to work during their studies. However, the differences between these categories were minimal, suggesting that the underlying reasons for the high proportion of working students, primarily undergraduate students, may differ. Nor is it a matter of precarious social and economic status. The proportions of students facing financial constraints, whether they are first-generation graduates, are similar in terms of employability during their studies. However, first-generation students, especially if they don't have a secure economic status, are more likely to work during their studies.

Table 5 Chi-Square test results concerning first-generation graduates' profiles and different personal and professional experiences during studies

Variable compared with first-generation graduate	Chi-Square (χ^2)	Degrees of freedom (df)	p-value	Phi/Cramer's V
Internships	17.352	1	0.000	0.051
Volunteering activities	8.836	1	0.003	0.037
External mobility or internships	31.813	1	0.000	0.069



Distribution of first generation graduates (and their peers) with social and economic variables related to employment during their studies

3.4 *Transition and Labour Market Insertion*

3.4.1 Perception Versus Reality: Job Market Entry and Recruitment

Although first-generation graduates perceive the transition to the labour market as slightly easier (2.33 compared to 2.36 for their peers on a 5-point Likert scale), they have greater difficulty in finding a job (2.87 vs. 2.77). Their perceptions of how the labour market works contradict the reality of their difficulties in finding a job.

First-generation graduates are significantly less likely to find jobs directly from employers (−36.94%), family businesses (−27.59%), work placements (−23.33%), or through pre-university teaching certification (−18.20%) compared to peers with parents holding higher education degrees. They rely more heavily on social networks (+27.27%), self-employment (5.68%), and university-related services (e.g., career counselling, job fairs +4.38%) than their peers (Table 6).

As a result, first-generation graduates have taken fewer direct routes to employment and are less likely to get their jobs directly from employers, family businesses,

Table 6 Recruitment channels and the distribution of the first-generation graduates (and their peers) within and between the same categories

	Distribution of graduates within the same category			Distribution of graduates between categories		
	Non-first-generation graduates	First-generation graduates	Difference (%)	Non-first-generation graduates	First-generation graduates	Difference (%)
	(A) (%)	(B) (%)	(B)–(A) (%)	(C) (%)	(D) (%)	(D)–(C) (%)
Job fairs	26.10	30.20	4.10	47.96	52.04	4.08
Family or friends	20.40	22.70	2.30	48.91	51.09	2.18
Internship	15.90	15.20	0.70	47.16	52.84	5.68
Own business	5.60	6.70	1.10	47.81	52.19	4.38
National tenure examination in pre-university education	8.00	5.90	−2.10	48.16	51.84	3.67
University (e.g., career counselling and guidance centre, teachers)	4.40	5.10	0.70	36.36	63.64	27.27
Private agency	4.00	4.50	0.50	51.61	48.39	−3.23
Direct via employer	7.20	3.50	−3.70	52.54	47.46	−5.08
Family business	5.00	3.00	−2.00	75.00	25.00	−50.00
Public employment agency	1.10	1.00	−0.10	61.67	38.33	−23.33
Work placements during university studies	1.20	0.80	−0.40	52.78	47.22	−5.57
Social networks	0.40	0.70	0.30	63.79	36.21	−27.59
Residency (in-hospital training)	0.50	0.50	0.00	59.10	40.90	−18.20
Recruitment websites	0.20	0.10	−0.10	68.47	31.53	−36.94

or work placements during their studies. They are more likely to rely on other routes, such as social networks, self-employment, or university services. However, more than a third of first-generation graduates found jobs through job fairs (30.20%). Also, one in five first-generation graduates found a job through family or friends (22.70%). The above-mentioned are their leading recruitment channels, followed by internships (15.2%) or setting up their own business (6.70%).

3.4.2 Employment and Employability: Disparities in Job Quality for First-Generation Graduates

While employment rates for first-generation graduates and their peers may be similar, a stark difference emerges in the quality of employment. Over a third (32.0%) of first-generation graduates with bachelor's degrees find themselves underemployed—in jobs not requiring their full qualifications—compared to just 23.9% of their peers. This highlights a crucial issue: the quality of employment is lower for this group (Table 7).

First-generation graduates face a significant income disadvantage compared to their peers with more educated parents. This is true for both bachelor's and master's graduates. The survey results reveal a significant income gap between first-generation

Table 7 Distribution of first-generation graduates (and their peers) with different variables concerning employment

				First-generation graduate	
				No (%)	Yes (%)
Study cycle	Bachelor	Employed/not employed	Not employed	14.9	17.5
			Employed	85.1	82.5
		Vertical mismatch	No	76.1	68.0
			Yes	23.9	32.0
		Self-employed (yes/no)	No	91.7	94.5
			Yes	8.3	5.5
		Coordination role	No	65.9	64.8
			Yes	34.1	35.2
	Master	Employed/not employed	Not employed	9.3	9.1
			Employed	90.7	90.9
		Vertical mismatch	No	77.7	73.3
			Yes	22.3	26.7
		Self-employed (yes/no)	No	92.2	94.3
			Yes	7.8	5.7
		Coordination role	No	61.6	63.6
			Yes	38.4	36.4

graduates and their peers. For bachelor graduates, this gap translates into an average income difference of 92.4 Euros per month. First-generation bachelor graduates earn between 7.7% and 12.0% less than their peers, with the average disadvantage decreasing from 10.7% in the short term (T + 1) to 7.7% in the medium term (T + 5), depending on the cohort. This trend continues for master's graduates, where the earnings gap is higher at 8.2% (T + 1) but decreases in the medium term to an average of 7.9% (T + 5) (Table 8).

Both fields of study and first-generation status play a role in the observed income differences. First-generation status leads to the situation here. They tend to earn less even in the same field of study (*Health and Welfare, Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction, Information and Communication Technologies or Business, Administration, and Law*). This could be due to less access to high-paying networks with specific job titles or differences in job strategies or negotiation skills (Demetriou et al., 2017). Other potential biases could arise from recruitment practices. Also, specific fields of study have lower average earnings (*Education*, *Arts and Humanities*, *Social Sciences, Journalism, and Information*) than others (*Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction* or *Information and Communication Technologies*) (DG EAC, 2020). Social pressures that steer certain groups towards traditionally 'safe' careers could also contribute to a greater prevalence of graduates within these study fields (Covarrubias et al., 2019) (Fig. 4).

Another possible explanation for their comparatively lower earnings could be a higher rate of vertical mismatch among first-generation graduates, especially in fields with lower earnings potential, such as *Education* or *Business, Administration, and Law*. Interestingly, *Education* is the only field of study where graduates who experience vertical mismatch in terms of occupation earn more than those who are matched according to their qualifications. In addition, significant differences in earnings of vertically mismatched graduates are observed in high earnings fields such as *Information and Communication Technologies* and *Health and Welfare.*

Table 8 Present mean and median earnings per month (at the moment of the survey) of first-generation graduates (and their peers)

			First-generation graduate			
			No		Yes	
			Mean	Median	Mean	Median
Cohort	2016 (T + 5)	Bachelor	949.6	775.5	876.5	714.3
		Master	1,027.6	816.3	946.7	734.7
	2020 (T + 1)	Bachelor	749.6	612.2	659.5	551.0
		Master	795.9	653.1	730.4	612.2
	General	Bachelor	868.8	714.3	776.4	612.2
		Master	927.6	714.3	847.6	673.5

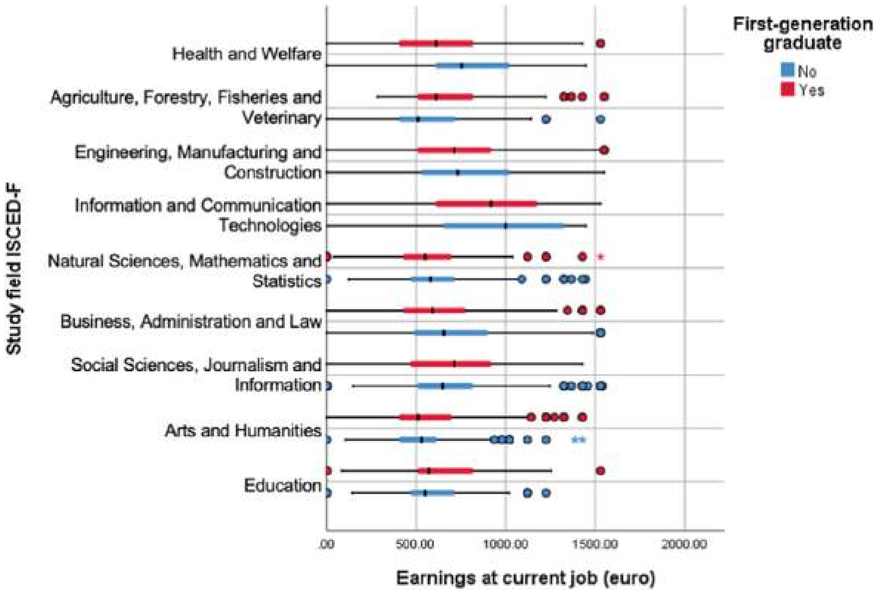


Fig. 4 Clustered boxplot of earnings at current job (Euro) by study field ISCED-F by first-generation graduate (without extreme maximal values above 1.571 Euro)

Nonetheless, upon applying the LHDI typology to graduate earnings, it becomes apparent that those from *communities of comprehensive development* have significantly higher earnings compared to their peers from *communities of comprehensive poverty* or *structural poverty*. It is important to note that first-generation graduates are more likely to come from these areas with lower earnings potential (Fig. 5).

First-generation graduates are less likely to be self-employed at both levels of education. This could imply limited access to start-up capital or business networks and less exposure to family role models in entrepreneurship (Ghazzawi, 2010). It may also reflect their reference to the perceived stability of traditional employment routes (Hirudayaraj & McLean, 2018). The fact that first-generation graduates appear as likely as their peers to be in managerial or executive positions and are only marginally disadvantaged at the master's level underlines that developing appropriate skills is one of the most important ways to succeed in coordinating roles. Both first-generation graduates and their peers take around a year to land their current position; therefore, job search experience in terms of duration is not a primary differentiating factor between these groups.

In conclusion, while first-generation graduates may achieve employment rates comparable to their peers, these data reveal a persistent gap in the quality of their employment and their long-term earning potential. They face underemployment, a significant earnings gap even within the same sectors, and are over-represented in sectors with lower average salaries. These findings illustrate that being a first-generation graduate poses specific challenges in the labour market beyond the disadvantages often associated with socio-economic background alone.

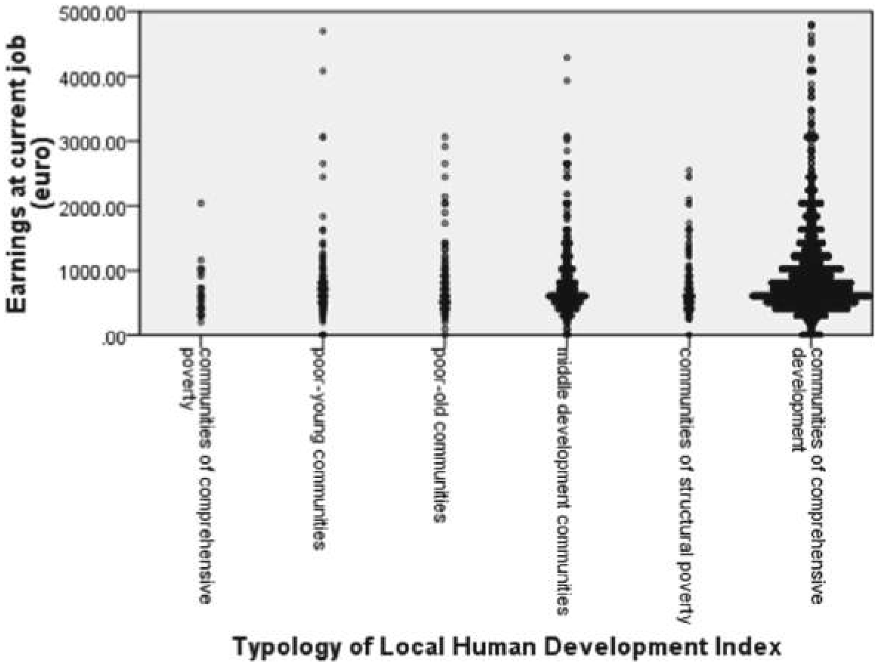


Fig. 5 2-D dot plot between earnings at the current job and the typology of LHDI for the residence of graduates (before their studies)

3.4.3 Further Focus on Vertical Mismatch and Skills

Regarding the differences between the earnings of overqualified and their peers within various fields of study, it can be noticed that in the case of *Information and Communication Technologies*, the surplus is 788.86 Euros per month (+111.82%). Less than 40% of graduates in ICT are the first in their family, while also within these graduates, the vertical mismatch is the lowest (6.6%). Also, in the case of *Health and Welfare*, where students with a vertical occupational mismatch receive a monthly income that is 114.64% higher than that of their peers, there is a small percentage of overqualified graduates (9.6%), as well as the lowest percentage of first-generation graduates (35.3%). Where average differences are lower, for example, in fields of study such as *Education* (+21.94%) or *Arts and Humanities* (+13.54%), the proportion of first generations is higher (58.0% and 49.6% respectively). The vertical mismatch among graduates is also higher, at 25.4% and 29.9% in the two fields, respectively (Fig. 6).

On the one hand, the data support the conclusion that there is an association between first-generation status and vertical mismatch, particularly with low levels of overqualified graduates. This could be due to some unique barriers that first-generation non-graduates face from admission onwards, such as a high level of competition and additional training or prior knowledge of the medical university

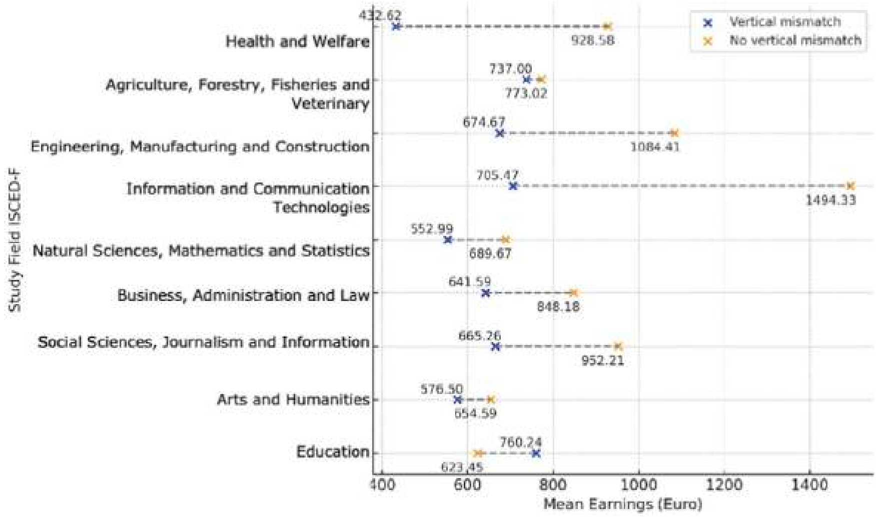


Fig. 6 Mean monthly earnings distribution amongst vertical mismatched graduates and their colleagues compared to study fields (ISCED-F 2013)

system (Mason et al., 2022), as "admission isn't access" for such students (Mason et al., 2021).

On the other hand, in fields with higher mismatch rates (such as *Education* or *Arts and Humanities*), where there are significantly more first-generation graduates, it is still debatable whether they are attracted to these fields by factors such as perceived job security or cultural expectations. Is this mismatch a matter of self-selection, or is there less selectivity in recruitment in these fields? It could also be a 'deliberate mismatch', as graduates may pursue them because they do not fully match their degree but offer an initial earnings advantage over 'proper' entry-level jobs. It is essential to contextualise the conclusions within the framework of the national labour market and the post-COVID-19 landscape, which led to significant disruptions in occupational profiles (Buda, 2020; Anghelache et al., 2022). Such an approach ensures a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the implications of these conclusions (Table 9).

The Table 10 presents a comparative analysis of professional skills between first-generation graduates and their peers. The findings indicate that first-generation graduates rate their professional, foreign language, and IT skills slightly higher than their peers. This self-assessment suggests that first-generation graduates are actively working to improve their skill sets, possibly to compensate for the lack of support from their family background. However, the differences between the two groups are minor, suggesting that HEIs provide a similar level of education to both groups. The data also highlight the importance of self-perceived competence in vocational skills, which can be crucial in the transition to the labour market.

Table 9 Vertical mismatch and first-generation graduates' distribution among study fields (ISCED-F 2013)

	Vertical mismatch		First-generation graduates	
	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)
Education	74.6	25.4	42.0	58.0
Arts and humanities	70.1	29.9	50.4	49.6
Social sciences, journalism, and information	67.3	32.7	50.9	49.1
Business, administration, and law	60.4	39.6	53.1	46.9
Natural sciences, mathematics, and statistics	73.8	26.2	46.9	53.1
Information and communication technologies	93.4	6.6	61.9	38.1
Engineering, manufacturing, and construction	79.4	20.6	45.6	54.4
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	65.9	34.1	52.3	47.7
Health and welfare	90.4	9.6	64.7	35.3

4 Discussion and Conclusions

Analysis of the CNAAIS provides a deeper understanding of first-generation graduates' educational process and employment prospects. This data is very valuable, as it offers insight into the career paths of these graduates. First-generation graduates are more likely to choose fields of study with lower earning potential and higher vertical mismatch. This trend may be related to a lack of cultural capital, which can impact their ability to gain admission into higher education programs. These students may not receive adequate career counselling, struggle to choose study programmes and may not be well-equipped to integrate into the academic environment.

4.1 Concerning the Characteristics of First-Generation Students

There is a significant gender gap among first-generation graduates, with women being over-represented, particularly in rural areas. Female graduates of the first generation are over-represented in rural areas in all development regions except one, with percentages of 70% in at least two development regions. This over-representation could be related to specific socio-economic disadvantages faced by women in rural areas (Wiborg, 2001), as well as to possible cultural expectations that hinder women's educational progress (Ballenger, 2010).

Graduates who are the first in their family are also slightly more likely to come from rural areas. Additionally, a larger proportion of first-generation graduates come from rural areas than their peers, potentially impacting their access to resources and opportunities for higher education (Fleming & Grace, 2014). This rural–urban

Table 10 Skills self-perspective of first-generation graduates (and their peers)

		First-generation graduate	
		No (%)	Yes (%)
(r) Professional skills specific to the field	–	5.1	6.2
	Neutral	17.2	19.1
	+	77.7	74.7
(r) Communication skills	–	1.6	2.0
	Neutral	12.7	12.5
	+	85.6	85.4
(r) Teamwork skills	–	1.4	0.9
	Neutral	7.9	7.5
	+	90.6	91.5
(r) Foreign language skills	–	6.1	10.7
	Neutral	21.4	27.7
	+	72.5	61.6
(r) Problem-solving skills	–	1.4	1.2
	Neutral	9.3	10.6
	+	89.3	88.2
(r) Basic IT skills	–	2.6	2.1
	Neutral	10.7	13.2
	+	86.7	84.7
(r) Advanced IT skills	–	40.0	41.8
	Neutral	24.0	27.4
	+	36.0	30.8
(r) Planning and organisational skills	–	3.8	3.4
	Neutral	13.6	14.7
	+	82.6	82.0

divide highlights the need for policies addressing the unique challenges rural students face in accessing higher education. Policies aimed at improving educational infrastructure, providing scholarships and support systems, and raising awareness of higher education opportunities in these communities could play a crucial role in reducing the gender gap and urban–rural divide among first-generation graduates.

First-generation graduates are generally older than their peers, suggesting they may have delayed entering higher education. First-generation graduates are older at the time of graduation than their peers from more educated families. This is true for both cohorts and both cycles (bachelor: 0.17 and 0.65 years, master: 0.47 and 0.77 years). The age difference is likely t due to factors such as delayed entry into higher education caused by financial pressures or the need to work before committing to study, as is the case in other countries (Engle, 2007; Wells & Lynch, 2012). As a result, flexible education pathways that accommodate mature students are crucial.

There is a consistent gap in upper secondary final exam (Baccalaureate) scores between first-generation graduates and their peers, with previous scoring lower in Romania. This gap is particularly important as it influences university admission and subsequent choice of study programmes. In addition, first-generation male graduates score lower and tend to be older than their peers. These factors suggest potential disadvantages that could have a negative impact on their educational and career paths.

First-generation graduates from economically disadvantaged areas tend to outperform their peers in pre-university education. This finding suggests higher levels of resilience or the effectiveness of support systems for economically disadvantaged students. In contrast, non-first-generation graduates from more affluent backgrounds often show lower academic achievement in the Baccalaureate. This may reflect differing social pressures or expectations. There is also a relationship between socio-economic background and academic achievement. Furthermore, graduates who are the first in their family to attend university are more likely to come from communities experiencing widespread poverty, which can have a detrimental effect on their educational attainment and future earning potential.

4.2 Concerning Educational Access and Student Experience

First-generation graduates exhibit greater mobility, with many opting to relocate from their birthplace, likely in search of better educational or employment prospects. They are also more inclined to reside in student housing, which could indicate a need for more financial resources or familial support to secure private accommodation. Government funding is an essential lifeline for a more substantial proportion of first-generation graduates, highlighting the significance of financial aid programs in supporting students who may not have access to other financial resources.

First-generation graduates tend to enrol in fields like *Engineering*, *Education*, and *Natural Sciences*, viewing these areas as pathways to upward social mobility or due to the availability of more funding opportunities. Particularly in the national context of Romania, such occupations as those from the above-mentioned study fields, such as teachers or engineers, were traditionally respected, especially in the region (Roșca & Fala, 2009). Conversely, *Health and Welfare* and *Information and Communication Technologies* are underrepresented among first-generation graduates, which may reflect their preferences, perceived barriers (e.g., admission is more difficult and requires additional training), or the influence of socio-economic factors on their choice of study field.

Despite the challenges faced by first-generation students, such as potential financial hardship and the absence of familial academic guidance, their higher

proportion among students receiving government funding and their successful completion rates reflect their determination and resilience in pursuing higher education. The slight difference in on-time graduation rates between first-generation and other students implies that while first-generation students face obstacles, they are still highly capable of academic success. The findings suggest that support services, such as financial aid, housing, and academic counselling, play a crucial role in the success of first-generation students. Higher education institutions and policymakers should consider developing targeted strategies to support first-generation students, particularly in providing information about study fields that lead to successful employment outcomes and ensuring equitable access to resources.

4.3 Concerning the Personal and Professional Factors During Studies

The empirical findings have revealed a noteworthy yet modestly positive correlation between first-generation graduates and their active participation in internships, volunteering activities, and external mobility programs. The Chi-Square test results have substantiated that first-generation graduates are more inclined to engage in internships and volunteering activities, with a Phi/Cramer's V value of 0.051 and 0.037, respectively, indicating a positive yet small association. Furthermore, the study has inferred a stronger correlation between first-generation graduates' participation in external mobility or internships, with a Phi/Cramer's V value of 0.069, which could suggest that these opportunities are more valued or sought after by these students.

The results also indicate that graduates, irrespective of being first-generation students or not, do not perceive a significant difference in the role of education and university prestige in employment. This finding could imply that all graduates view their educational achievements and the reputation of their university as similarly influential in securing employment. However, a slightly higher percentage of first-generation graduates work during their studies at both the bachelor's and master's levels, which may suggest a need for financial support or a desire to gain professional experience concurrently with their academic studies.

The study observes minimal differences in work participation rates during their studies between first-generation graduates and their peers, which could point to a broader trend of students working while studying. This trend may be driven by factors other than just being a first-generation student, such as the economic climate or changing cultural expectations around work and study.

4.4 Concerning Transition and Labour Market Insertion

While first-generation graduates experience greater difficulty in securing a job, their perceptions of how labour market works seem to minimise these challenges. To compensate for lower levels of social capital, they rely more heavily on job fairs as a means of discovering opportunities.

Though first-in-family higher education graduates tend to have less social capital, they still find a significant proportion of employment opportunities through family and friends—a trend that appears to contrast with the wider emphasis on direct routes such as internships and employer contacts in the case of their peers with more educated parents. This reliance on close networks could reflect their strong community ties, the effectiveness of these networks, or a lack of access to the types of direct routes more common among their peers. It's important to note that first-generation graduates are less likely to secure jobs directly through employers, family businesses or pre-existing internships. Instead, they make greater use of social networks, self-employment, and university services. Job fairs (30.20%), followed by family and friends (22.70%), remain their main recruitment channels.

As the unemployment rates for first-generation bachelor graduates and their peers may be comparable, there's an important distinction to be made. First-generation graduates are significantly more likely to be underemployed—more than a third (32.0%) are in jobs that do not require their full qualifications, compared to 23.9% of their peers. This highlights a mismatch between their educational attainment and the job opportunities available to them and indicates a greater challenge in securing employment that fully utilises their skills and qualifications. It may also reflect the fact that they have chosen their jobs mainly through job fairs and from families with lower social capital.

First-generation graduates face a persistent income disadvantage compared to their peers, earning significantly less at both bachelor's and master's levels. It is important to note that this is a factual observation, not a subjective evaluation. While they are less likely to be self-employed, first-generation graduates may hold managerial positions at similar or slightly higher rates than their peers, especially at the bachelor's level. However, even with potential managerial positions, this doesn't compensate for the earnings gap. For bachelor graduates, the difference is 92.4 Euros per month on average, representing a disadvantage of between 7.7% and 12.0%.

First-generation graduates often end up working in industries with lower average salaries, which further reduces their earning potential. They also experience a higher rate of vertical mismatch, especially in fields with lower earning potential, which affects their income. Surprisingly, in the field of *Education*, overqualified graduates earn more than their peers. Furthermore, graduates who are the first in their family to attend university often come from less developed communities, which can limit their earning potential. Additionally, they may face a 'deliberate mismatch' by choosing jobs outside their field of study for immediate financial gain.

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Building an EHEA Furthering the Fundamental Values of Higher Education (Coordinated by Sjur Bergan and Liviu Matei)

Tracking a Remarkable Intellectual and Policy Journey: Building a European Higher Education Area Furthering the Fundamental Values of Higher Education

Sjur Bergan and Liviu Matei

Abstract This chapter identifies and discusses a remarkable dimension of the process of building the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which concerns the fundamental values of higher education. From their very start, the Bologna Process and the EHEA have included references to values. The chapter tracks how these references evolved over 25 years from being unsystematic and not very central from a policy point of view to becoming a well-articulated and solid intellectual and policy framework for the entire Process. In 2018, members of the EHEA adopted a defined list of six EHEA "fundamental values of higher education". They are now completing a process of adopting shared EHEA definitions for each fundamental value, have made explicit commitments about how they are expected to further in practice these values as jointly defined ("protect" "and "promote" the fundamental values), and have agreed in principle to implement a monitoring mechanism to assess how these commitments are implemented in all systems. In order to track and interpret the milestones and overall trajectory of this development, the chapter relies on an analysis of the Bologna Ministerial Communiqués. Other official documents are also considered, along with relevant contributions from the scholarship of the Bologna Process and EHEA.

Keywords Fundamental values of higher education · European higher education area

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1 Introduction

This chapter identifies and discusses a remarkable and distinct dimension of the process of building the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), namely the fundamental values on which it is built. The chapter also introduces the section in this volume dedicated to the fundamental values of the EHEA.

From the very start, the Bologna Process and the EHEA[1] included references to values. In this chapter, we track how these references evolved over almost 25 years from being not very central from a policy point of view (because somewhat overshadowed by other priorities) and unsystematic to becoming a well-articulated and solid intellectual and policy framework for the entire Process.

As will be discussed in detail, this is an extraordinary intellectual and policy journey. Members of the EHEA,[2] meaning basically all countries of the continent[3] as well as the European Commission, adopted a defined list of six EHEA "fundamental values of higher education". In this, they were supported by eight consultative members representing stakeholders (higher education institutions, students, staff, and employers) as well as two intergovernmental organizations.[4] They are now completing a process of adopting shared EHEA definitions and conceptual references for each value, they have made concrete and explicit commitments about how they are expected to further in practice these values as jointly defined (how they will "protect" "and "promote" the fundamental values), and they agreed in principle to implement a monitoring mechanism to assess how these commitments are put into practice in all systems.

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[1] The "European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was launched in 2010 as a common European space for dialogue and practice in higher education. EHEA is considered the result of the Bologna Process (…) launched in 1999 (…) The Bologna Process is ongoing as a voluntary intergovernmental initiative in higher education based on jointly agreed principles, objectives and standards, governance mechanisms, and the implementation of these within national education systems. (…) there are 49 European states that have agreed to implement the Bologna Process. They form the EHEA. Russia and Belarus were suspended following the invasion of Ukraine in 2022". (Matei, 2023).

[2] For an overview of members, see https://www.ehea.info/page-members, accessed March 29, 2024. Russia and Belarus were suspended from participation in the EHEA work program and governing bodies in April 2022 because of their role in the war of aggression against Ukraine.

[3] The exceptions are Monaco, which has never applied for membership, and Kosovo, whose status is recognized by a clear majority of EHEA members but not by all, and which is for this reason also not a party to the European Cultural Convention. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe is scheduled to consider a recommendation that Kosovo become a member of the Council at its session in April 2024: https://pace.coe.int/en/news/9395/pace-spring-session-opinion-on-the-application-by-kosovo-to-join-the-council-of-europe-alexei-navalny-s-death-and-the-need-to-counter-vladimir-putin-s-regime, accessed April 6, 2024. Any decision on membership will be taken by the Committee of Ministers.

[4] The consultative members are, in alphabetical order: BusinessEurope, Council of Europe, Education International, European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), European Students' Union (ESU), European University Association (EUA), EURASHE—European Association of Institutions in Higher Education, and UNESCO.

This is another example of significant, maybe even unprecedented, developments in higher education triggered by the Bologna Process (Matei 2020a). It can further be argued that the development discussed here is, to some extent, distinctive to Europe. As noted by Matei and D'Aquila, if we conceptualize this particular European development as an example of the emergence of conceptual references and broader frameworks of reference for academic freedom and related (fundamental) values of higher education, this will not be the only example. There are a few more in other parts of the world in recent years as well as in the European Union, independently from the EHEA (Matei and D'Aquila, in this volume). Similar European developments will also be discussed briefly in this chapter. A distinguishing feature of the EHEA is the scale of this development (nominally engaging an entire and diverse continent), the capacity of EHEA members to implement these values in practice, and its completeness (clearly identified values, joint definitions and conceptual elaborations, explicit commitments to their implementation, and a joint monitoring mechanism). We can talk about a systematic, well-organized endeavor within the EHEA that has been unfolding over a relatively long period of time with the participation of a large spectrum of stakeholders to conceptualize, codify, and further the fundamental values. This has led some to the discussion of a distinct "fundamental values project" within the broader Bologna Process (Matei and D'Aquila, in this volume). Like with other major Bologna Process initiatives, it can be expected that not all aspects of this "project" will be implemented equally by all members. Still, the existence of common EHEA understandings, standards, and commitments with regard to the fundamental values is in itself remarkable.

In 2018 and 2020, EHEA members adopted an official list of six fundamental values of higher education: academic freedom, academic integrity, institutional autonomy, student and staff participation in higher education governance, and public responsibility *for* and *of* higher education (Bologna Process, 2018 and 2020a). They adopted a shared short definition and a statement with a longer elaboration (a conceptual reference) for one of them—academic freedom (Bologna Process, 2020a, b) and agreed to develop similar definitions and statements for the other values by their next meeting, due in 2024.[5] The road to this important achievement has been quite meandering, but it is not impossible to track.

We will see below that the language has evolved over the years from one about "values" more generally to "fundamental values of higher education" more specifically. The exact list of fundamental values emerged progressively during the dialogue made possible by the Bologna Process. It was not there from the very beginning. Different values gained prominence at different times rather than simultaneously and in the same way. Identifying, conceptualizing, and codifying specific (fundamental) values was triggered by different factors, including European traditions in higher education, the internal logic or dynamics of the Bologna Process itself, independent contributions by key European stakeholders like the Council of Europe or

[5] The statement was adopted by Ministers at their Tirana conference on May 30, 2024, after this article was submitted, cf https://ehea.info/Immagini/ANNEX-1-EHEA-STATEMENTS-ON-FUNDAMENTAL-VALUES1.pdf.

the European University Association and, most importantly, by distinct events and economic, social, and political process processes in Europe and European societies that had a major impact on higher education during this time.

In order to track and interpret the milestones and overall trajectory of this development, the chapter relies primarily on an analysis of the main Bologna Process documents, the Ministerial Communiqués[6] adopted every two to three years beginning with the Bologna Declaration of 1999. Other official documents are also considered, along with relevant contributions from the by now quite extensive scholarship on the Bologna Process and EHEA. Both authors have been direct participants, in different capacities, in the developments discussed in this chapter.

2 Toward a European Higher Education Area Built on Values: The Early Years and the Incipient Discourse About Values

When the Bologna Process started a quarter century ago, in June 1999, and also when the European Higher Education Area was officially launched in March 2010, the fundamental values of higher education were already very present, albeit not with the same degree of clarity or centrality as now.

Already in May 1998, when Ministers[7] of four European countries met to celebrate the 800th anniversary of the Sorbonne, they underlined that the most important characteristic of higher education in Europe is neither technical nor commercial. In the Sorbonne Declaration adopted on that occasion, which is in many ways the precursor of the Bologna Process, they said:

> The European process has very recently moved some extremely important steps ahead. Relevant as they are, they should not make one forget that Europe is not only that of the Euro, of the banks and the economy: it must be a Europe of knowledge as well. We must strengthen and build upon the intellectual, cultural, social and technical dimensions of our continent. These have to a large extent been shaped by its universities, which continue to play a pivotal role for their development (Bologna Process, 1998: 1).

While this does not amount to an explicit statement on the fundamental values of higher education, it points to the importance of values as well as to the importance of higher education in defining, upholding, and furthering the values of European societies.

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[6] Ministerial delegations from the EHEA countries meet every two to three years, together with the European Commission and stakeholder organizations. At each such Ministerial Conference, a Ministerial Communiqué is adopted with joint decisions and statements of the members regarding various aspects of the Bologna Process and EHEA. The statements adopted in 1999 and 2010 were labeled "Declarations" rather than "Communiqués". All are available through https://www.ehea.info/page-ministerial-declarations-and-communiques, accessed March 29, 2024.

[7] Claude Allègre (France), Jürgen Rüttgers (Germany), Luigi Berlinguer (Italy), and Tessa Blackstone (United Kingdom).

The first direct reference to the values of higher education came a year later, in the Bologna Declaration, the founding document of the Bologna Process—and how could it have been otherwise in a declaration adopted in the city that also gave rise to the Magna Charta Universitatum[8]? Ministers of the 29 countries present said in the Declaration:

> European higher education institutions, for their part, have accepted the challenge and taken up a main role in constructing the European area of higher education, also in the wake of the fundamental principles laid down in the Bologna Magna Charta Universitatum of 1988. This is of the highest importance, given that Universities' independence and autonomy ensure that higher education and research systems continuously adapt to changing needs, society's demands and advances in scientific knowledge" (Bologna Process, 1999: 2).

The Bologna Declaration is less than a ringing endorsement of fundamental values, but it does indicate that at least academic freedom and institutional autonomy—the two values covered by the original Magna Charta Universitatum (1988)—have an important place in the Ministers' thinking and their policy endeavor to develop a European Higher Education Area. When they met in Praha two years later, Ministers still did not spell out a complete vision of the place of fundamental values in the Bologna Process, but they did underline the importance of both higher education institutions and their students, paving the way for the official identification a few years later of other fundamental values in the EHEA: student and staff participation in governance, and public responsibility for higher education. In 2001, the Ministers stated:

> Ministers stressed that the involvement of universities and other higher education institutions and of students as competent, active and constructive partners in the establishment and shaping of a European Higher Education Area is needed and welcomed", and "Ministers affirmed that students should participate in and influence the organisation and content of education at universities and other higher education institutions. Ministers also reaffirmed the need, recalled by students, to take account of the social dimension in the Bologna Process" (Bologna Process, 2001: 2–3).

Not least, they "supported the idea that higher education should be considered a public good and is and will remain a public responsibility (regulations etc.), and that students are full members of the higher education community" (ibid.: 1).

In Berlin two years later, Ministers reaffirmed their position that higher education is a public good and a public responsibility, by which, in our interpretation, they did not repeat the obvious but rather expressed a concern that what had been a key feature of European higher education was under threat (Bergan, 2005). They also emphasized that "in international academic cooperation and exchanges, academic values should prevail" (Bologna Process, 2003: 1). They further recognized "the fundamental role in the development of the European Higher Education Area played by

[8] "The Magna Charta Universitatum was originally signed by 388 rectors and heads of universities from all over Europe and beyond on September 18, 1988, the 900th anniversary of the University of Bologna. The document contains principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy as a guideline for good governance and self-understanding of universities in the future" (Magna Charta Universitatum, 1988).

Higher Education Institutions and student organisations" (*ibid.*: 2). Even if they did not use the term "fundamental values", Ministers made a stronger implicit reference to them than in the previous declarations and communiqués by including a specific section of five paragraphs on "Higher education institutions and students" in the Berlin Communiqué, in which, among other things, they "welcome the commitment of Higher Education Institutions and students to the Bologna Process and recognise that it is ultimately the active participation of all partners in the Process that will ensure its long-term success", "accept that institutions need to be empowered to take decisions on their internal organisation and administration", "note the constructive participation of student organisations in the Bologna Process and underline the necessity to include the students continuously and at an early stage in further activities", reiterate that students are "full partners in higher education governance", and call on "institutions and student organisations to identify ways of increasing actual student involvement in higher education governance" (all quotes *ibid.*: 5). It is worth noting that the references to higher education institutions and students are not at this time matched by similar references to staff, and no staff organization had yet been included among the consultative members of the Bologna Follow Up Group (BFUG)[9] (*ibid.*: 8).

The next significant step toward recognizing the importance of the fundamental values of higher education in the Bologna Process, and with another value coming to the fore, was taken by the BFUG rather than by Ministers. The background this time was the relatively intense discussions about the criteria on which new membership applications should be assessed. The BFUG addressed the issue at its meeting in Noordwijk in October 2004 and decided that autonomous universities, student participation in the governance of higher education, and public responsibility for higher education should be among the "principles" to which applicant states needed to confirm their adherence (Bologna Process, 2004: 2). These "principles" still do not present a comprehensive vision of the role of fundamental values in the Bologna Process, but if we put the Bologna Declaration, the Prague and Berlin Communiqués, and the BFUG document together, we start seeing the contours of what was to develop into a more comprehensive view of values in the EHEA.

3 Toward Consolidation

When they met in Bergen in May 2005, Ministers made no significant new commitment to fundamental values, and values were less present in their discussions than at their previous meetings. They underlined the importance of the social dimension of higher education and of intercultural understanding and respect in their relations

[9] "The **Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG)** oversees the Bologna Process between the ministerial meetings. The BFUG meetings play an important role in overseeing the implementation of the ministerial Communiqués as well as in developing the Bologna Process". cf. the EHEA website https://www.ehea.info/page-the-bologna-follow-up-group, accessed on March 29, 2024. Bold in the original.

with other parts of the world. In a budding reference to the global dimension of the EHEA, they stated that "We[10] all share the common understanding of the principles, objectives and commitments of the Process as expressed in the Bologna Declaration and in the subsequent communiqués from the Ministerial Conferences in Prague and Berlin" (Bologna Process, 2005: 1), which is at least an indirect reference to fundamental values, among other things, and they included the Education International (EI) Pan-European Structure, which represents higher education staff, among the consultative members (*ibid.*: 6). Although discussed here and also in other documents with at least indirect reference to values, the social dimension of higher education or the intercultural understanding and respect were not identified as values or included in the final list of fundamental values. This is an example of how not all important core notions and principles within the Bologna Process ended up being conceptualized as fundamental values of higher education. They remain "dimensions or principles" and important priorities, along with mobility, employability, and structural reforms. This, of course, raises the question of what exactly values are, or the fundamental values of higher education, which we will address shortly in the conclusions.

The first more comprehensive reference to fundamental values came in the London Communiqué, even if the term was still not used. In 2007, Ministers stated that "we are developing an EHEA based on institutional autonomy, academic freedom, equal opportunities and democratic principles that will facilitate mobility, increase employability and strengthen Europe's attractiveness and competitiveness" (Bologna Process, 2007: 1). This was also the first time Ministers—inspired by the Council of Europe's previous work (Bergan, 2005; Weber & Bergan, 2005; Council of Europe, 2007)—referred to the multiple purposes of higher education, which would later be used to define and operationalize public responsibility of higher education as another fundamental value:

> Our aim is to ensure that our HEIs have the necessary resources to continue to fulfil their full range of purposes. Those purposes include: preparing students for life as active citizens in a democratic society; preparing students for their future careers and enabling their personal development; creating and maintaining a broad, advanced knowledge base; and stimulating research and innovation[11] (ibid.: 1).

Ministers also "underline the importance of strong institutions, which are diverse, adequately funded, autonomous and accountable" (*ibid.*: 2).

When Ministers met again in Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve two years later, they were already looking toward the establishment of the European Higher Education Area, and they were doing so against the background of the financial crisis that hit Europe, as it hit much of the world, in 2008. Ministers made no new commitment

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[10] I.e., the members who had joined the Bologna Process prior to 2005, as well as the five new countries that joined at the Bergen meeting: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

[11] The list of purposes in the London Communiqué is inspired by but not identical to the one adopted by the Council of Europe: preparation for sustainable employment, preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies, personal development, and the development and maintenance, through teaching, learning, and research, of a broad, advanced knowledge base (Council of Europe, 2007: paragraph 5).

to, and spilled little ink on, the fundamental values. They did, however, confirm some of the fundamental values, and they enunciated a slightly different vision of the purposes of higher education, closer to the one that the Council of Europe had articulated two years earlier, by stating their

> full commitment to the goals of the European Higher Education Area, which is an area where higher education is a public responsibility, and where all higher education institutions are responsive to the wider needs of society through the diversity of their missions. The aim is to ensure that higher education institutions have the necessary resources to continue to fulfil their full range of purposes such as preparing students for life as active citizens in a democratic society; preparing students for their future careers and enabling their personal development; creating and maintaining a broad, advanced knowledge base and stimulating research and innovation (Bologna Process, 2009: 1).

A year later, Ministers met in Budapest and Wien to formally launch the European Higher Education Area on the basis of the *acquis* of the Bologna Process until then. They adopted a Declaration that was briefer than what they had previously adopted, and they underlined the values basis of the EHEA by saying "We, the Ministers, recommit to academic freedom as well as autonomy and accountability of higher education institutions as principles of the European Higher Education Area and underline the role the higher education institutions play in fostering peaceful democratic societies and strengthening social cohesion" and "We acknowledge the key role of the academic community—institutional leaders, teachers, researchers, administrative staff and students—in making the European Higher Education Area a reality… We commit ourselves (*sic*) to working towards a more effective inclusion of higher education staff and students in the implementation and further development of the EHEA. We fully support staff and student participation in decision-making structures at European, national and institutional levels" (Bologna Process, 2010: 2). We can see that this is yet another element in the evolution towards an EHEA list of fundamental values.

The 2012 Ministerial conference in Bucureşti was the first after the European Higher Education Area had been formally established. It also indicated that the political interest in and commitment to the EHEA was diminishing, at least if the number of delegations headed by political leaders (such as Ministers or Deputy Ministers) was an indication (Bergan & Deca, 2018). The Bucureşti conference is perhaps most memorable because of the intense discussion of the wording on financing, where, in the end, some Ministers of a neo-liberal persuasion had to accept a commitment to securing "the highest possible level of public funding for higher education" in addition to "drawing on other appropriate sources, as an investment in our future" (Bologna Process, 2012a: 1). Ministers did, however, commit to "maintaining public responsibility for higher education" and to "supporting the engagement of students and staff in governance structures at all levels", and they "reiterate[d] our commitment to autonomous and accountable higher education institutions that embrace academic freedom" (*ibid.*: 2).

In Bucureşti, two years after the formal launch of the European Higher Education Area, we observe a development in which there have been clear references to values throughout the process, and in which these references have moved from broader societal values in the Sorbonne Declaration to more specific references to the fundamental values of higher education from the Bologna Declaration onward. The extent to which these values were referred to varied, and they were developed the most extensively in the Berlin Communiqué. By its decision in 2004 on the criteria ("principles") for the assessment of new membership applications, the BFUG made some of the fundamental values an operational requirement for new members.

Nevertheless, even as late as 2012, the fundamental values of the EHEA, which had yet to be defined in a coherent way, were still seen as an important but underlying feature. They were largely taken for granted. That was soon to change.

4 The Fundamental Values Move to Center Stage in the EHEA

Sometime between the Bucureşti conference of 2012 and the one in Yerevan in 2015, it became clear that the fundamental values of the EHEA could no longer be considered merely an underlying factor that could be taken for granted. Several developments showed that the fundamental values of the EHEA were coming under increasing pressure, and this development has continued since.

There were several factors that led to this realization. Belarus had applied for accession to the EHEA twice and was rejected both times. Prior to the 2005 Ministerial conference, the contacts had been informal,[12] and the message was clear: if Belarus lodged a formal application, it would be turned down given the lack of democracy in the country. Therefore, Belarus did not apply. It did, however, prior to the 2012 Ministerial conference, and the application was duly considered in the BFUG. However, in December 2010, the Lukashenka regime violently oppressed demonstrations against what was widely seen as a flawed presidential election. The oppression included the arrest of some 600 people, and presidential candidates were not spared. Assaults and searches were carried out in the private homes of journalists and people active in the opposition, as well as on the premises of several non-governmental organizations and media.[13] Several Ministers of Education expressed concern at the treatment of the members of the academic community who had participated in the protests (Myklebust 2011; O'Malley, 2011), and at its meeting in January 2012, the BFUG concluded that it "would advise the EHEA ministers not to accept Belarus' application to join the EHEA, with an open message that accession would be possible in the future, provided that reforms are made in the direction of the EHEA objectives" (Bologna Process, 2012b: 25). Prior to the Yerevan Ministerial conference, Belarus again applied for accession, and by this time, conditions in the country seemed to have improved somewhat. Even if there were no illusions about any commitment by the regime to democracy, the feedback received from contacts in Belarus who were

[12] One of the authors (Sjur Bergan) was involved in these contacts.

[13] https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-EN.asp?fileid=17958&lang=en, accessed March 29, 2024.

not aligned with the regime led one of us (Sjur Bergan), as an active member of the BFUG, to conclude that the risks of isolating its academic community were greater than the risks of admitting Belarus to the EHEA, and this was ultimately the recommendation by the BFUG and the decision taken by Ministers at the Yerevan meeting (Bologna Process, 2015a: 3). Belarus was, however, admitted with a Roadmap that included commitments to the fundamental values of the EHEA, with specific reference to academic freedom and institutional autonomy and "enabling students and staff to organize freely and to register their organizations" (Bologna Process, 2015b: 1–2).

Belarus was not the only problematic case in these years. The 2018 Bologna implementation report indicates strong concerns about the state of academic freedom and institutional autonomy in three countries: Hungary, Russia, and Turkey (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, Eurydice, 2018: 40–46).[14] The concerns about Turkey mentioned in the report related to the treatment of its academic community in the wake of the failed coup in July 2016, which included the forced resignation of 1577 deans as well as suspensions and travel bans affecting many academics and students[15] and entire higher education institutions being closed or restructured (Kaya, 2018). Even before the failed coup, however, there was great pressure on the Turkish academic community (O'Malley, 2021), such as when members of "Academics for Peace" were arrested in January 2015 because they had protested against the government's treatment of the Kurdish community.

In Hungary, the most emblematic case was that of the Central European University (CEU), in which one of us (Liviu Matei) was closely involved as Provost. In March 2017, the Hungarian government initiated changes to the higher education law that were clearly aimed at CEU. With a very international body of academic staff and students and a good academic reputation, the CEU received substantial financial support from the Open Society Foundation. In parallel to its campaign against the CEU, the Hungarian government conducted a crude campaign with anti-Semitic overtones against the founder and then-chairperson of the Open Society Foundation, George Soros. The proposed legislation caused massive protests both in Hungary and internationally, but the law nevertheless came into force very quickly, in April 2017. The EU Commission sued Hungary for infringement of academic freedom. In October 2020, the European Court of Justice ruled that, indeed, "*lex CEU*" violated the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, which stipulates that "The arts and scientific research shall be free of constraint. Academic freedom shall be respected" (European Communities 2000: Article 13). As there is no specific EU legislation on academic freedom and institutional autonomy, the Court verdict detailed that the new legislation violated Hungary's legal obligations as an EU member state under the World Trade Organization. The legal ruling therefore

[14] In other contexts, other cases were indicated, including in the European Parliament Academic Freedom Monitor (available at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2024/757798/EPRS_STU(2024)757798_EN.pdf from the 2023 edition). These were, however, less influential in developing the thinking around fundamental values in the EHEA context.

[15] https://www.magna-charta.org/observatory-publications/statement-concerning-universities-in-turkey, accessed March 29, 2024.

stated that there was an infringement of free trade (right of establishment and delivery of commercial services) rather than an infringement of fundamental academic values (Matei, 2024). In practice, this made no difference anyway, as the Hungarian government did not change its legislation in response to the Court's ruling so as to ensure respect of academic freedom and university autonomy, two fundamental values of higher education. In the face of threats to close the institution, the CEU moved all its teaching and most of its research and outreach activities from Budapest to Wien, in neighboring Austria.[16] Both events and others with them raise serious questions about the fundamental values of higher education and, at the same time, about the future of democracy in Europe (Matei, 2020b).

Russia is a case of its own. In the 2018 implementation report, it is singled out for revoking the license of the European University in Sankt Peterburg on dubious grounds in March 2017 (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, Eurydice, 2018: 42), but this is just one among several indications that members of the Russian higher education community were under severe pressure. For example, contacts with foreign academics were monitored and curtailed even before the invasion of Ukraine.[17] Soon after the invasion, some 200 leaders of Russian full scale education institutions signed a declaration in support of the invasion, claiming that "instil[ling] patriotism in young people, the desire to help the Motherland" is the "main duty" of higher education (O'Malley, 2022).[18] The impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine is discussed by Kateryna Suprun and Jussi Kivistö in an article in this section and also referred to below.

5 Defining the Fundamental Values of the EHEA

These events, as well as others, led the BFUG to explore the concept of fundamental values in greater detail. The most high-profile cases concerned more than the three countries indicated in the 2018 implementation report, but many EHEA member States nevertheless felt they were not concerned by violations of the fundamental values of the EHEA. In addition to the high profile cases, there is, however, a set of issues that are less high-profile and less clear-cut and which concern all countries (Bologna Process, 2016; Bergan et al., 2020a).

Traditionally, European higher education has perceived academic freedom and institutional autonomy as an issue of the legal relationship between public authorities

[16] For a timeline of developments, see https://www.ceu.edu/istandwithceu/timeline-events, accessed March 29, 2024.

[17] https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/08/14/russian-scientists-told-beware-foreign-contacts-academic-says-a66843, accessed March 29, 2024.

[18] The link in this article to the full text of the statement in Russian is no longer operational. The text may be found at https://web.archive.org/web/20220320105358/https://www.rsr-online.ru/news/2022-god/obrashchenie-rossiyskogo-soyuza-rektorov1/, an English translation at https://www.ica-europe.info/support-by-the-russian-union-of-rectors-rur-for-the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine, both accessed March 29, 2024.

and higher education institutions, and it has been recognized that public authorities have an important responsibility for safeguarding these two key values (Council of Europe, 2012). The issue is, however, far more complex than what can be regulated through higher education legislation. Other kinds of regulations, such as labor legislation, safety regulations, and rules on public accountability, are also important. Few would argue that autonomous universities are free to ignore public regulations on, for example, the safety of laboratories, but the right balance between legitimate public concerns and institutional autonomy is not easy to find. The same applies to the relationship between public authorities and higher education institutions more broadly. Few would dispute that public authorities are responsible for the education system and act within their competences when they develop policies for higher education in their country. Likewise, few would question the sole competence of higher education institutions in organizing their own teaching, learning, research, and outreach activities. Public authorities would act within their competences if they decide to strengthen the higher education provision in parts of the country where the offer is clearly insufficient. However, we would maintain that the public authorities overstep their competence if they establish an education program against the advice of the institution that will ultimately be responsible for the program and against the advice of the competent quality assurance agency. This is not a hypothetical example. In 2021, the Norwegian government decided to reestablish what it called a "decentralized" teacher education program in Nesna, a small locality in the north of Norway, that Nord University had previously decided to close, at least in part because of concerns about the quality of the program. As part of its regional policy, the government instructed the university to reopen the program, which the university would then oversee. The government decision caused strongly adverse reactions in the Norwegian higher education community.[19]

The discussions in the BFUG led to agreement on a defined list of fundamental values in the EHEA (Bologna Process, 2018, 2020a). At first sight, the list looks like four but is, in reality, a list of six, as two sets of values have been put together, most likely for stylistic reasons:

- Academic freedom
- Academic integrity
- Institutional autonomy
- Staff and student participation in higher education governance
- Public responsibility *for* higher education
- Public responsibility *of* higher education.

In 2020, Ministers also adopted a definition of academic freedom as well as a longer statement or conceptual reference,[20] the latter as an appendix to the

[19] https://www.forskerforum.no/uhr-leder-whittaker-om-nesna-dette-er-en-klar-overstyring/, accessed March 29, 2024.

[20] Matei defines a "conceptual reference" for academic freedom to mean not only a definition or a link to an existing definition, but a sufficiently long conceptual elaboration available in a written format that serves as a common reference or go-to conceptual source (or "anchor") for actors inside

Rome Communiqué (Bologna Process, 2020b). The definition included in the Rome Communiqué itself reads:

> We adopt the definition of academic freedom as freedom of academic staff and students to engage in research, teaching, learning and communication in and with society without interference nor fear of reprisal (Bologna Process, 2020a: 5).

An EHEA Working Group on Fundamental Values, of which both authors are members, have developed similar statements on the five values that were not defined in the Rome Communiqué and submitted these as well as definitions of these values to the BFUG with the intention that they be adopted by Ministers at their Tirana conference on May 29–30, 2024. The definitions proposed by the Working Group and included in the draft Tirana Communiqué approved by the BFUG are[21]:

> *We understand **academic integrity** as a set of behaviours and attitudes in the academic community internalising and furthering compliance with ethical and professional principles and standards in learning, teaching, research, governance, outreach and any other tasks related to the missions of higher education.*
>
> *We further understand **institutional autonomy** as the will and ability of higher education institutions to fulfil their missions without undue interference and to set and implement their own priorities and policies concerning organisation, finance, staffing and academic affairs.*
>
> ***Participation of students and staff in higher education governance** encompasses their right to organise autonomously, in accordance with the principle of partnership and collegiality, without pressure or undue interference; to elect and be elected in open, free and fair elections; have their views represented and taken into account; initiate and participate in all debates and decision-making in all governing bodies; and through their representative organisations, be duly involved on issues concerning the governance and further development of the relevant higher education institutions and system.*
>
> ***Public responsibility*** **for** ***higher education*** *denotes a set of duties, mainly exercised at the level of the national higher education system, that public authorities must fulfil as part of their overall responsibility for the education sector and society as a whole.*
>
> ***Public responsibility*** **of** ***higher education*** *denotes the accountability obligations of the higher education community to the broader society of which the higher education community is a part.*[22]

6 Monitoring the State of the Fundamental Values of the EHEA

With these definitions and statements, the EHEA has taken an important step forward in clarifying the values on which it is based. We know, however, that even if definitions and legal regulations are essential, they will not by themselves ensure that

and outside the university, and which they use in sync for the understanding, codification and practice of academic freedom (Matei, 2024).

[21] See the draft Communiqué submitted to the BFUG for its meeting on April 11 – 12, 2024, which is the latest available at the time of writing: https://www.ehea.info/Immagini/Draft_2.1_Communique___20240327_.pdf.

[22] Bold in the original.

the fundamental values of the EHEA are respected in policy and practice. In the same way that the implementation of other aspects of the EHEA has been monitored since 2005, there is a need to assess to what extent the fundamental values are put into practice in the 49 EHEA member States.[23] To put this slightly differently, the conceptual references for the fundamental values of higher education in the EHEA are part of a broader policy framework within the Bologna Process (Matei and D'Aquila in this volume). This framework includes a list of fundamental values, definitions for each, detailed conceptual references for each (which allows the EHEA to operationalize them for implementation and monitoring purposes, also detailing aspects of their interrelations), explicit commitments by the members to "promote" and "protect" these values as jointly defined through adapted legislation, policy, and other initiatives (Bologna Process, 2020a), and a monitoring mechanism.

As we saw, the 2018 EHEA implementation report includes a relatively brief consideration regarding the state of academic freedom and institutional autonomy in the EHEA (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, Eurydice, 2018: 40–46). However, more extensive assessments of all fundamental values will be required if the EHEA is to be credible in furthering these values both within the EHEA and globally. It would be ironic if the quite extensive monitoring of the implementation of structural reforms could not be matched by a similar monitoring of the fundamental values now that they have been well defined. We do not underestimate the challenges of doing so, both because it is technically complicated and because the political stakes are high (see the chapter by Matei, Crăciun, and Potapova in this volume for more details). It is difficult enough for Ministers to recognize that their development of the national qualifications framework or arrangements for quality assurance leave much room for improvement. With the possible exceptions of Ministers representing outspokenly undemocratic regimes or governments claiming to be "illiberal democracies", it is infinitely more difficult to recognize that the state of the fundamental values of higher education in their countries is far from the mark.

Even if we recognize the challenges of assessing the state of fundamental values in the EHEA, we cannot accept that this essential task is too challenging to be attempted. It is important to make this a part of the overall monitoring of the implementation of the commitments countries have undertaken in the EHEA, even if the complexity of the undertaking may ultimately mean that there will be a separate report, that the implementation of all values may not be assessed prior to every Ministerial conference, and that even if EURYDICE will need to be involved in the assessment, it may (also) need to be carried out by other independent experts. The NewFAV project, led by one of us (Liviu Matei), is developing a monitoring framework that will be submitted to the BFUG after being tested through a pilot

[23] In April 2022, the BFUG suspended Russia and Belarus from participation in the EHEA governing bodies and work program as a consequence of their role in the war of aggression against Ukraine launched by Russia on February 24, 2022. Both countries remain members of the EHEA, and the Ministerial conference in Tirana will most likely decide to prolong their suspension rather than exclude them from the EHEA, c. the draft Communiqué submitted to the BFUG prior to its meeting on April 11 – 12, 2024, https://www.ehea.info/Immagini/Draft_2.1_Communique___20240327_.pdf, accessed April 6, 2024.

project in February–May 2024. It is hoped that the Tirana Ministerial conference will endorse further work on developing this monitoring framework and that from 2027 or 2030, the EHEA will be in a position to ascertain the extent to which its fundamental values are observed in each of its member States and the extent to which members fulfill their commitments to further these values. The NewFAV project and the monitoring framework are described more extensively in the article by Matei, Crăciun, and Potapova in the present volume. For the purposes of monitoring, this article makes the distinction between those values that can be conceived of as rights (academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and student and staff participation in higher education governance) and those for which the aspect of obligations may be more prevalent (academic integrity and the public responsibility *for* and *of* higher education). While this distinction is valid and meaningful, it should not be construed to mean that the aspect of obligation is absent from the values primarily conceived of as rights and vice versa. While academic freedom is a right, it is not a privilege, and it also carries responsibilities, including abiding by accepted standards for academic integrity. Conversely, student and staff participation in governance is an important right, but it also implies that student and staff representatives, like all other members of the governing bodies, share in the responsibility for governing the institution well.

7 The Fundamental Values of Higher Education in Other Contexts

Concerns for the fundamental values of higher education are not limited to the EHEA. Space does not allow for an extensive description of initiatives in other frameworks, but a cursory overview of some of the main initiatives and texts is nevertheless in order. The chapter by Matei and D'Aquila in this volume discusses comparatively several of the most important recent developments in this area (emerging "frameworks of reference" for the fundamental values) in the world.

Within the European Union, three contexts are particularly important.[24] As part of the European Strategy for Universities (European Commission, 2022), the European Commission is developing proposed Guiding Principles on the fundamental academic values, which is the term the Commission uses. The work was launched in early 2023, and the intention is to complete it by the end of 2024. This project is based on the definition of the fundamental values within the EHEA that are discussed in this chapter and aims to be complementary to and not overlap with what is done within this framework. The European Research Area (ERA), which focuses on the freedom of scientific research and bases its work on the Bonn Declaration (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, 2020), has made safeguarding the freedom of scientific research a key priority of the ERA, in particular under Policy Agenda Action 6.

[24] For the sake of transparency: Sjur Bergan is involved with the work on the Guiding Principles, while Liviu Matei is involved with the European Research Area and the European Parliament Forum for Academic Freedom.

Foreign interference with research is also an important concern within the ERA, and in January 2022, the Commission published a toolkit on tackling foreign interference in Research and Innovation.[25] For its part, the European Parliament has established a Forum for Academic Freedom[26] and in January 2024, passed a Resolution calling for, among other things, EU legislation to protect the freedom of scientific research.[27]

The Magna Charta Universitatum, in both its 1988 and 2020 versions (Magna Charta Universitatum, 1988, 2020), is a fundamental text on academic freedom and institutional autonomy, which was originally launched in a European context but has since taken on global importance. As part of its Living Values project, the Magna Charta Observatory, the organization which is the custodian of Magna Charta Universitatum, has "developed and piloted **guidelines** and resources (**Living Values Tool Box**) to enable universities across the world to define, achieve engagement with and live effectively in accordance with their values".[28] The Lima Declaration (World University Service, 1988) was also adopted in 1988 and, from the outset, had a global scope. It offers another set of conceptual references for what is now called fundamental values in the EHEA: academic freedom and university autonomy.

Both the Council of Europe and UNESCO have developed important standard-setting texts, with the Council of Europe focusing on public responsibility (Council of Europe, 2007, 2012) and UNESCO on the status of higher education teachers (UNESCO, 1997). The Council of Europe has also explored the relationship between academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and democracy (Bergan, Gallagher and Harkavy, 2020). The European University Association publishes the Autonomy Scorecard (Pruvot et al., 2023), while the V-Dem Institute publishes the Academic Freedom Index (Kinzelbach et al., 2022). Scholars at Risk[29] provides extensive assistance to members of the academic community under persecution in their home countries and also issues annual reports on threats to scholars globally (Scholars at Risk, 2022). The Global Observatory on Academic Freedom[30] conducts systematic academic research and facilitates inclusive dialogue to respond to the need of rethinking the concept of academic freedom and in relation to other "knowledge concepts", such as freedom of speech, institutional autonomy, or student and staff participation in governance.

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[25] https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/news/all-research-and-innovation-news/commission-publishes-toolkit-help-mitigate-foreign-interference-research-and-innovation-2022-01-18_en, accessed March 29, 2024.

[26] https://epthinktank.eu/2023/01/05/how-to-provide-enforceable-protection-for-academic-freedom-at-eu-level/, accessed March 29, 2024.

[27] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2024-0022_EN.html, accessed March 29, 2024.

[28] https://www.magna-charta.org/activities-and-projects/living-values#:~:text=These%20are%20academic%20freedom%2C%20institutional,education%20has%20been%20widely%20confirmed.&text=%2Dhealth%2C%20well%2Dbeing%2C%20and%20a%20caring%20community, accessed March 29, 2024. Bold in the original.

[29] https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/, accessed March 29, 2024.

[30] https://elkana.ceu.edu/global-observatory-academic-freedom, accessed March 29, 2024.

8 The Topics Addressed at the 2024 Bologna Process Researchers' Conference

The authors who contributed to the session on the fundamental values of higher education at the 2024 Bologna Process Researchers' Conference covered diverse topics, illustrating a variety of related practical and scholarly challenges.

The article by Liviu Matei, Daniela Crăciun, and Elizaveta Potapova discussing how the commitments about, and state of, the fundamental values can best be monitored and assessed has been referred to above; they focus on the concept of monitoring as a "transnational policy tool" in the context of the EHEA fundamental values project. We will now briefly discuss the other articles in this section.

9 Emerging Conceptual References and Policy Frameworks of Reference for Academic Freedom

Liviu Matei and Giulia d'Aquila maintain in their article that Europe—perhaps more than other parts of the world—has made significant progress in developing new and better-adapted frameworks of reference for safeguarding academic freedom. They propose a new analytic framework for studying and understanding these developments. This new analytical perspective makes it evident that similar developments regarding new conceptualizations, codification, monitoring, and practice of academic freedom are also taking place in other parts of the world and at other levels in higher education systems (i.e., institutional, national, and global). The authors examine how the European developments fit with and interact with global developments and trends, in particular whether developing a global conceptual reference for academic freedom, one that transcends national and regional frameworks, including that of the EHEA, is possible and desirable.

10 The Academic Freedom of Doctoral Students

Pil Maria Saugmann and Hannah Schoch, who are both prominent members of the European Council of Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers (EURODOC), maintain in their chapter that academic freedom is in decline both globally and in Europe. Within this rather somber situation, the position of doctoral candidates and early career researchers in non-permanent positions is of particular concern, all the more so as these groups make up the majority of researchers working in academic positions. The article analyzes the national, regional, and, in some cases, institutional frameworks of doctoral education across Europe. In particular, the authors assess whether these frameworks take into consideration the academic freedom of doctoral candidates, with specific reference to ten countries. They conclude with a set of recommendations to higher education policymakers at institutions, the national level, in the EU, and in the EHEA.

11 Digitalization and Fundamental Values

Petri Mäntysaari explores the relationship between digitalization and fundamental values. He maintains that digital transformation is driven by opportunities, and this has been the dominant perspective over the past two or three decades. From the optimism of the 1990s, however, more critical and perhaps more balanced perspectives now see both advantages and challenges, threats and opportunities, and the author maintains that the often-discussed digital divide is real. He also suggests that at the system level, the divide takes the form of societal polarization. The author underlines that whether something is considered an opportunity or a risk, at least in part, depends on one's values, and he points out that the challenges and opportunities of the digitalization of education have largely been absent from the Ministerial communiqués and other policy documents of the EHEA.

Petri Mäntysaari maintains that digitalization does not change the fundamental components and challenges of quality education. He suggests that the EHEA needs to develop a more holistic approach that should consider both the opportunities and the risks of the digital transformation, and which would need to consider the risks for the members of the higher education community and system-level risks. Not least, he reminds us that regardless of technologies, quality higher education depends on competent teachers and maintains that digitalization has increased the workload of teachers rather than reduce the need for them. He suggests that the EHEA, and by extension its member countries, should make teaching and research more attractive career options and give priority to developing the competences of teachers.

12 Fundamental Values in Times of War

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 sent shock waves through all of Europe. One aspect of this tragedy is that important parts of the Russian academic community rallied behind the Putin regime, as demonstrated by the declaration signed by the leaders of some 200 Russian higher education institutions referred to above.

In their article, Kateryna Suprun and Jussi Kivistö explore the future of the fundamental values in the EHEA in light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. They describe the destruction of much of the higher education infrastructure in Ukraine as well as the very real damage caused by interrupted teaching and learning and the fact that many members of the Ukrainian academic community have had to flee the country for shorter or longer periods. They also describe the response of the Ukrainian authorities, which managed to take remedial measures with admirable speed, as well as the strong support for Ukrainian higher education from abroad. They argue that the EHEA—specifically the BFUG and the successive Ministerial conferences—has taken inadequate account of and has not properly understood Russia's real intentions, which, they argue, should have been abundantly clear, at least following the invasion of the Crimea (Krym), Donetsk, and Luhansk. After the launch of the all-out war on Ukraine in February 2022, however, the BFUG moved quickly to suspend Russia and Belarus from the EHEA work program and governance bodies, and several higher education organizations also suspended Russian members or cut contacts with Russia, even if reactions have not been uniform. More broadly, the authors raise the question of the implication of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Europe's reaction to it for the internationalization of higher education more broadly, not least in relation to China. They maintain that non-democracies like Russia, Belarus, and China have not taken any steps during the past 20 years to liberalize their political systems, nor have they turned to embrace "European values", which is a relevant criterion for at least Russia and Belarus.

13 Conclusion. Fundamental Values—Where Does the EHEA Go from Here?

As we have seen, the concept of fundamental values has been developed gradually over the quarter century of the Bologna Process and the EHEA. The early reference to broader societal values in the Sorbonne Declaration has been supplemented with specific references to the fundamental values of higher education, starting with the inclusion of the Magna Charta Universitatum in the Bologna Declaration and—at least at the time of writing—ending with the specification of six fundamental values in the Paris and Rome Communiqués, the definition of and statement on academic freedom in the Rome Communiqué and the definition of and statements on the five remaining values in the Tirana Communiqué. At least from 2014 to 15 onward, the fundamental values of the EHEA could no longer be taken for granted, and the EHEA has responded with at least some force.

Our analysis in this paper demonstrates how the policy reflection and language about values have become increasingly clear during this period. Rather imprecise references to a variable list of values have progressively evolved into a defined list of fundamental values of higher education, jointly defined and, at least in theory, operationalized. We have also seen why and how certain values have been retained on the final list while others have not. It was also interesting to see how the concept of "fundamental values" came to be used strategically along with other Bologna Process concepts such as "principles" or "dimensions". It would require a separate analysis to understand better what is different and what is common between "fundamental values", "principles", and "dimensions". What is clear is that "fundamental values" appear to have a clear practical remit, in particular after 2015, in addressing major challenges facing higher education in Europe. They work better in at least certain situations in higher education, it seems, than other policy concepts such as legal rights.

This brings back the question of what fundamental values are, and how they work when they work, compared to related or competing concepts. In the EHEA context, the fundamental values appear to function better (again, at least in certain instances) for different reasons: EHEA cannot adopt legislation, the idea of binding international legislation in higher education is anyway not easily or not at all accepted by some countries,[31] and values appear less threatening politically and more difficult to discard given their moral implied dimension. What government would say it opposes "values"? It appears from this short analysis that the fundamental values of higher education in the EHEA are, at the same time, an intellectual anchor (clarifying for all involved what we are talking about), a moral anchor (confirming that what we all agree is important), a guiding principle (what is recommended/acceptable in terms of behaviors and tools), but also a tactical tool, because it is more easily accepted by all compared to other tools (such as rights and binding legislation, for example). It is this versatility that might explain, at least in part, why fundamental values have become so prominent recently in the EHEA.

It is also remarkable that the fundamental values of the EHEA are treated together as a cluster. This helps to address difficulties that arise elsewhere, given the existence of more than one "knowledge concept". For example, when measuring academic freedom (such as by using the Academic Freedom Index), questions are asked about why autonomy is conceptualized as only a sub-dimension of fundamental values. Are these not separate and possibly equal? The EUA Autonomy Scorecard, which measures autonomy at the system level, has been criticized for ignoring academic freedom. There are different answers to the question of whether the right to participate in governance should be included within the scope of academic freedom. The fundamental values of the EHEA, given that they are a set of interrelated and carefully defined values, seem to avoid this trap with remarkable elegance and efficiency.

The impact of this EHEA fundamental values project cannot be exactly foreseen, but it can be expected that there will be both short-term and long-term impact. The existence of a shared, EHEA-wide understanding of the fundamental values and of a set of explicit commitments to promote them at the national level is in itself a sign, or at least a promise of progress, in times where convergence and collaboration are not at the top of the international affairs agendas. These definitions and statements provide an essential basis for the further development of the EHEA. Of course, they will not by themselves bring about an EHEA built on fundamental values. A first test will be whether EHEA members will accept a monitoring of the fundamental values that will inevitably put some EHEA members to shame. The technical and methodological challenges of assessing and monitoring the fundamental values are

[31] Cf. the bitter discussion in the BFUG about implementation and non-implementation in the run-up to the 2018 Paris Ministerial conference, which in the end led to the establishment of a Bologna Implementation Coordination Group, see https://www.ehea.info/page-Bologna-Implementation-Coordination-Group, accessed March 29, 2024.

real, but they should not be used as a pretext against the whole exercise by those whose results may be embarrassing.

Measuring and assessing implementation is, however, only a part of the work that needs to be done. The fundamental values are complex, and even if some violations are blatant breaches of democracy, other issues are far more subtle and require a nuanced approach. The relationship between the higher education community and public authorities is complex and needs to be considered in detail. Peer learning has been developed into an important response to challenges of implementation and non-implementation in the EHEA. Few peer learning activities and policy discussions will be more important to the future of the EHEA than those that need to be held on the fundamental values, not least on the less high profile and more complex issues.

However, peer learning alone is not an adequate response. In some cases, public peer pressure at the very least—what in the "Bologna context" has often been labeled, somewhat derisorily, "naming and shaming"—is indispensable and, in some cases, suspension and even exclusion of the worst offenders will be called for. The BFUG moved quickly to suspend Russia and Belarus after the invasion of Ukraine, but the lenient attitude of both the EHEA and most European countries to Russia following its invasion of part of Ukraine's territory in 2014 demonstrates that concern for fundamental values is in competition with other foreign policy priorities. The case of Belarus is somewhat different, as there seemed to be some reason for cautious hope around 2015, not least based on messages from Belarusian academics who were not in cahoots with the Lukashenka regime. The fact that these hopes have been crushed does not necessarily mean they were false at the time. An EHEA in search of consistency and coherence would have reacted with the same determination against Azerbaijan as it did against Russia, at the latest following the Azerbaijani military attack on Nagorno-Karabakh with the expulsion of all of its ethnic Armenian population in September 2023,[32] or when Azerbaijan's use of hunger as a weapon had been convincingly demonstrated a couple of months earlier (Moreno Ocampo, 2023).

This case demonstrates, as clearly as any, that foreign policy is not mainly based on ethical principles and values, and the EHEA is unlikely to be divorced from foreign policy considerations. However, the stronger emphasis on fundamental values within the EHEA over the past few years will hopefully shift the balance in policy-making toward more principled stands. A reliable assessment of how the fundamental values are put into practice within and across the EHEA, as well as sincere dialogue about more nuanced issues of values and the proper relationship between the higher education community and public authorities, will hopefully make it more difficult to disregard fundamental values as an important factor in the development of higher education reforms.

Our fundamental values must become a *de facto* and *de iure* cornerstone of the EHEA. Both democracy and the quality of higher education will suffer if they do not. Romania and Moldova, as the hosts of the 2027 EHEA Ministerial Conference,

[32] https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/nagorno-karabakh-exodus-amounts-war-crime-legal-experts-say-2023-09-29/, accessed March 29, 2024.

have a golden opportunity to bring academic researchers and higher education policy makers together in a research-informed policy debate leading up to the Iaşi–Chişinău Ministerial conference as well as to give it adequate political importance in the agenda of the conference itself.

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The Emergence and Design of a Transnational Policy Tool: Monitoring the Fundamental Values of Higher Education in the European Higher Education Area

Liviu Matei, Daniela Crăciun, and Elizaveta Potapova

Abstract This chapter analyses the emergence, design, characteristics, and function of a new monitoring mechanism put forward as part of a larger undertaking in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) meant to safeguard the fundamental values of higher education. This monitoring mechanism is characterized as a policy tool of a transnational nature. Values have underscored the Bologna Process since its launch in 1999. However, in response to the crisis of academic freedom, a new approach to what is now designated as "the fundamental values of higher education" emerged after 2015. This development marked the advent of a transnational policy framework comprising (1) the identification and formal adoption for the first time by all EHEA members (at the time, 49 countries and the European Commission) of a defined list of six fundamental values for higher education; (2) the development and formal adoption of new and shared EHEA-wide conceptual references for these values; (3) the adoption of concrete government-level commitments to protect and promote, in the higher education systems of all members, the fundamental values of higher education as jointly defined in the EHEA; and (4) the decision to develop and employ an EHEA-wide mechanism for monitoring the implementation of the commitments regarding the fundamental values of higher education.

Keywords Fundamental values of higher education · Monitoring in higher education policy · European Higher Education Area · Transnational policy tools · Academic freedom · Institutional autonomy · Participation of students and staff in governance · Academic integrity · Responsibility for and of higher education

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1 Introduction

In 2018 and 2020, members of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)[1] adopted and confirmed an official list of "fundamental values of higher education" comprising academic freedom, academic integrity, institutional autonomy, participation of students and staff in governance, and responsibility for and of higher education (EHEA, 2018, 2020). These are "the fundamental values of higher education in the EHEA".

The concern for values is not a recent feature or an afterthought in the Bologna Process. Values have underscored the Process since its very beginning (Craciun et al., 2022). However, in response to the crisis of academic freedom in the EHEA at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and in particular after 2015, a new approach emerged progressively to protecting and promoting what has been designated since then as the "*fundamental values of higher education*". Bergan and Matei (in this volume) track the historical unfolding of this development. More precisely, a novel transnational policy framework developed that includes (1) the identification and formal adoption for the first time by all EHEA members (at the time, 49 countries and the European Commission) of a defined list of six fundamental values for higher education; (2) the development and formal adoption of new, shared EHEA-wide conceptual references for these values; (3) the adoption by all members of concrete government-level commitments to protect and promote fundamental values of higher education as jointly defined in the EHEA; and (4) the decision to develop and employ an EHEA-wide mechanism for monitoring the implementation of these commitments.

The succinct summary of the exact commitments made in this context is as follows, in the very language of EHEA official documents (EHEA Ministerial Communiqués):

a. "The EHEA of our vision will fully respect the fundamental values of higher education and democracy and the rule of law. (…) We recognise that accomplishing this will require **enacting policies** and **implementing measures** in our national frameworks, some of which will go beyond our higher education systems and will entail **alignment** of wider national economic, financial and social strategies" (EHEA, 2020:4; *emphasis added*)
b. "We reaffirm our commitment to **promoting** and **protecting** our **shared fundamental values** in the entire EHEA through intensified political dialogue and

[1] The "European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was launched in 2010 as a common European space for dialogue and practice in higher education. EHEA is considered the result of the Bologna Process (…) launched in 1999 (…) The Bologna Process is ongoing as a voluntary intergovernmental initiative in higher education based on jointly agreed principles, objectives and standards, governance mechanisms, and the implementation of these within national education systems. (…) there are 49 European states that have agreed to implement the Bologna Process. They form the EHEA. Russia and Belarus were suspended following the invasion of Ukraine in 2022". (Matei, 2023).

cooperation as the necessary basis for quality learning, teaching and research as well as for democratic societies" (EHEA, 2020:3; *emphasis added*).[2]

c. "We commit to upholding institutional autonomy, academic freedom and integrity, participation of students and staff in higher education governance, and public responsibility for and of higher education" (EHEA, 2020:5)
d. "We ask the BFUG to develop a framework for the enhancement of the fundamental values of the EHEA that will foster self-reflection, constructive dialogue and peer-learning across national authorities, higher education institutions and organisations, while also making it possible to assess the degree to which these are honoured and implemented in our systems" (EHEA, 2020:5).

This chapter briefly discusses all other elements of this emerging framework but focuses on investigating more extensively the advent, design, nature, function, and place of the monitoring mechanism in this larger policy framework in the EHEA. In this context, we propose to understand the monitoring mechanism as a policy tool—or the 'means' by which policy 'ends' are achieved (Bali et al., 2021). "Assessing" the degree to which the fundamental values are honored (point d. in the above list of commitments) became, in reality, a tool—an implementation device for the commitments about these values. We further posit that this is a policy tool of a transnational nature. It emerged as a transnational endeavor, initially as part of the efforts to address the crisis of academic freedom on the whole continent/in the entire EHEA, not limited to a particular jurisdiction or higher education system and not controlled or governed by the public authorities of any individual higher education system. It is envisaged to employ this tool beyond academic freedom alone in order to safeguard all fundamental values of higher education more broadly in the EHEA, exactly by facilitating the implementation[3] of the commitments detailed above ("protect and promote", primarily) taken by public authorities from the members states vis-à-vis these values.[4]

Before moving to discuss the monitoring mechanism and monitoring tool, the chapter looks into the "conceptual references" and "frameworks of reference for the fundamental values of higher education" that have emerged in this context and

[2] The language of commitments to protecting and promoting the fundamental values is already present in the Paris Ministerial Communiqué: "Having seen these fundamental values challenged in recent years in some of our countries, we strongly commit to promoting and protecting them in the entire EHEA through intensified political dialogue and cooperation" (EHEA, 2018:1).

[3] We use the notion of 'implementation' here in a generic sense referring to how these commitments about the fundamental values are or should be put into practice. At the same time, we acknowledge that the notion of 'implementation' has a particular history in the context of the EHEA, which has not been unproblematic. For example, a difficult debate took place prior to the 2018 Paris Ministerial Conference, which led to the establishment of the Bologna Implementation Coordination Group (https://www.ehea.info/page-Bologna-Implementation-Coordination-Group, accessed on 5 April 2024). At present, this Group covers three "key commitments", different from the commitments discussed in this chapter, related to structural reforms regarding recognition, qualifications frameworks, and quality assurance.

[4] It is important to note that in order to become an EHEA member, countries must ratify the European Cultural Convention and "declare their willingness to pursue and implement the objectives of the Bologna Process in their own systems of higher education" (EHEA 2024a, 2024b).

which ultimately coalesce into a new higher education policy framework in Europe, or the EHEA. In discussing the monitoring tool proper, the chapter retraces the related policy-making route in the Bologna Process and how exactly this tool was developed. It further discusses its core elements, including some of their key methodological, epistemological, and political underpinnings, and what makes it a transnational policy tool. Finally, the chapter examines the potential relevance and impact of the proposed monitoring mechanism for the fundamental values of higher education in the EHEA.

The concepts of *framework*, *mechanism,* and *tool* are extensively used as analytical lenses in this chapter to support the exploration and explanation of clearly identified, although still unfolding, phenomena. More precisely, in the present chapter, they are used in combination with other concepts, as follows:

– *Framework (or frameworks) of reference for the fundamental values of higher education.* This is a newly proposed concept (Matei and D'Aquila in this volume), the understanding of which is discussed separately in Sect. 2 (below).
– *Policy framework.* We discuss in this chapter the new policy framework for higher education that emerged in the EHEA, which resulted from coalescing frameworks of reference for the fundamental values of higher education. For a generic understanding of the concept, we use Lakhno's definition according to which policy frameworks "are general structures, often encapsulated in documents or established practices, that provide (.) a guiding architecture for policy action across one or multiple policy areas" (Lakhno, 2023: 103).
– *Monitoring mechanism.* A monitoring mechanism is understood here to consist of a monitoring tool (for the fundamental values of higher education, in this specific case), along with the organizational/institutional arrangements for its development and utilization (primarily but not exclusively the EHEA institutional and governance structures in our case here).
– *Policy tool.* As explained above in this section, a policy tool here signifies the means by which policy ends are achieved (Bali et al., 2021). In the context of the EHEA, the monitoring mechanism for the fundamental values of higher education functions as a policy tool, being used for and supporting the implementation of the commitments ('the end', in this case) assumed by the EHEA members with regard to fundamental values.
– *Monitoring framework*. In this chapter, 'monitoring framework' is understood as the conceptual structure that presents and clarifies the main components or conceptual parameters of a monitoring tool (such as indicators). In Sect. 3.2 (below), we analyze the design, substance, and main features of the proposed monitoring framework for the fundamental values of higher education in the EHEA.
– *Monitoring tool*. By monitoring tool, we understand the actual instrument that is used for data collection, processing, and reporting for the purpose of monitoring. This can be a simple questionnaire, for example, or a slightly more complex and sophisticated technical apparatus (as is the case here). We analyze the proposal for a monitoring tool for the fundamental values of higher education in the EHEA in Sect. 3.2 as well, along with the monitoring framework on which it is based.

2 Conceptual References and Frameworks of Reference for the Fundamental Values of Higher Education

The beginning of the twenty-first century, and in particular the period after the Great Recession of 2007–2009, marked significant challenges to academic freedom globally (Altbach, 2005; Kinzelbach, 2023; Matei, 2020; Tierney & Lechuga, 2005). Several observers and researchers have argued that at least some of these challenges were unprecedented in their nature and magnitude (Gilbert, 2023; Matei, 2020). While there have always been challenges to academic freedom during its long history—as long as the history of the university itself—it has been argued that this period was not one of "business as usual" in this regard. Importantly, infringements and threats to academic freedom permeate democracies as well, not just autocratic or dictatorial regimes (Craciun & Mihut, 2017; Craciun et al., 2024; Matei, 2021; Mihut & Craciun, 2017).

Moreover, in Europe, new types of challenges to academic freedom arose (Elken et al., 2024) during a particular period of economic, social, and political developments, but also at a time and in the context of specific European transnational dynamics in higher education itself. These dynamics were made possible 'with a programme' by the Bologna Process unfolding since 1999, the European Higher Education Area officially launched in 2010[5] as well as, to a different extent, by the European Union's (EU) policies in higher education and research, which have been impactful in Europe beyond just the EU member states. For the specific case of Europe, it has been further stated that the predicaments of academic freedom during this time amounted to a crisis with specific transnational or regional dimensions, more precisely a "European crisis", rather than one with global or national defining characteristics, origins, and explanations (Matei, 2020).

It may not appear as a surprise, therefore, if it is true that there was a specific European crisis of academic freedom, that a European solution was needed as well (Matei, 2020). What might be surprising is that not one, but several, "European" solutions have been proposed, and quite rapidly (Craciun & van der Meulen, 2024; Bergan and Matei, in this volume). This is a fascinating phenomenon to study—as difficult as it might be, given the recency of these developments, which are still unfolding, and a number of associated methodological, epistemological, and political difficulties, some of which are discussed in this chapter. At the same time, from a higher education practitioners' perspective—the viewpoint of those who work and live in higher education—it is quite heartening to see that at least some of these solutions are already working, be it only partially, or that there are good prospects that they might work in the short or long run, and that they genuinely go beyond just

[5] The European Higher Education Area, a product of the Bologna Process, includes 49 countries and the European Commission (with the caveat that in 2022 the rights of the Russian Federation and Belarus to participate in the EHEA governance bodies and work programme were suspended due to their war on Ukraine). In order to become an EHEA member, countries must sign the European Cultural Convention and "declare their willingness to pursue and implement the objectives of the Bologna Process in their own systems of higher education" (EHEA, 2024a, b).

declarative attempts to acknowledge the importance of the "fundamental values of higher education" across the continent.[6]

This new policy framework in the EHEA was developed initially and directly in order to address the crisis of academic freedom. It currently consists of "conceptual references" and "frameworks of reference" (Matei and D'Aquila in this volume) for an explicitly articulated cluster of fundamental values of higher education, including, together with academic freedom, institutional autonomy, academic integrity, student and staff participation in governance, public responsibility for higher education, and public responsibility of higher education. The ambitions and impact of these efforts, their explicit, programmatic direction, complex and sustained institutional organization, and the centrality of values may well justify the overall characterization of these developments as a "fundamental values project" in the EHEA (Matei and D'Aquila, in this volume).

Two papers in the present volume systematically trace the intellectual and policy milestones of the current efforts to address the crisis of academic freedom in Europe (Bergan and Matei), also placing and analyzing them in a global context (Matei and D'Aquila). A third paper (Suprun and Kivistö in this volume) discusses selected key aspects and moments of these developments. Taken together, the three papers track the origins of the usage of a "values language" and the tactical motivations for framing this cluster of concepts as values, or "fundamental values" more precisely, rather than human rights, legal rights, or governance principles, as they have been framed in other contexts. We will not repeat these historical reconstructions here but will use their insights and analytical apparatus (in particular, the terminology of "conceptual reference" and "framework of reference") for the purpose of identifying and scrutinizing the specific nature, design, function, and relevance of the proposed EHEA-wide monitoring mechanism and toll which, we state, are a key part of this new policy framework for higher education.

A conceptual reference for a fundamental value of higher education (like academic freedom, for example) means not just a short formal definition or link to an existing definition but an extensive conceptual elaboration available in a written format, which serves as a common reference point or go-to conceptual source (or "anchor") for actors inside and outside the university,[7] and which they use in sync for the understanding, codification and practice of the respective value (Matei, 2024). A conceptual reference for academic freedom was adopted in 2020 in the EHEA in the form of a "Statement on Academic Freedom", included as an annex to the Rome Communiqué (EHEA, 2020). Similar conceptual references—or "statements" to use the EHEA language—have been developed for the remaining five EHEA fundamental

[6] The authors of this paper consider themselves to be practitioners as well. A formative experience they share in this regard is that all three were at the Central European University (CEU) as academics or doctoral students when this university was forced out of Hungary, in one of the most salient manifestations of the crisis of academic freedom in Europe.

[7] University is used in the broad sense to include different types of higher education institutions.

values of higher education between 2021 and 2024 and are expected to be formally adopted in 2024 (Bergan and Matei in this volume).[8]

A framework of reference for the fundamental values of higher education, on the other hand, is broader. It includes the conceptual reference for that value (for example, for academic freedom) but goes beyond that to comprise "guidelines for the practice and, possibly, protection of academic freedom, elements of codification (such as norms—including legislative norms—regulations, codes of conduct, etc.), and provisions about institutions and institutional mechanisms that should or could be utilized to implement the respective understanding and codification" (Matei and D'Aquila in this volume). It should be stressed that new shared norms emerging as part of such frameworks do not necessarily need to be legally binding.[9]

Separate frameworks of reference for all the EHEA fundamental values have thus emerged during this period, not just for academic freedom. We posit that they coalesce to form the new European policy framework for higher education that we are talking about here. This policy framework includes a transnational policy tool in the form of a monitoring mechanism and a monitoring tool to assess or monitor the fundamental values, which are, in fact, conceived as a practical means to foster the implementation of EHEA system-level, non-legally binding commitments to protect and promote the values.

3 A Monitoring Mechanism for the Fundamental Values in the EHEA

3.1 The Policy Process

The Bologna Process is a complex and uneven undertaking, which has made possible the creation of a European Higher Education Area with genuine, although occasionally skewed, substance as a common space for dialogue and practice in higher education. Members of the EHEA are almost all countries of Europe.[10] At its core, and drastically simplified, the way in which the Bologna Process works is as follows: common principles, norms, models, and objectives are developed and adopted by the

[8] Change sentence before publication in line with the language in the Tirana Communiqué.

[9] A case in point is the European Parliament Monitor of Academic Freedom 2023 (Craciun et al., 2024) that seeks to propose both legislative and non-legislative policy actions that could be taken at the EU level to safeguard academic freedom.

[10] The only European countries that are not members of the EHEA are Monaco (with a very small higher education system) and Kosovo, whose membership will depend on the development of status negotiations (currently, it is recognized by most but not all European countries as an independent country and is not (yet) a party to the European Cultural Convention). Russia and Belarus are members of the EHEA, but they are currently suspended due to their war on Ukraine, a member of the EHEA.

EHEA members, most often with explicit commitments regarding their implementation. Mirroring the centrality and visibility of the "commitments" in the Bologna Process since its early years, extensive scholarly and policy literature about them is available (see, for example, Ravinet, 2008; Curaj et al., 2018). Key programmatic documents, such as the EHEA Ministerial Communiqués adopted every two–three years, are often centered on announcing and detailing "commitments".[11]

In order to help with the implementation in practice of these voluntary commitments, which can be very different—regarding, for example, theme/area or level of technicality—the practice of a somewhat selective monitoring and reporting has been developed within the Bologna Process. There is also extensive scholarly and policy literature about monitoring, usually referred to as "implementation reports".[12] Implementation reports are prepared before the EHEA ministerial conferences or ministerial meetings (the highest governance body of the Bologna Process), focusing selectively on the state of implementation of particular, identifiable commitments.[13]

The same process, in several steps, was followed for the monitoring mechanism for the fundamental values of higher education, although with particular nuances that make it different in certain regards from other monitoring efforts or "implementation reports". In what follows, we will briefly trace the chronology of the Bologna Process regarding the fundamental values of higher education, including the steps that led to the design of a monitoring mechanism and tool. The steps are to be understood as distinctive activities since while—as we will show—there is a certain linear chronology in the development of this mechanism, there are also recursive and overlapping elements between them.[14]

To begin with, the list of six fundamental values of higher education in the EHEA was first stated in the Paris Communiqué (EHEA, 2018). EHEA members explicitly identified academic freedom, academic integrity, institutional autonomy, participation of students and staff in governance, and responsibility for and of higher education as the fundamental values of their common higher education space. As discussed above, this does not mean that the Bologna Process was value-free prior to the Paris Communiqué, but rather that the discussion about values was not systematic and it was often only implicit. It also does not mean that the list of values was

[11] All Bologna Process/EHEA Ministerial Communiqués are available at https://www.ehea.info/page-ministerial-declarations-and-communiques. Accessed on 5 April 202.

[12] A collection of these reports is available at https://www.ehea.info/page-implementation. Accessed on 5 April 2024.

[13] The original decision to develop monitoring reports (then called "stock taking") was taken by the Bologna Process Ministers in 2003, cf. https://www.ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/2003_Berlin_Communique_English_577284.pdf, p. 7, accessed on 5 April 2024. Since 2005, implementation reports have been developed prior to every ministerial conference and presented to these. It is currently taken for granted that this system will continue unless Ministers decide otherwise.

[14] For instance, the development and adoption of the conceptual framework for academic freedom was made in 2020 in the Rome Communiqué. For all other values, these steps happened subsequently and in parallel with the development of a monitoring mechanism.

pre-determined. As mentioned in the previous section, they appeared in a particular historical context where basic values like academic freedom could no longer be taken for granted and were considered under threat. The existence of the EHEA as a supra-national space for higher education made some believe that solutions could be designed at the EHEA level itself rather than only at the national/system or institutional level. As such, it would not be unthinkable to assume that if it was not for the threats to and infringements of academic freedom in Europe, the fundamental values project would either not have taken off the ground or could have included a different list of values (e.g., it could have been sustainability, equity, excellence, social engagement, etc., as discussed by Bergan and Matei in this volume). The Paris Communiqué itself states that "Having seen these fundamental values challenged in recent years in some of our countries, we strongly commit to promoting and protecting them in the entire EHEA through intensified political dialogue and cooperation." (EHEA, 2018:1).

Next, the Rome Communiqué re-affirmed the commitment of Member States to "promoting and protecting our shared fundamental values in the entire EHEA" (EHEA, 2020), adopted a short definition[15] and also what we propose to call a conceptual reference[16] for academic freedom, and asked the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG)[17] to "develop a framework for the enhancement of the fundamental values of the EHEA that will foster self-reflection, constructive dialogue and peer-learning across national authorities, higher education institutions and organisations, while also making it possible to assess the degree to which these are honoured and implemented in our systems" (EHEA, 2020: 5).

Following the Rome ministerial conference, the BFUG requested the set-up of a Working Group on Fundamental Values that was mandated to develop statements ("conceptual references" in our language) on all EHEA fundamental values and a comprehensive framework for monitoring them in preparation for the Tirana Ministerial conference of May 2024. In other words, the specific task assigned to the Working Group on Fundamental Values was to consider how through systematic work in this Group itself and consultation with higher education stakeholder organizations and academic experts, the remaining fundamental values (in addition to academic freedom) can be jointly defined and understood in the EHEA; develop and pilot a framework for monitoring academic values that includes indicators for assessing the implementation of commitments throughout the EHEA in system-level legislation and in practice; and initiate policy dialogues and peer learning activities to further promote and protect aforementioned values.

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[15] Academic freedom in the EHEA is defined as "freedom of academic staff and students to engage in research, teaching, learning and communication in and with society without interference nor fear of reprisal" (EHEA 2020).

[16] See the statement on academic freedom in Annex 1 of the Rome Communiqué (EHEA 2020).

[17] "The **Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG)** oversees the Bologna Process between the ministerial meetings. The BFUG meetings play an important role in overseeing the implementation of the ministerial Communiqués as well as in developing the Bologna Process". cf. the EHEA website https://www.ehea.info/page-the-bologna-follow-up-group, accessed on 5 April 2024.

Overall, the statements developed by the Working Group on Fundamental Values and adopted at the Rome and Tirana Ministerial Conference provide a shared understanding, or conceptual reference points for what these values mean in the EHEA, and they represent the basis on which the monitoring system was to be developed and operated. Furthermore, a small team of researchers (comprising the three authors of this chapter) was asked to develop a complete proposal (design) for this monitoring mechanism and the actual monitoring tool within the framework of an Erasmus + project, New Building Blocks of the Bologna Process: Fundamental Values (NewFAV). The work of this team of researchers also included systematic and broad consultations with all categories of stakeholders in the EHEA (as detailed below in this chapter) under the coordination of the Working Group on Fundamental Values and reporting on the final account to the BFUG.

3.2 The Monitoring Mechanism—And the Monitoring Tool

Technically, the development of the proposal for the monitoring mechanism, including a monitoring tool and its piloting in four systems of the EHEA, took place between the summer of 2021 and the summer of 2024. There were several distinct types of challenges that needed to be addressed along the way. However, none of them was insurmountable.

- *Political*: how to develop a monitoring mechanism and a monitoring tool that would be accepted by all EHEA members in a politically scattered, at times tense, European political landscape. The solution to this challenge in the development of the mechanism was to stick strictly to the explicit mandate given by the ministers themselves regarding the purpose and nature of this exercise. The fact that this process was overseen at the end of the day by the BFUG, an EHEA-wide coordination body representing all member countries, and also that extensive consultations with stakeholders (detailed below in this chapter) took place at all times has also helped significantly in this regard.
  Some other sensible questions or challenges to be addressed regarding this mechanism included, for example, who (which organization or institution) will undertake the actual monitoring (who will employ the monitoring tool), who will select or supervise them, what institutional and governance arrangements will be put in place for to support and oversee monitoring. The answer to these questions is not too difficult to identify, and it relies on the authority conferred to the BFUG within the EHEA as well as on the previous Bologna Process monitoring experiences in areas other than the fundamental values.
- *Methodological*: how to "measure" values, in particular, but other methodological challenges as well. Values are considered to be extremely complex and notoriously elusive concepts, even more so for the purpose of measuring them. In essence, the solution to this challenge was not to try to *measure*, but rather, as mandated by the ministers, *monitor*—and not the values per se, but the implementation of

the commitments about them, which is eminently doable, so that to assess how the fundamental values are respected and, maybe more importantly, for using the results of this assessment in peer learning activities in the EHEA. To support the peer learning function, an indicator about positive experiences in the implementation of commitments is also included, as well as another indicator about the outlook in the implementation of said commitments.

Another methodological challenge was to design a monitoring tool that is at the same time not overly complicated although covering six composite values in a large number of diverse systems; clear but nuanced (discriminative) enough; feasible; not too expensive to carry out; and credible while being applied to all EHEA member countries and, where applicable, their sub-national systems (such as in federal countries). Considering that we are indeed talking about six fundamental values with more than one dimension each, their interrelations, and a large number of countries, the actual monitoring—from data collection to processing and preparing an integrated monitoring report for the entire EHEA—will certainly be a significant task. This, however, is eminently manageable, and the proposal presented here is prepared with these criteria in mind (i.e., simplicity, comparability, practicability, discriminative ability, transparency, credibility, and capacity to support and inform peer learning).

– *Epistemological*: perhaps related to the methodological challenges, another question to be addressed was what kind of entities the fundamental values are. The proposal for the monitoring framework opted to consider the fundamental value as being similar to organizational values (i.e., stated principles about the mission and vision of an organization or an explicitly formulated set of core beliefs of an organization) rather than values in an anthropological sense (e.g., purported values of a particular cultural tradition or group). This option was made for technical/methodological reasons, as it is easier to monitor "organizational" values, or rather commitments about them, but also for moral reasons—to avoid any implication that the European/EHEA fundamental values of higher education are superior to, or more important than those of other higher education and cultural traditions.

The overall aim of the monitoring mechanism and the monitoring tool at its center, as mandated by the Rome Communiqué, is to assess the extent to which the "commitment to promoting and protecting our shared fundamental values in the entire EHEA" is respected and provide a basis for policy dialogue and peer learning. This is in line with the tradition of the Bologna Process implementation reports to monitor the commitments made at ministerial meetings.

Figure 1 shows the core elements and features (or the monitoring framework) of the proposed monitoring tool, followed by their discussion.

There have already been other efforts to monitor, asses, or measure some of these fundamental values in other contexts, although differently defined, or using different conceptual references for them, for instance, institutional autonomy (Bennetot

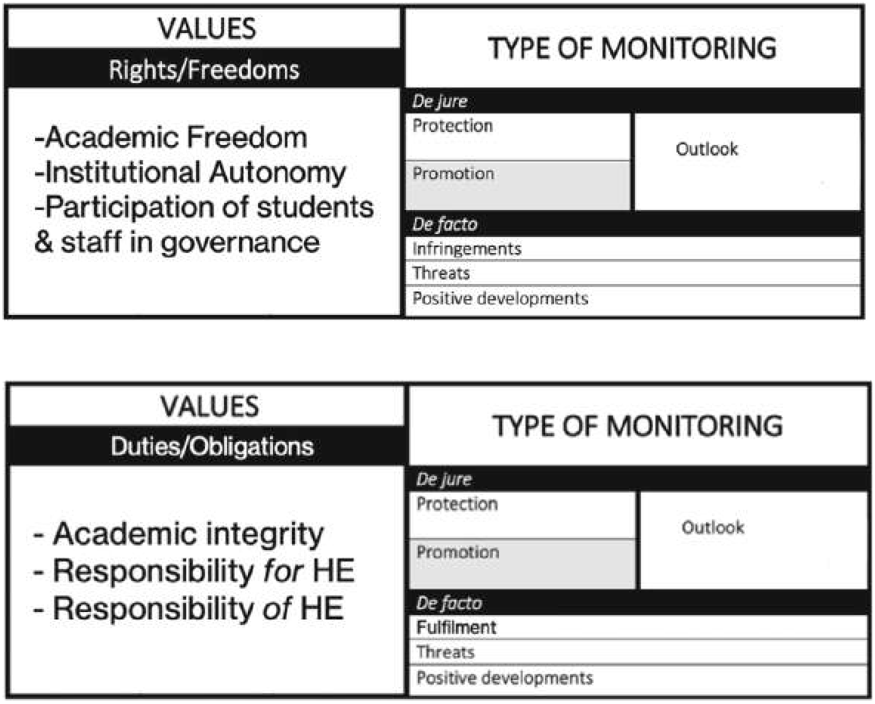

Fig. 1 Monitoring framework for fundamental academic values. *Source* Matei et al., 2023a, b; EHEA, 2024a.

Pruvot & Estermann, 2017; Bennetot Pruvot et al., 2023) or academic freedom (Beiter et al., 2016; Craciun et al., 2024; Kinzelbach et al., 2023; Maassen et al., 2023). Any such endeavor comes not only with considerable methodological challenges (Spannagel, 2020; Kováts & Ronay, 2023) but also epistemological and political challenges. Our particular approach to addressing these challenges was discussed briefly above.

The distinguishing features of the monitoring framework presented in Fig. 1 are as follows:

(1) **Commitments**: The tool focuses on monitoring the implementation of Bologna Process commitments (a to d in Sect. 1) regarding fundamental values in the EHEA rather than the values per se. This is a more general distinguishing feature of monitoring in the EHEA beyond the area of fundamental values. By continuing this existing approach, fundamental values are given an equal footing to other commitments in the Bologna Process (e.g., vis-à-vis compliance with the three-cycle system, Lisbon Recognition Convention, European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance).

(2) **Set of values**: The tool monitors a whole set of values rather than focusing on only one value as in the case of other efforts (e.g., Academic Freedom Index,

Institutional Autonomy Scorecard, European Parliament Academic Freedom Monitor). This implies that the core elements of the tool need to be coherent across values to enable comparative assessments, before zooming in on the distinct dimensions of the individual values.

(3) **Categories of fundamental values**: The tool proposes to distinguish between two different types of values in the EHEA. On the one hand, rights and freedoms: academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and participation of students and staff in the governance of higher education. On the other hand, duties and obligations: academic integrity, responsibility for higher education, and responsibility of higher education. The monitoring tool distinguishes between the two, in particular, by looking at infringements of commitments regarding rights/freedoms *versus* fulfillment of commitments regarding duties/obligations.

(4) ***De jure*/de facto**: To provide a fuller picture on the respect of commitments, the tool distinguishes between the respect of the commitments to fundamental values of higher education at the level of regulation (*de jure*) and in practice (de facto).

(5) **Protection/Promotion**: When it comes to regulation (*de jure*), the tool considers both the protection and promotion of the values, as detailed in the EHEA commitments. Protection refers to the existence of provisions regarding a given value in the constitution, general law, higher education law/ or judicial decisions, but also if these provisions are aligned (or not) with the EHEA statement (joint conceptual reference) on the respective value. Promotion, as also clarified by the EHEA ministers, refers to the development of guidelines and mechanisms (initiatives, policies, funding) to support the exercise of the values.

(6) **Quantitative/qualitative elements**: The framework includes both quantitative and qualitative indicators. Regarding quantitative elements, for the values' *de jure* protection, promotion, and outlook, the traffic light system of scoring used in Bologna Process implementation reports will be used. Regarding qualitative elements, for the values' de facto*,* state narratives evaluation based on an inventory of infringements/fulfillment, threats, and positive developments will be provided.

(7) **Current situation *versus* outlook**: Given the novelty of the commitments made in 2018, 2020, and then, in 2024 at the Tirana Ministerial Conference and the fact that some of these conceptual references for the fundamental values are quite new in Europe in their current form, the monitoring framework will look at and report not only on the current levels of implementation of commitments, but also on the outlook, that is, existing plans (legislative initiatives, policy papers, electoral manifestos, etc.) to increase, decrease or leave unchanged the protection and promotion of fundamental values. The degree to which these plans have been put in practice will be assessed in the next monitoring cycle, checking back on the outlook in this way. This element of the framework, the outlook, is meant to further help with initiating peer-learning activities and policy dialogues between EHEA members and across relevant higher education stakeholders.

3.3 The Design Process

The design of the monitoring tool proper took place in a few stages between 2021 and 2024, under the supervision of the Working Group on Fundamental Values, with the help of the advisory committee of the NewFAV project and involving extended structured consultation with stakeholders. The advisory committee comprised experienced practitioners and experts in matters of fundamental values (including assessment). The stages were as follows:

a. *Building a comprehensive inventory and taxonomy of existing tools, mechanisms, and efforts to assess/measure the fundamental values of higher education and assessing the degree to which these existing tools, mechanisms, and efforts can be used for the purpose of monitoring the fundamental values of higher education in the EHEA.* This stage included desk research looking at existing tools, mechanisms, and efforts anywhere in the world, even when they were not directly applied to values or fundamental values defined exactly as in EHEA. In addition, six task forces (one for each value) with six to ten members each were set up to help the research team check and complete the inventory and taxonomy. The task forces included experts in the respective areas (e.g., quality assurance specialists for academic integrity, scholars of academic freedom, etc.), as well as stakeholder representatives (individual academics, representatives of student unions, diverse university associations, trade unions, governments, and governments agencies, etc.), primarily but not exclusively from Europe. An extensive mapping report was submitted to the Working Group on Fundamental Values and the European Commission as a funder (Matei et al., 2022). The report concluded preliminarily, and this conclusion was confirmed in the next stage, that these existing tools, mechanisms, and efforts have only a limited value for the EHEA effort to develop a monitoring mechanism. The main reason for this was that they all define these values in significantly different ways, and, as a consequence, they assess or monitor something different. The Academic Freedom Index, for example, is a very useful and broadly used tool to monitor academic freedom. However, what is measured by the Index is something significantly different from what the Rome Statement of Academic Freedom put forward as the EHEA definition for this value. However, the mapping report suggested that existing tools and instruments can be used for their heuristic values (they provide useful insight about how to design monitoring) and also as complementary sources of information, along with or even included in the new EHEA monitoring tool. For example, existing inventories of infringements realized outside this EHEA project can be used in many cases as such; there is no need to repeat that work. For certain values, such as public responsivity for higher education, there was very little already available anyway by way of even attempting to monitor them.
b. *Designing a monitoring framework with a set of indicators for the fundamental values of higher education in the EHEA.* In this second stage, the research team finalized the analysis of the inventory and taxonomy of existing tools, mechanisms, and efforts, and it developed an EHEA-specific monitoring framework

for the fundamental values of higher education (Fig. 1). Also at this stage, extensive consultation was conducted with the six task forces, the project advisory committee, and the Working Group of Fundamental Values. The Working Group, in turn, reported to the BFUG periodically on the progress of this work. The results of this phase, including the actual proposal for a monitoring framework, were presented in a report submitted once again to the Working Group and the European Commission (Matei et al., 2023a).

c. *Designing the monitoring tool.* In this phase, the research team developed a detailed proposal for a monitoring tool, based on the monitoring framework, using the same consultative approach as in the previous stages. The tool was developed by operationalizing the fundamental values for the purpose of monitoring. That meant primarily extracting the main dimensions of each value, as outlined in the Rome Statement on Academic Freedom and the draft statements/conceptual references prepared by the Working Group for the other five values; proposing what data should be collected about each and by what means; proposing a coding system (for the *de jure* section), and modalities of reporting and visualization of the results. This proposal followed, to a significant extent, the methodology of the Bologna Process monitoring reports, although with adaptations and new elements, as required by the particular nature of this monitoring exercise.
   In terms of data collection, it was proposed that information regarding protection, promotion, and outlook be collected from public authorities in each system but cross-checked with the participation of selected higher education stakeholders from that system, and also through input collected on an open platform from any interested member of the academic communities in the respective system. The same sources will be used for data collection in the *de facto* section, except for the public authorities, who will not be asked to provide information in this section (for example, not about infringements), and by adding information from any relevant existing reports, studies, or databases regarding the *de facto* situation of individual values and commitments about them relevant for that particular system. The presentation of results in the *de facto* section of the monitoring reports will be strictly narrative. The *de jure* section will include both quantitative results and narrative reporting. An extended report with a high degree of granularity regarding the tool design methodology was submitted to and was approved by the Working Group on the Fundamental Values and then to the BFUG and the European Commission (Matei et al., 2023b).

d. *Piloting the monitoring framework and the tool in four EHEA systems.* At the time of writing, the monitoring tool is being piloted in four EHEA systems: the Czech Republic, Finland, the Flemish Community of Belgium, and Turkey. These four systems were selected in consultation with the Working Group and the BFUG at the proposal of the NewFAV research team. They represent large, small, and medium-size systems from the main regions of Europe, EU and non-EU EHEA countries, national and sub-national higher education systems. The proposal for the monitoring tool and monitoring mechanism will be revised considering the lessons learned from the pilot and, subject to the approval of BFUG in the second half of 2024, actual monitoring is expected to be launched shortly thereafter.

4 Conclusions

This chapter described and examined the emergence, design, function, nature, and main features of a monitoring tool and related monitoring mechanism for the fundamental values of higher education in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). These tools and mechanism have emerged as part of the "fundamental values project" in the EHEA, a set of major developments in higher education unfolding mainly after 2015, initially triggered by the aspiration to address the crisis of academic freedom in Europe. The monitoring mechanism is not just a stern or technical attempt at monitoring, although it includes significant innovative technical solutions to monitoring. More than that, it is a policy tool of a transnational nature—a means to promote novel policy objectives in the transnational space for dialogue and practice in higher education that is the EHEA.

The fundamental values project led to the emergence of new frameworks of reference for the fundamental values of higher education in the EHEA, which coalesced to form a novel higher education policy framework. For the first time, these frameworks of reference, in turn, include shared, EHEA-wide conceptual references for the six fundamental values of higher education, concrete albeit voluntary government-level commitments regarding the promotion and protection of these values in all EHEA systems, objectives, norms, principles and guidelines for implementation of these values and related commitments, and tools and institutional or quasi-institutional arrangements for the implementation of these objectives and principles. The monitoring mechanism is such an implementation tool, which is what makes it a policy tool. The purpose of the monitoring is not only to present a picture of the level of implementation of the commitments adopted in this context but also to provide a basis for the protection and promotion of the fundamental values as jointly defined in the EHEA through peer learning activities and transnational cooperation, and also to put pressure on the public authorities and other stakeholders, including higher education institutions, to advance on the path towards safeguarding these values by upholding their commitments about them.

The emergence of the policy framework discussed in this chapter is in itself a remarkable, surprisingly encouraging development, one that can be expected to have a significant positive impact in higher education in Europe in the sense of promoting and protecting the fundamental values of higher education, and in this way maintaining or even creating in the long run better conditions for higher education institutions and academic communities to pursue their core function, which is the production, transmission, dissemination and use of knowledge as a public good, for the benefit of society, through education, research and civic engagement. It is expected that the Tirana Ministerial Conference of 2024 will endorse the principles of the proposed mechanism for monitoring the fundamental values of higher education in the EHEA, the development of which was completed at their specific request. This will be another important step on this path.

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The Future of Fundamental Values in the EHEA: The Russian War on Ukraine and Re-Thinking Safeguards Against Non-Democracies

Kateryna Suprun and Jussi Kivistö

Abstract The concept of the fundamental values of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)–academic freedom, academic integrity, institutional autonomy, participation of students and staff in higher education governance, and public responsibility *for* and *of* higher education–received little attention and was taken for granted during the first decade of the Bologna Process, even if some of the values were addressed independently of each other before the concept was formally introduced. This chapter aims to contribute to the discussion on the fundamental values in the context of the Bologna Process from two perspectives. First, it provides an overview of the EHEA response to the Russian war on Ukraine and analyses the procedural complexities of its decision-making process. This discussion is supplemented by an account of disruptions incurred by the Ukrainian higher education system due to Russian military attacks since 2014. The depiction of academic freedom and public responsibility *for* and *of* higher education in Ukraine provides the argument for a bottom-up model of policy implementation in emergencies. Second, the chapter argues the need to uphold fundamental values in international cooperation with non-democracies and authoritarian regimes that infringe on democracy, human rights and the rule of law and promote authoritarian ideologies. It analyses the concept of democratic change through engagement and provides examples of legitimisation of authoritarian ideologies through 'soft power'. Finally, the authors suggest implications for collaboration between the EHEA and other countries as part of the Global Policy Dialogue.

Keywords Bologna Process · European Higher Education Area · Crisis management · Fundamental values · Public funding · Higher education · Non-democracies · Ukraine

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In memory of Ukrainian Heroes and Heroines

1 Introduction: The Rule of Law 'Explained' by Russia and Belarus

Beyond producing knowledge and developing human capital, higher education contributes to developing and maintaining democratic societies. On 19 November 2020, the Ministers responsible for higher education in the member countries of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) reaffirmed, among others, the following commitment in the Rome Ministerial Communiqué: 'The EHEA of our vision will fully respect the fundamental values of higher education and democracy and the rule of law. … We reaffirm our commitment to promoting and protecting our shared fundamental values in the entire EHEA through intensified political dialogue and cooperation as the necessary basis for quality learning, teaching and research as well as for democratic societies. We commit to upholding institutional autonomy, academic freedom and integrity, participation of students and staff in higher education governance, and public responsibility for and of higher education.' (European Higher Education Area, 2020: 5).

Fundamental values largely remained a vague topic for the EHEA until shortly before the 2015 Yerevan Ministerial Conference, which underscored the challenges of 'conflicts within and between countries, … extremism and radicalization' (European Higher Education Area, 2015a: 1) and asserted the role of 'public responsibility for higher education, academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and commitment to integrity' (*ibid.*: 1). These developments built upon elements such as the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) discussions in the preceding years arguing for 'responsibility of European political and institutional leaders, academics and student organizations for transferring global values into HE' (European Higher Education Area, 2015b: 7) and the need for the EHEA to 'react [to] conflicts between countries and political extremisms within countries' (*ibid.*: 9). The importance of the fundamental values was reaffirmed in 2018 at the Paris Ministerial Conference, followed by the work of a dedicated Task Force under the Working Group on Monitoring during 2018–2020. As mandated in the Rome Ministerial Communiqué by the EHEA Ministers responsible for higher education, in 2021, the Working Group on Fundamental Values commenced to develop a monitoring and implementation framework. One year later, two EHEA members invaded a third one.

This chapter provides a detailed account of the consequences of international cooperation with non-democracies in the EHEA context, as exemplified by the Russian war on Ukraine with the support of Belarus.

Firstly, it outlines changes and challenges in Ukrainian higher education caused by the Russian military invasion of Ukraine since 2014 and, particularly, from 2022. The authors argue that the response of public authorities in Ukraine to the aggression was broadly adequate from the perspective of their public responsibility *for* higher education. The chapter also examines public responsibility *for* higher education as exercised by the EHEA[1] in face of Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine and the decisions taken and pending in this regard. The depiction of public responsibility *of* higher education draws on the example of institutional agency in Ukraine and the bottom-up model of policy implementation.

Secondly, the chapter investigates the notion of non-democracies as illustrated by Russia and Belarus. The authors draw on these countries' violations of human rights and academic freedom and instilling of authoritarian ideologies through 'soft power'. Emphasis is also given to the EHEA's actions in upholding the fundamental values of higher education related to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. The chapter concludes with a review of the EHEA's aspirations for global cooperation and provides recommendations for safeguarding against non-democracies.

The chapter scrutinises fundamental values in several ways. Firstly, it reviews the history of the concept in the context of the Bologna Process and the EHEA. Secondly, it analyses the decision-making power and commitment of the EHEA in acting upon the declared adherence to fundamental values and illustrates challenges and successes in doing so. Thirdly, it evaluates the implementation of policy-related responses of Ukrainian national authorities after the full-scale Russian invasion and examines their public responsibility *for* funding and provision of higher education in times of crisis.

2 Higher Education in Ukraine: Managing the Emergency

The Ukrainian higher education sector has been dealing with the consequences of Russian military invasions since 2014, when Russia temporarily occupied the Autonomous Republic of Crimea alongside the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

This violation of international law forced the full-fledged displacement of 18 Ukrainian higher education institutions and marked a long-lasting crisis for their students and staff (EuroMaidan Press, 2017). Public support for the relocated universities remained limited, lacking targeted financial assistance or integration policies into new regional communities (Nikolaev et al., 2023). The displaced higher education institutions have suffered deteriorated performance and decreased student demand, resulting, for some of them, in mergers with other universities.

The full-scale Russian war on Ukraine has exerted a considerably larger impact on the Ukrainian higher education sector. This section provides a concise account of the war-induced challenges experienced by Ukrainian higher education institutions since 2022 and attempts to compensate for the losses incurred and enable uninterrupted operations.

[1] By the EHEA, we refer to its governance structures, specifically the Ministerial Conferences, the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG), the BFUG Board, Working and Advisory Groups established by BFUG and the Secretariat. Although the EHEA could be considered as a higher education space for dialogue and practice, its operation is attached to and built on the actions and decisions taken by its governance structures.

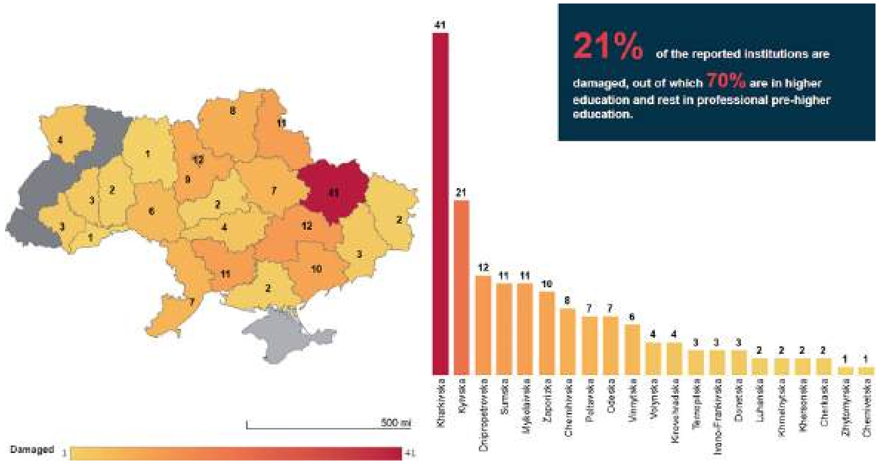

Fig. 1 Number of destroyed/damaged tertiary institutions in Ukraine, mid-2022. *Source* Reprinted from Education Cluster et al., 2022. *Note* The survey was administered during 25 June – 4 August 2022 across 1,247 tertiary educational institutions. The overall response rate amounted to 62% (34% for higher education institutions, 66% for professional pre-higher education institutions). No data is available for regions highlighted grey.

2.1 Disrupted Service Delivery and Financial Crisis

At the time of writing, Russian targeted destructions have resulted in 3798 damaged and 365 destroyed educational institutions.[2] The first comprehensive assessment of damages to the higher education institutions, their losses and needs was conducted in mid-2022 by the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) of Ukraine, UNICEF, Save the Children, and the World Bank (Education Cluster et al., 2022) (Fig. 1).

Major challenges of professional pre-higher and higher education institutions are related to lack of digital capacity, damage to infrastructure and equipment, displacement of students, staff and institutions, and safeguarding the mental health of learners and educators. As of August 2022, the costs incurred due to the Russian military aggression have been reported to exceed 115 million USD, with higher education institutions accounting for 102 million USD (see Table 1).

Supported by the World Bank 'Improving Higher Education for Results Project', the survey was replicated in May 2023, with a focus on safe learning spaces. As reported by 113 higher education institutions (74% response rate), the key challenges for enabling a safe educational process included the accessibility of shelters, the availability of surveillance systems, and infrastructure for mental health and psychosocial support. The needs for enhancing safe learning conditions have been stipulated at

[2] https://saveschools.in.ua/, accessed 16 May 2024.

Table 1 Damages and financial losses of tertiary education institutions, August 2022

Assets	Costs for universities (UAH)	Costs for colleges (UAH)	Total costs (UAH)	Total costs (USD)
Damaged laboratory equipment	1,192,672,395	176,895,782	1,369,568,177	37,083,155
Damaged ICT equipment	86,092,950	11,043,419	97,136,369	2,630,116
Damaged library equipment	39,607,471	9,708,620	49,316,091	1,335,309
Damaged furniture	182,654,706	45,657,372	228,312,078	6,181,899
Damaged education material	36,098,655	7,886,251	43,984,906	1,190,959
Other damaged assets (buses, catering facilities, etc.)	885,907,373	95,646,248	981,553,621	26,577,067
Costs related to facilities overuse	230,721,049	32,043,503	262,764,552	7,114,753
Costs related to IDPs support	314,013,958	54,102,996	368,116,954	9,967,330
Costs related to rental space	51,620,396	4,287,818	55,908,214	1,513,800
Costs related to the construction of shelters	706,620,078	56,160,052	762,780,130	20,653,440
Costs related to debris removal	44,883,022	11,294,623	56,177,645	1,521,096
Total costs	3,770,892,053	504,726,684	4,275,618,737	115,768,923

Source Reprinted from Education Cluster et al. (2022)

64.2 million USD, as detailed in Table 2. The war-affected higher education institutions did not exceed 30% of the reported needs, which could be attributed to challenges with processing reporting requests, particularly in the temporarily occupied territories.

These findings are further substantiated in the Ukraine Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment, whose third issue estimates the reconstruction needs of the higher education sector to 641.5 million USD (World Bank et al., 2024). Given the scale and cost of the anticipated reconstruction interventions, the long-standing challenges of the Ukrainian higher education modernisation agenda–prioritising fiscal efficiency, diversifying institutional funding, and rationalising the network of higher education institutions,–continue to be relevant also during the crisis (Gresham and Ambasz, 2019, Kahanec et al., 2022).

Table 2 Reported needs of higher education institutions for safe learning, May 2023

Reported needs of higher education institutions	All regions		War-affected regions		Other regions		Kyiv city	
	Total amount, M UAH	Total amount, M USD	Total amount, M UAH	Total amount, M USD	Total amount, M UAH	Total amount, M USD	Total amount, M UAH	Total amount, M USD
Digital equipment	579.0	15.8	172.0	4.7	311.0	8.5	96.0	2.6
Safety infrastructure	1553.0	42.5	446.0	12.2	503.0	13.8	604.0	16.5
Inclusive learning spaces	216.0	5.9	43.0	1.2	111.0	3.0	62.0	1.7
Total	**2348.0**	**64.2**	**661.0**	**18.1**	**925.0**	**25.3**	**762.0**	**20.8**

Source Project Implementation Unit of the 'Improving Higher Education for Results Project', 2023
Note For purposes of this survey, the war-affected higher education institutions included those located in the regions of active and potential hostilities, as defined by the Ministry of Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine at the time of the survey implementation (Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhia, Mykolaiv, and Kherson regions), higher education institutions located in the temporarily occupied regions of Ukraine, and displaced higher education institutions located in Sumy and Chernihiv

2.2 *Public Responsibility for and of Higher Education*

Ukrainian public authorities have provided a consolidated response to the challenges of operating higher education institutions in crisis, particularly, compared to 2014.

Providing sufficient public funding remained the most difficult aspect of sustaining the operation of higher education institutions. As Fig. 2 details, in 2022, the real value of the public funding of higher education institutions dropped by 6.2% compared with 2021 and remained low throughout 2022-2023. While fiscal projections for 2024 increased above the pre-war level, higher education institutions in emergencies might well require higher levels of resourcing. Limited financial autonomy and declined tuition fees purported their further dependencies on public funding, making its allocation arrangements particularly important.

During 2020–2021, the public funding of higher education institutions was allocated as per the performance-based funding (PBF) formula policy (Parliament of Ukraine, 2019), an embodiment of the so-called Matthew effect where stronger institutions prosper while weaker institutions improve or merge (Suprun, 2020). After the full-scale Russian invasion, the PBF policy was suspended and received little attention. Public funding returned to a historic funding model based on student numbers, long purporting multiple imbalances, from exceptionally high completion rates (since higher education institutions have no financial interest in selective admissions) to loosely coupled institutional profiling (due to bargaining between the MoES of Ukraine and institutions).

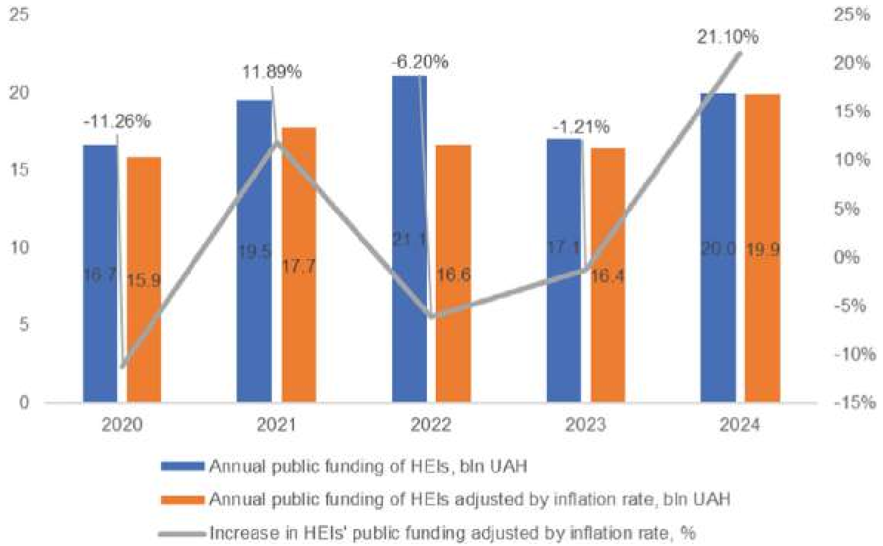

Fig. 2 Tendencies of public funding of Ukrainian higher education institutions. *Source* The State Budgets of Ukraine in 2020–2024, authors' calculations.

Under the circumstances, financial assistance and in-kind contributions from external partners became crucial. In March 2022, top-tier EdTech companies, i.e. Coursera, Udemy, edX, Google, Zoom and Microsoft, provided free-of-charge access for Ukrainian higher education institutions to their products (Hochschulforum Digitalisierung, 2022). During April–May 2022, the World Bank disbursed 100 million USD in support of merit- and needs-based scholarships to students at these institutions.[3] Until March 2023, 100 partnerships between UK and Ukrainian universities had been established under the Twinning initiative,[4] facilitating infrastructure rehabilitation and bilateral cooperation.

These crisis responses and recovery objectives became institutionalised in the national plans, including Ukraine's National Recovery Plan (National Recovery Council, 2022), Draft Ukraine Recovery Plan (The National Council for the Recovery of Ukraine from the Consequences of the War, 2022), Vision of Education and Science of Ukraine (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2023) and Strategic Plan of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine until 2027 (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2024). Notably, higher education is rarely featured on the humanitarian response and recovery agenda of major development partners (Education Cluster and UNICEF, 2023; UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2023; United Nations in Ukraine, 2022; USAID,

[3] https://www.kmu.gov.ua/news/minfin-svitovij-bank-nadast-100-mln-dolariv-dlya-viplat-akademichnih-ta-socialnih-stipendij, accessed 16 May 2024.

[4] https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/creating-voice-our-members/media-releases/twinning-scheme-one-year-how-invasion, accessed 16 May 2024.

2019), except for supra-national and international actors active in the sector prior to emergency (European University Association, 2023; OECD, 2022; World Bank, 2022).

As the full-scale Russian war on Ukraine continues into its third year, sustaining the operational capacity of higher education institutions becomes even more urgent. In mid-2023, the MoES announced a large-scale reform of higher education governance and funding. The envisioned changes should include reinstating the PBF policy, diversifying state subsidies for waiving tuition fees (merit-based grants and needs-based aid), merging higher education institutions and piloting wider financial and organisational autonomy at several universities. Notably, the PBF formula should be key in defining mergers' priorities since it steers the MoES modelling of the future higher education landscape towards 'some public higher education institutions becoming bankrupt'.[5]

Available anecdotal evidence (e.g., stakeholder meetings, expert articles, media) claims the PBF formula redesign to envision high reserve funding (6.3% of operating expenditures), wide-ranging differences in funding of higher education institutions as compared to the previous year (from 60 to 150%), use of the pre-war data for evaluating research outputs (2019–2022), and incentivising institutions participating in the Erasmus+ programme.

The outlined policy changes, initiated during the full-scale war, invite a closer look into policy learning during a crisis and robustness of the suggested policy designs against external shocks and internal resistance (Capano and Woo, 2017).

2.3 Displaced Universities

The latest Free to Think report (Scholars at Risk, 2023) cites multiple attacks on higher education and academic freedom committed by Russians in their war against Ukraine. These include murdering, kidnapping and disabling scholars and students, seizing control of the administration of higher education institutions through appointing pro-Russian rectors, and modifying curriculum to reflect Russian imperialistic and Soviet-era beliefs.

Russia has caused massive internal and external displacement of higher education institutions, students and staff, whose capacity to remain engaged in intellectual activities has been challenged. As of mid-2022, 29 institutions were displaced, including 18 that had been in exile since 2014 (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2022), and their number grew to 44 in April 2023. Contrary to 2014, the newly displaced institutions have adopted a 'semi-virtual relocation' model, assuming a quick return: a few key administrators relocated to the hosting university while students and staff continued remote teaching and learning (Nikolaev et al., 2023).

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[5] https://osvita.ua/blogs/91424/?fbclid=IwAR0sng0duvW-3Wshka_JjZwJdEcWxq5UwO5Jn5wNZ-3SunFYsH60eZ0jWVs, accessed 16 May 2024.

The exact number of displaced students and staff remains unknown, both to the national authorities and the EU. The best available hypothesis implies one-quarter of post-secondary students (325,000 persons) staying outside the country (European University Association, 2022).

The academic freedom index of Ukraine has experienced a decline since 2022, as campus integrity, institutional autonomy and academic freedom have deteriorated since the full-scale Russian invasion, particularly in the temporarily occupied and newly liberated territories. Yet, the bottom-up networks of higher education actors play a pivotal role in safeguarding academic freedom, institutional autonomy and participation of students and staff in higher education governance, as discussed in the next section.

2.4 *Institutional Agency*

Key stakeholders in the bottom-up model of policy implementation are local implementing entities with 'a wide range of discretion and interpretative power' (Schofield, 2001). This model adopts an analytical approach in anticipating and predicting policy outcomes and analysing policy implementation. Yet, it is subject to limitations of accountability and power base and exaggerative character of autonomy and impact of the low-/local-level actors (Matland, 1995).

In Ukraine, 'problem solving around a complex, context-specific, and dynamic policy issues' (Hill and Hupe, 2003) has led to higher education institutions assuming a proactive role as centres of regional communities. As emphasised by Sharov (The Ukrainians, 2023), universities became humanitarian hubs for millions of internally displaced people. According to the 2022 MoES survey, 85% of their staff are engaged in war-related volunteering activities (Education Cluster et al., 2022). The community engagement resulted in multiple grass-root institutional initiatives, such as the Ukrainian Global University,[6] the Alliance of Ukrainian Universities,[7] and the Digital University.[8] Many higher education institutions from safer regions have opened their premises to displaced institutions to establish temporary administrative 'back-offices' and supported the internally displaced with dormitory placements and necessaries. Lastly, the student agency has developed into periphery implementation structures of the emergency policy response. The Erasmus Student Network Ukraine, the Ukrainian Student League, and Ukrainian Students for Freedom have conducted a survey of Ukrainian students displaced abroad to inform policy making with their perceptions and attitudes (Fedorchuk et al., 2022). Another example of the front-line students' engagement is the Unissued Diplomas project, aimed to

[6] https://uglobal.university/ukrainian-global-university, accessed 16 May 2024.

[7] https://ucu.edu.ua/news/v-ukrayini-stvoryly-alyans-universytetiv-zarady-vidbudovy-ukrayiny-tarozbudovy-gromad/, accessed 16 May 2024.

[8] https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/ukraine/eu-support-higher-education-development-ukraine-erasmus-digital-university-%E2%80%93-open-ukrainian_en?s=232, accessed 16 May 2024.

disseminate information on students' casualties across international higher education communities.[9]

2.5 Against all Odds

Ukrainian higher education institutions have suffered long-lasting, unprecedented disruptions to their human potential, physical infrastructure, and operational capacity. As the Russian war on Ukraine continues, reconstruction will become more demanding and costly, external partners' commitment to support will become weakened, and people available to rebuild the country will decrease. Providing Ukraine with long-requested military supplies is the most effective way to mitigate further purposeful destruction of the national higher education sector.

3 EHEA Decision Making in the Face of Crisis

Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus have been members of the Bologna Process since 2003, 2005 and 2015, respectively. For Russia, the decision to join the Bologna Process came after several years of preparatory work by its government, arguably with a view to 'incorporating Russian higher professional education system into European education community before 2010' (Bologna Process, 2003). Ukraine's accession to the Bologna Process was perceived as key to the 'modernization [of] the system of higher education and science of Ukraine' (Bologna Process, 2004). Belarus' access required more efforts as its higher education was largely misaligned with the Bologna Process structural reforms. This, alongside Belarus being the first country to access the EHEA after its formal establishment in 2010 and the scope of structural reforms required of Belarus, including on fundamental values, necessitated adopting a Belarus strategy 2018–2020 at the Paris Ministerial Conference (European Higher Education Area, 2018).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 received little attention from the EHEA governance structures, as did the Russian military offensive in Georgia in 2008. The Bologna Process Implementation Report (BPIR) issued in 2015, the year after Russia's temporary occupation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk regions, provided no reference to these events. This BFUG non-reaction to the disruption of fundamental values surprisingly coincided in time with its work on referencing fundamental values in the Yerevan Ministerial Communiqué. Still, the BPIR lacked any mention of Ukraine or reasons for Ukraine's non-submission of data. Russia, on the contrary, not only had its higher education system properly reflected in the BPIR but also hosted a BFUG Board meeting in September 2017, three years

[9] https://www.unissueddiplomas.org/, accessed 16 May 2024.

after exterminating Ukrainian higher education institutions from the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the eastern regions of Ukraine.

As per the 2014–2020 BFUG and minutes of the BFUG Board meetings, the BFUG neither officially discussed nor undertook any actions related to the illegal military invasion by one EHEA member of another. The first documented evidence of the Russian violation of international law in the official proceedings of the BFUG appeared in the minutes of the BFUG meeting hosted by Ukraine in March 2020 (Bologna Process, 2020a). As the MoES of Ukraine stressed at a time, the EHEA needed to finally react to 'hybrid threats to global peace and security' (*ibid.*: 3). The problem of non-implementation in Belarus and its disregard for fundamental values has received more attention than the Russian war on Ukraine. The topic of suspension within the EHEA was first raised with regard to Belarus and its violent suppression of student protests related to electoral fraud by the European Students' Union, as supported in previous discussions by several other BFUG members and consultative members during the BFUG Board meeting hosted by the UK (Scotland) (Bologna Process, 2020b). Notably, the UK, the UK (Scotland) and Germany initiated, in their capacity as the EHEA Co-Chairs, a statement on the situation in Belarus (Bologna Process, 2020c). Supported by 24 EHEA countries and 5 consultative members, it argued that there was a 'grave violation of human rights and shared fundamental freedoms and values' (ibid.) in Belarus and reiterated the EHEA support to its academic community authorities in achieving fundamental values. Russia produced its own counter-statement in support of the Belarus authoritarian regime[10] and echoed the Belarus authorities during the BFUG meeting hosted by Italy immediately before the Rome Ministerial Conference (Bologna Process, 2020d).

The BFUG's negligence and inertia go against its role as the executive structure overseeing the Bologna Process implementation and its duty to act upon commitments undertaken through the Ministerial Communiqués. Despite the explicit ministerial pledges to safeguarding fundamental values, the BFUG remained silent on military invasions of its member.

The full-scale Russian war eventually challenged the status quo. On 1 March 2022, the MoES of Ukraine issued an official letter[11] to the BFUG Co-Chairs and the BFUG Secretariat, asking for suspension of Russia's participation in the work of the Bologna Process and its expulsion from the EHEA. Similar statements were sent to several EHEA consultative members–ENQA, EUA, EURASHE, EQAR, as well as the ENIC Bureau and NARIC Advisory Board, aiming to exclude Russia from the EHEA-relevant institutional and intergovernmental relations.

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[10] At the time of writing, the document was mentioned on, but had been removed from, the EHEA website under the link https://ehea.info/Upload/%D0%9C%D0%9D_12_2762.pdf, accessed 16 May 2024. Both the first author of this article and one of the session coordinators (Bergan) saw the document as members of the BFUG and participants in the Ministerial Conference.

[11] https://www.ehea.info/Upload/MoES_to_EHEA_RU_suspension%5B6%5D.pdf, accessed 16 May 2024.

The E4 Group (ENQA, EUA, EURASHE and ESU) promptly responded to the war unfolding in Europe. ENQA suspended[12] the rights of Russian quality assurance and accreditation agencies and urged its member and affiliate agencies to reconsider engagement in Russia. EUA suspended[13] the membership of 12 Russian higher education institutions that were signatories to the rectors' letter,[14,15] in support of the Russian war on Ukraine and called on its members to 'cease contact and collaboration with any central government agency of the Russian Federation or any other country that actively supports the Russian invasion of Ukraine'.[16] EURASHE condemned[17] Russia's violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity and recommended its members to cease all academic cooperation in Russia. ESU joined the public judgment against Russia's invasion of Ukraine, 'a sovereign democratic State with full rights to determine its own future.'[18] EQAR committed[19] not to cooperate with any central government agency in Russia and advised EQAR-registered quality assurance agencies against collaboration with the Russian higher education institutions, whose rectors supported the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The ENIC and NARIC Networks did not issue any public statements or decisions on the Russian war against Ukraine.[20] The Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee (LRCC), overseeing the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, adopted a decision[21] on abstaining from electing or appointing any representative of Russia or Belarus to the LRCC Bureau or any office as rapporteur only on 28 February 2023. This response was not only belated[22] but also inconclusive since it failed to effectively address the question of restricting or suspending the participation of Russia and Belarus in the LRCC itself.

The BFUG response enabled suspending the rights of participation of Russia and Belarus in the EHEA governance bodies and work programme at the BFUG meeting

[12] https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/ENQA-Board-statement-on-invasion-of-Ukraine.pdf, accessed 16 May 2024.

[13] https://www.eua.eu/news/842:eua-suspends-membership-of-12-russian-universities-following-statement-by-university-leaders.html, accessed 16 May 2024.

[14] https://rsr-online.ru/news/2022/3/4/obrashenie-rossijskogo-soyuza-rektorov/ (in Russian) accessed 16 May 2024.

[15] https://www.khrono.no/files/2022/03/08/Statement%20of%20the%20Russian%20Rectors_II.pdf(non-official translation in English), accessed 16 May 2024.

[16] https://www.eua.eu/news/835:european-university-association-statement-on-ukraine.html, accessed 16 May 2024.

[17] https://www.eurashe.eu/news/eurashe-statement-ukraine-crisis/, accessed 16 May 2024.

[18] https://esu-online.org/policies/statement-addressing-the-renewed-russian-aggression-towards-ukraine/, accessed 16 May 2024.

[19] https://www.eqar.eu/we-stand-with-ukraine/, accessed 16 May 2024.

[20] As argued in the ENIC-NARIC Networks' official letter to the Minister of Education and Science of Ukraine dated 11 April 2022, that is also available to the first author of this chapter, its mandate is limited to that of an implementation mechanism of the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

[21] https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/-/declaration-adopted-by-the-lisbon-recognition-convention-committee-on-the-participation-of-the-russian-federation-and-belarus, accessed 16 May 2024.

[22] The decision was preceded by an attempt to put the issue on the agenda of the regular LRCC meeting in November 2022. Yet, it was turned down and postponed until the extraordinary session held in February 2023.

held by France in April 2022, as reflected in the Statement by members and consultative members of the Bologna Follow-Up Group on consequences of the Russian Federation invasion of Ukraine.[23] Signed by 39 governmental and 6 consultative EHEA members, the European Commission and EQAR, it proved the BFUG's determination to suspend Russia and Belarus from participating in the meetings, working groups, structures, and work programmes of the EHEA. The statement was prepared over a short time (March 2022) by an informal group of EHEA members, with the Czech Republic, Iceland, Norway, and the Council of Europe as its core group. The statement was introduced during the extraordinary BFUG Board meeting hosted by France on 18 March 2022. Following a formal proposal submitted by the French Co-Chair in Strasbourg, the BFUG reached 'a near-unanimous agreement on this exceptional situation' (Bologna Process, 2022).

While the BFUG was able to provide a response to the atrocities caused by Russia and Belarus in Ukraine, its decision-making process was not smooth. The BFUG Rules of Procedure (RoP) became the key point of contention since they lacked clear guidance on decision making in exceptional circumstances. The BFUG statement underwent several revisions to fully comply with the RoP for the 2021–2024 working period and mitigate reservations of some EHEA members on national policies and terminology. Other instances of discord included an argument by some delegations that the BFUG lacked the mandate to decide on the suspension of members, for which–the argument went–the decision of the EHEA Ministers was required, and voting arrangements when consensus cannot be reached, i.e., the type of BFUG membership majority (absolute or qualified) for voting, number of voting delegations, political vis-à-vis technical decisions, and the interpretive or prescriptive nature of the RoP. Unable to close a motion on these matters in Strasbourg, the BFUG Co-Chairs (France and Azerbaijan) committed to suggesting amendments to the Rules of Procedure, having their final text approved electronically and presenting them for formal approval at the next BFUG meeting. This intention was never fulfilled: the BFUG Board meeting hosted by Kazakhstan in October 2022 reopened the question of establishing an *ad hoc* Task Force to review the rules and regulations for the EHEA governance. As per the mandate of this Task Force, adopted by the BFUG in November 2022,[24] and its work during recent years, the revisited RoP (or part of it) should be presented for adoption at the 2024 Tirana Ministerial Conference.

Shortly after the BFUG decision, the Russian public authorities started spreading news of their intentional withdrawal from the Bologna Process, given 'a lack of

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[23] https://www.ehea.info/Upload/STATEMENT%20BY%20MEMBERS%20AND%20CONSULTATIVE%20MEMBERS%20OF%20THE%20BOLOGNA%20FOLLOW%20UP%20GROUP%20ON%20CONSEQUENCES%20OF%20THE%20RUSSIAN%20INVASION%20OF%20UKRAINE.pdf, accessed 16 May 2024.

[24] https://www.ehea.info/Upload/BFUG_CZ_KZ_82_ToRs_Task_Force_Review_of_Rules_and_Procedures%20%281%29.pdf, accessed 16 May 2024.

positive impact on the national system of higher education'.[25] Similar fake narratives were reinforced by higher education media, including the anonymous anti-Western 'UWN Reporter',[26] specialising in Russia and China. This reaction resembles the way Russia attempted to mislead the public into thinking it chose to leave the Council of Europe in mid-March 2022 while being excluded[27] from it just a few hours after its attempted withdrawal. Unlike its arguably independent decision to leave the Council of Europe, Russia, however, has not submitted any withdrawal to the EHEA competent authorities.

4 Public Responsibility *for* Higher Education and Collaboration with Non-democracies

The fundamental values of higher education have consistently enjoyed attention in higher education studies (Bergan, 2020; Enders et al., 2013; Maassen et al,. 2017; Weber & Bergan, 2005), including a recent surge in their comparative aspect (Karran et al., 2017; Matei et al., 2021; Pruvot & Estermann, 2017) and endeavours to provide a consistent literature review thereof (BFUG Working Group on Fundamental Values, 2022; DAAD, 2021). Still, so far, relatively little consideration has been given to the feasibility and necessity of cooperation with actors coming from non-democratic contexts, although this consideration would be particularly important in upholding the public responsibility *for* higher education. As suggested by Bergan and Matei (2022), the responsibility of public authorities and actors at national and supranational levels (including the EHEA) should ensure that the fundamental values of higher education are respected. This includes also furthering the democratic values, which play an essential role in higher education for preparing the active citizenship in democratic societies and maintaining the democratic culture in society (Bergan and Matei, 2022; Council of Europe, 2007). In light of this, suspending the rights of participation of Russia and Belarus in the Bologna Process has hardly prevented them from continuous engagement in higher education collaboration in Europe, enabled by vague or non-existent policies of the national and supranational authorities. For instance, the Erasmus Mundus Association (EMA) welcomed a country representative from Russia at its 16th General Assembly in May 2022 despite Ukraine's official appeal.[28] The Council of the European Union introduced restrictions on cooperation with Russian public authorities but allowed 'mobility exchanges for individuals and

[25] https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20220415114832118, accessed 16 May 2024.

[26] https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20230518145828664, accessed 16 May 2024.

[27] https://search.coe.int/cm/pages/result_details.aspx?objectid=0900001680a5d7d9, accessed 16 May 2024.

[28] The appeal was tabled by the first author in her capacity as the Ukrainian representative to the 16th EMA General Assembly and Oleksandr Ivanov on behalf of the EMA Eurasian Regional Chapter 2016-2018, accessed February 14, 2024.

people-to-people contacts'.[29] Numerous higher education institutions in the EHEA countries, e.g., University of Amsterdam,[30] University of Manchester,[31] University of Leuven[32] and University of Osnabrück,[33] have established common support structures for students and staff from Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus, thus humiliating Ukrainians further and deepening their grief. Both ENQA and EUA have stated their continued communication with to-be-suspended Russian institutions and encouraged case-by-case maintenance of existing collaborations with Russia 'where these are clearly based on shared European values.'[34]

At the same time, non-democracies are keen to use soft power measures to reinforce their geopolitical standing. According to Nye (2017), soft power refers to the ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction rather than coercion or payment. Soft power involves ways to impact and build an image which aims to facilitate state cooperation, administration, and a race to distribute influence, values, and ideology to other states (see also Nye, 1990). It can include many non-coercive forms, such as humanitarian assistance, developmental aid, cultural exchange and, more importantly, higher education and research collaboration and exchange. Simultaneously, liberal democracies have been eager to promote their own soft power measures aiming to support liberalisation and democratisation of non-democracies.

Unfortunately, current research suggests a failure of democratic change through engagement with non-democracies (Baykal & Benner, 2020; Morris, 2002; Pap, 2023). Often, this engagement is coupled with increased risks for those initiating cooperation in the hope of instilling fundamental values through 'soft power'. A more prevailing outcome of engaging with non-democratic regimes appears to be the unintended (or quite purposeful) legitimisation of authoritarian narratives under the umbrella of enhancing educational diplomacy, overthrowing 'geopolitical narcissism' (Marginson, 2023) or 'addressing global social needs' (Altbach and de Wit, 2021).

When we look at the real outcomes instead of hopeful aims, non-democracies like Russia and Belarus have not taken any steps during the past 20 years to liberalise their political systems, nor have they turned to embrace "Western" or "European" values. On the contrary, they have transformed into more authoritarian regimes with a higher tendency to rely on hard power in domestic (violent suppression of democratic movements and opposition, assassinations and imprisonment of political opponents and eradication of independent media) and foreign policy (invasions of Georgia and Ukraine). This leads us to think that non-democracies have been better equipped to

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[29] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32022R0576, accessed 16 May 2024.

[30] https://www.steunuva.nl/project/support-students-in-need, accessed 16 May 2024.

[31] https://www.manchester.ac.uk/discover/conflict-support/ukraine-response/, accessed 16 May 2024.

[32] https://www.kuleuven.be/fundraising/emergency-fund-ukraine, accessed 16 May 2024.

[33] https://www.uni-osnabrueck.de/en/solidarity-towards-ukraine/, accessed 16 May 2024.

[34] https://www.eua.eu/news/835:european-university-association-statement-on-ukraine.html, accessed 16 May 2024.

capitalise on soft power than European liberal democracies, or at least that the soft power initiatives of European democracies largely have failed.

For the purposes of this chapter, we should also recall how and why Russia accessed the EHEA in 2003. According to several Russian and non-Russian authors, it was primarily politically motivated and driven by President Putin's administration while strongly opposed by the Russian higher education sector, particularly by rectors (Ezhevski et al., 2017; Marquand, 2018; Pursiainen & Medvedev, 2005; Telegina & Schwengel, 2012; Tomusk, 2007). From a soft power perspective, joining the EHEA benefitted Russia in many ways. It allowed Russia to use the European "halo effect" to increase the prestige and image of the Russian higher education sector globally and to enter the race for global talent (Mäkinen, 2016; Pursiainen & Medvedev, 2005), and it further legitimised the Russian higher education sector as a valid partner for European higher education systems and reinforced the capability to benefit from European funding (e.g., international credit mobility, Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters, capacity building projects and Jean Monnet activities). Since 2003, Russian higher education institutions have been able to coordinate EU-funded projects and since 2006, to receive EU funds (Mäkinen and Deriglazova 2021). Finally, it has increased Russian opportunities to influence foreign students' worldviews and perceptions of Russia (Crowley-Vigneau et al., 2022).

It should not be forgotten that the same regime that pushed towards Russian accession in 2003 used the strongest possible hard power tools in 2008, 2014 and 2022 against other EHEA countries. This leads us to assume that, despite the naïve expectations, there was no major change in Russian geopolitical ambitions between 2003 and 2008. Therefore, also the goals of Russia's accession should be interpreted primarily in the light of successive use of hard power in the form of unprovoked military invasions of the neighbouring countries.

It is unfortunate that most of the European countries were blinded by the belief that collaborating with Russia and Belarus would, in the end, if not lead the latter to embrace the European values, then at least keep them abstaining from the use of hard power tools. As it can now be seen, Europe's political inaction and continued appeasement of Russia after 2008 and 2014 did not prevent the all-out attack on Ukraine in 2022. On the contrary, the continued absence of punitive actions, like those that eventually took place after the 2022 invasion, possibly encouraged Russia to act more presumptuously. Although we are not suggesting that an earlier suspension (or preferably expulsion) of the Russian Federation from the EHEA would have prevented the 2022 invasion, we argue that by continued inaction and collaboration with Russia, the EHEA stakeholders missed a crucial moment to safeguard a fundamental value of public responsibility *for* higher education. Failure to oppose an aggressive non-democratic EHEA member was a missed opportunity to show what supporting democracy means in European higher education. Even now, when it has become evident that appeasement as a policy has clearly failed, some European countries and actors continue to hesitate in their punitive actions. A more cynical perspective is that the willingness to continue collaborating with the Russian higher education sector results from financial, political or other dependencies.

5 The Global Dialogue of the Bologna Process—The Way Forward

Ukraine has been defending European fundamental values from Russian aggression for ten years already. Meanwhile, the EHEA stakeholders should have come to realise the meaning and importance of fundamental values. The continuous presence of fundamental values on the BFUG agenda since 2015 marks a considerably closer attention devoted to this topic in the EHEA, currently leading to the outputs of the dedicated Working Group on Fundamental Values[35] to be approved by the Tirana Ministerial Communiqué. Still, even after fundamental values are operationalised, the question remains how to distinguish between true and fabricated values.

This chapter has attempted to describe the BFUG non-decision making in 2014 and the way resolutions were taken in 2022. The Russian war on Ukraine, which nudged the BFUG to take a closer look at its own regulations, is nowhere near an end, and Russia's purposeful destruction of the Ukrainian higher education continues. While the BFUG mandate is limited, excluding Russia and Belarus from the EHEA falls perfectly well under the Minister's mandate. It is only reasonable to expect the BFUG to mobilise again to put forward this proposal on the agenda of the Tirana Ministerial Conference and the EHEA Ministers to be determined in their decisions.

The *savoir faire* of collaboration with non-democracies will likely remain an EHEA priority, as it aims to establish wider political engagements via the Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue. In this collaboration, it is important to remember that the EHEA has been challenged with addressing authoritarian regimes among its own members multiple times.[36] While international fora and dialogue can be useful, the BFUG might benefit from an honest reflection on its experiences with Russia and Belarus and learn from this. In addition, the BFUG would benefit from the risk management of the evolving geopolitical tensions and the emerging cases of non-democratic politics and policies within the EHEA. From this perspective, approving the proposed RoP that would enable excluding countries or consultative members from the EHEA and permit voting on all subject matters shall be a prime responsibility of the Tirana Ministerial Conference.

Values-based collaboration with non-democracies should be grounded in one's capability to uphold those values, whether out of self-interest or political necessity. When the absence of shared values becomes evident, such collaborations should cease, be it with the European counterparts or with such non-democracies as China. European countries should learn that even when appeasement and silence are the easiest options, they are also the most dangerous ones, making Europe at least partly complicit to the actions of non-democracies. There is a real risk that inaction only reinforces the perception of non-democracies that Europe is unable and weak in safeguarding its own values.

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[35] The report submitted to the BFUG is available at https://www.ehea.info/Immagini/BFUG_BE_VA_90_8_4_1_WG_FV_Report.pdf (report) and https://www.ehea.info/Imma gini/BFUG_BE_VA_90_8_4_2_WG_FV_Annex.pdf (draft statements), both accessed 16 May 2024.

[36] Such other instances include, e.g., the conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh region.

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Digitalisation v. The Values of Higher Education: Opportunities, Threats, Recommendations for the EHEA

Petri Mäntysaari

Abstract Whether the deployment of digital technology in higher education can be regarded as an opportunity or a risk is a question of values. The relevant values range from traditional academic values and the fundamental values of higher education in the EHEA to a democratic society and respect for human rights. Before COVID-19, it was customary to focus on potential benefits for learners. However, the earlier approach failed to pay enough attention to the wider educational and societal impacts of digital transformation. This changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent studies have discussed the impact of the digital transformation of higher education on staff, institutions, the higher education market and society as a whole. In this chapter, it is argued that the digital transformation of higher education can have an impact on academic freedom, student and staff participation in higher education governance, public responsibility for higher education, public responsibility of higher education, and democracy. The digital transformation of higher education makes it necessary to balance multiple values. Higher education policy in the EHEA should take into account both opportunities and risks.

Keywords Digitalisation · Digital transformation · Artificial Intelligence · European Higher Education Area · Higher education policy · Academic freedom

1 Introduction

1.1 General Remarks on the Digital Transformation of Society

According to Kranzberg's first law of technology, "technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral" (Kranzberg, 1986). The digital transformation of society presents both opportunities and risks and is values-based.

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Digital transformation is driven by opportunities. In the 1990s, digital technologies were still regarded as an uncomplicated improvement in the lives of their users (Fukuyama, 1992). There was "great optimism that it would constitute a 'liberation technology' that would empower ordinary people to inform themselves, mobilize, and ultimately become participating agents in a democratic process" (Fukuyama, 2023: 3). However, there have been fears that "some people, even a majority of them, can be made worse off by advances in technology" (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014: 173). It has turned out that digital transformation also has a dark side with detrimental consequences (Wheaton & Kreps, 2023).

There are opportunities and risks for individuals and, at the level of the artificial goal-directed systems of human society (Simon, 1996: xi), for organisations, sectors of society and society in general. While opportunities and risks identified at the individual level can apply at a higher system level, methodological individualism may miss some systemic phenomena (*ibid*.: 40–41).

According to an OECD study, key opportunities and risks for individuals "are still debated by researchers and analysts" (OECD, 2019a: 12). What is known is that "safe digital technologies improve the life of those who have the skills to use them" (*ibid*.: 11). On the one hand, individuals can benefit from digital opportunities if they possess skills labelled as "digital literacy" (*ibid*.: 12). On the other hand, "digital technologies entail a major inequality risk for society, as they introduce a digital divide between those who have the skills to use them and those who do not" (*ibid*.: 12). The study shared a key message: "In a nutshell, making the digitalisation work for people's well-being would require building equal digital opportunities, widespread digital literacy and strong digital security" (*ibid*.: 12).

At the system levels of the economy and society, the divide takes the form of economic and societal polarisation in four ways. First, there is economic concentration (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014; Andrews et al., 2015; Anderton et al., 2023). Not only is the digital economy largely dominated by platforms that rely on network effects (Parker et al., 2016), but economy and wealth are generally becoming more concentrated (Mäntysaari, 2022: 11–15). Second, there is a societal trend of rising earnings inequality in OECD countries (OECD, 2019b: 16–17) that implies a declining share of people in middle-income households (*ibid*.: 46–49) and the simultaneous growth of the share of employment in high-skill, high-wage occupations and low-skill, low-wage occupations (Acemoglu & Autor, 2011: 1070; Song et al., 2019). According to an analysis by the International Monetary Fund, the adoption of AI will benefit higher-income workers and younger college-educated workers more (Cazzaniga et al., 2024: 14–15). Third, non-standard work has become more common (Fritz & Tomaschek, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2021; Aleksynska, 2021; De Stefano et al., 2021; O'Higgins & Caro, 2022; Ilsøe & Larsen, 2021, 2023). Non-standard work can be defined as employment other than the standard full-time, open-ended contract. Non-standard work ranges from part-time employment, fixed-term contracts and zero-hour contracts to temporary agency work, solo self-employment and digital platform work (Ilsøe & Larsen, 2021: 18; Rasmussen et al., 2019: 9). Non-standard work is generally associated with less comprehensive forms of social protection and is deemed to require better legislation to cure the problem (European

Commission, 2021; U.S. Department of Labor, 2024; Countouris & De Stefano, 2023). Fourth, there is a trend of political polarisation. It is fuelled by economic polarisation, the digitalisation of the media (Pew Research Center, 2014, 2020), and social media (Spohr, 2017). Digital technologies "have proven to have the potential risk of helping polarisation, misinformation and mistrust" (Errandonea, 2023).

Shortly put, the fact that the benefits and risks of digital transformation are not evenly shared has serious societal consequences. For example, the Policy Brief of the Stigler Committee on Digital Platforms stated that the "concentration of economic, media, data, and political power is potentially dangerous for our democracies" (Zingales & Lancieri, 2019: 11). Moreover, it has become increasingly challenging to defend the resiliency of democratic processes and the truth. Democratic processes and public authorities are targeted by disinformation (Alaraatikka et al., 2022; Koistinen et al., 2022; Turčilo & Obrenović, 2020). At the same time, attention-grabbing false information is easier to produce and spreads much faster than serious information intended to correct it (Vosoughi et al., 2018; Ireton and Posetti, 2018).

1.2 General Remarks on the Values of Higher Education

Higher education is influenced by the general societal trends connected to the digitalisation of society and by its outer environment (Simon, 1996: 7–8). One may ask to what extent the opportunities and risks characteristic of digital transformation in general have been recognised in the particular discourse relating to the values of higher education in the EHEA.

Fundamentally, whether something can be regarded as an opportunity or a risk–or good or bad–is a question of values. There is no way to use the *potential* of technological advancement for *good* and make its *benefits* accessible to all in higher education (Jensen, 2019) without sufficient information about societal mechanisms and values-based choices of desirable goals.

For the purposes of the EHEA, the values of higher education include academic values and the fundamental values of higher education in the EHEA.

The fundamental values of higher education in the EHEA are relatively recent. They were specified in the Paris Communiqué (Bologna Process, 2018) and reconfirmed in the Rome Communiqué (Bologna Process, 2020a, b). The fundamental values of higher education in the EHEA include academic freedom, academic integrity, institutional autonomy, student and staff participation in higher education governance, public responsibility for higher education and public responsibility of higher education.

In contrast, the long-term values of higher education predate the digital transformation of society and the EHEA and are relatively stable. Higher education and the EHEA are embedded in academic values (Bologna Process, 2003, 2005). For example, academic values include the scientific worldview (Wittgenstein, 1922: 2.233; Bologna Process, 1998; UNESCO, 2017, paragraph 14), academic freedom (AAUP, 2015: 13–14; Commager, 1963; Gerber, 2014: 29–31; Bologna Process, 2007, 2018, 2020a, b), and respect for a package of human rights protected under international law (UNESCO, 1997, Preamble; United Nations, 2020, paragraph 5; Beiter et al., 2016; Beiter, 2019).

While the Paris Communiqué (Bologna Process, 2018) first spelled out the fundamental values of the EHEA as they are understood today, the foundations of the EHEA's framework can be found in the rules-based system of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the 1997 UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel. This universal system is complemented by European treaties. The 1950 European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR) reflects the Council of Europe's core values that include respect for democracy, human rights, and the rule of law (e.g., Leslie et al., 2021; Holmes et al., 2022; Holmes, 2023). The ECHR protects the right to education and academic freedom (Council of Europe, 2009, paragraphs 2 and 4). The 2012 Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2012) reflects the same core values and is more detailed.

The international rules-based system both influences the contents of the EHEA's ministerial communiqués and makes them meaningful. By definition, international law is recognised by states as binding upon their mutual relations. The countries that belong to the EHEA must comply with their international legal obligations in good faith, as stipulated by Article 26 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (United Nations, 1969). For example, this includes compliance with the obligations relating to academic freedom under Article 10 of the ECHR. The ECHR established the European Court of Human Rights, that now has a large body of case law relating to academic freedom (United Nations, 2020, paragraphs 21 and 23). EU countries must also comply with EU law such as Article 13 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, guaranteeing the freedom of the arts and sciences, and Article 14, guaranteeing the right to education. The EU member states' common obligations under international law must be taken into account when interpreting EU law. This can be illustrated with the legal effect of the 1997 UNESCO Recommendation in the EU. The 1997 UNESCO Recommendation is the "only international law document laying down standards with regard to academic freedom and institutional autonomy in a more structured and detailed manner" (Beiter et al., 2016: 120–121), lists measures that, according to the terminology of the EHEA, belong to public responsibility for higher education (UNESCO, 1997, paragraphs 10, 57–64) or public responsibility of higher education (*ibid*.: paragraphs 6, 17, 22–24, 33–34, 36), and mentions academic integrity (*ibid*.: paragraph 22(b)). While the UNESCO Recommendation constitutes soft law that is not binding as such (Beiter et al., 2016: 121–122), the Recommendation itself is an application of binding obligations under international law (*ibid*.: 107–108 and 189; United Nations, 2020, paragraph 5; UNESCO, 1997, Preamble) and can be taken into account when interpreting binding obligations under EU law (CJEU, Case C-66/18, European Commission v Hungary, paragraph 227). The ministerial communiqués of the EHEA have never existed in a legal vacuum. It would not be reasonable to assume that all EHEA members have been unaware of their well-known obligations under international law (e.g., Karran, 2007; Council of Europe, 2007; Council of Europe, 2009, paragraphs 2–4, 9 and 11; European Parliament, 2018).

Such values are relatively stable but are constantly evolving. Due to societal change, there is a constant search for a fair balance between the fundamental rights of different parties (e.g., CJEU, Case C-401/19 Poland, paragraph 99) and between the different values enshrined in those rights. One of the transformations (e.g., Polanyi, 1944) that societies are undergoing is digital. Fundamental rights and the values of higher education must be applied, interpreted, and balanced in new contexts such as the digital economy (e.g., UNESCO, 2021a: II.8).

1.3 This Chapter

It is necessary to reassess whether the individual-level, institution-level, higher-education-system-level and wider outcomes of the deployment of digital technologies are aligned with the values of higher education and the EHEA. Important policy choices need to be made based on the reassessment. For example, higher education should defend and help develop democratic societies by mitigating societal mechanisms that are "potentially dangerous for our democracies" (Zingales & Lancieri, 2019: 11) rather than naively endorse digitalisation without reservations.

In the following, we will first study how digitalisation was perceived in the EHEA at the time of the Rome Communiqué (Bologna Process, 2020a) and before. This will be followed by a brief discussion of outcomes reported in more recent studies and their connection to the EHEA's values. We will conclude with recommendations for the EHEA. We recommend a stronger focus on the risks and the system level.

2 From the Sorbonne Declaration to the Rome Communiqué

2.1 General Remarks

The perceived impact of digitalisation is highlighted here using three kinds of proxies, namely ChatGPT 3.5, the core EHEA ministerial documents,[1] and the edited book (Curaj et al., 2020a) from the Fourth Bologna Process Researchers' Conference that preceded the Rome ministerial meeting in 2020. The large-language-model (LLM) technology of ChatGPT 3.5 can provide initial clues as to how the deployment of

[1] https://www.ehea.info/page-ministerial-declarations-and-communiques, accessed April 10, 2024.

digital technologies was perceived in the context of higher education up to its knowledge update in January 2022. The ministerial declarations and communiqués seem to share the technology optimism of the 1990s. The 2015 Yerevan and 2020 Rome Communiqués (Bologna Process, 2015; Bologna Process, 2020a) brought digitalisation closer to the agenda of the EHEA. The chapters published in the edited book reflect what was perceived as high-quality research acceptable to editors and peers in the field. The part titled "Bologna Process in the Global Higher Education Arena. Going Digital?" in the book largely focused on opportunities for individuals and largely reflected the same bias as the answers provided by ChatGPT 3.5. Individual-level and system-level risks were not properly addressed in the past.

2.2 ChatGPT

For the purposes of this chapter, ChatGPT 3.5 was asked in January 2024 two questions with an assumption of causality between digitalisation and what is going on in higher education. The first question was: "How does digitalization affect the values of higher education?" The second question was: "How has digitalization affected higher education?" Based on the content of the Internet up to the LLM's latest update, the answers were programmed to simulate text written by humans. ChatGPT 3.5 combines words according to what is the likely word order found in prior texts and by creating highly structured text (Herbold et al., 2023). This also includes listing many sides of the argument and creating text intended to give the impression of a balanced view (Huang & Tan, 2023). The answers showed digital transformation in a very positive light and revealed a bias.

The answer to the first question mentioned a "Positive Impact" at the individual level under the following headings: "Accessibility and Inclusivity"; "Flexibility and Lifelong Learning"; "Collaboration and Globalization"; "Personalization of Learning"; "Efficiency and Resource Optimization"; "Technological Literacy"; "Engagement and Active Learning"; and "Continuous Improvement and Innovation". The answer to the first question mentioned a "Mixed Impact" under the headings "Critical Thinking and Information Literacy" and "Ethical Considerations". The answer's simulated balanced view was largely positive: "While digitalization brings about numerous positive changes, it is essential for higher education institutions to address challenges such as digital inequality, the digital divide, and the need for ongoing professional development for faculty to ensure that the values of higher education remain at the forefront of the digital era."

The answer to the second question revealed a similar positive bias. When asked how digitalisation has affected higher education, ChatGPT 3.5 produced various examples of "transformation" and "enhancement" but just one "challenge". "Transformation" was mentioned under the headings "Online Learning and Remote Education", "Blended Learning Models", "Collaboration and Communication", "Personalized Learning", "Assessment and Feedback", "Research and Innovation", "Globalization of Education" and "Changing Pedagogical Approaches". "Enhancement" was mentioned under the headings “Access to Resources”, “Administrative Efficiency” and “Technological Literacy”. The only “challenge” was described under the heading “Challenges and Inequalities”: “While digitalization has brought about positive changes, it has also highlighted and exacerbated existing inequalities. The digital divide, issues of access to technology, and concerns about digital literacy need to be addressed to ensure equitable access to education.”

It is not possible for any human to explain how the LLM produced its particular answers in this or any other case. The answers cannot be called findings because the LLM is not designed to produce findings alleged to be true (OpenAI, 2024). What we know is that large datasets based on texts from the Internet overrepresent hegemonic viewpoints and encode biases (Bender et al., 2021). In this case, the hegemonic viewpoint reflects technology optimism.

2.3 Bologna Process Ministerial Documents

There is no coherent development of technology and digitalisation policy in the ministerial declarations of the Bologna Process, but the Bologna Process seems to have shared the technology optimism of the 1990s. There is a major difference between the earlier ministerial declarations and communiqués and the Yerevan, Paris, and Rome Communiqués (Bologna Process, 2015, 2018, 2020a).

Before the Yerevan Communiqué, digitalisation did not play any major role in the ministerial declarations and communiqués. The Sorbonne Declaration briefly mentioned “the ability to use new information technologies” as something “undergraduates should have access to” (Bologna Process, 1998: 2). The Bologna Declaration focused on the integration of European countries in the area of higher education rather than on technology (Bologna Process, 1999). The Prague Communiqué called for lifelong learning strategies because of technological advancement: “lifelong learning strategies are necessary to face the challenges of competitiveness and the use of new technologies and to improve social cohesion, equal opportunities and the quality of life” (Bologna Process, 2001: 2). The Berlin Communiqué emphasised research more strongly. Ministers asked “Higher Education Institutions to increase the role and relevance of research to technological, social and cultural evolution and to the needs of society” (Bologna Process, 2003: 7). The Communiqué of the Conference in Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve mentioned “the major challenge and the ensuing opportunities of globalisation and accelerated technological developments with new providers, new learners and new types of learning” and proposed student-centred learning as the answer: “Student-centred learning and mobility will help students develop the competences they need in a changing labour market and will empower them to become active and responsible citizens” (Bologna Process, 2009: 1, paragraph 2). In the Bucharest Communiqué, the ministers agreed to “[e]ncourage knowledge-based alliances in the EHEA, focusing on research and technology” (Bologna Process, 2012: 5).

Digitalisation and technological advancement played a more central role in the Yerevan, Paris, and Rome Communiqués (Bologna Process, 2015; Bologna Process, 2018; Bologna Process, 2020a). By focusing on the opportunities of digitalisation for students, these Communiqués reflected the optimism and bias of the 1990s.

On the one hand, the Yerevan Communiqué did list major societal challenges: “Today, the EHEA faces serious challenges. It is confronted with a continuing economic and social crisis, dramatic levels of unemployment, increasing marginalization of young people, demographic changes, new migration patterns, and conflicts within and between countries, as well as extremism and radicalization.” (Bologna Process, 2015: 1).

On the other hand, the Yerevan Communiqué did not see digitalisation as a contributor to any societal problems. Instead, digitalisation was regarded as an opportunity: “[R]apid development of knowledge and technology, which impacts on societies and economies, plays an increasingly important role in the transformation of higher education and research. The EHEA has a key role to play in addressing these challenges and maximizing these opportunities …” (*ibid.*: 1).

In the Yerevan Communiqué, the perceived opportunities provided by digital technologies related to student-centred learning. The ministers “encourage and support higher education institutions and staff in promoting pedagogical innovation in student-centred learning environments and in fully exploiting the potential benefits of digital technologies for learning and teaching” (Bologna Process, 2015: 2). A “major goal” of the EHEA was “[f]ostering the employability of graduates throughout their working lives in rapidly changing labour markets–characterised by technological developments …” (*ibid.*: 2).

In the Paris Communiqué, the ministers called on the BFUG to “take the issue of digitalisation forward”. The ministers agreed to “enable our education systems to make better use of digital and blended education, with appropriate quality assurance, in order to enhance lifelong and flexible learning, foster digital skills and competences, improve data analysis, educational research and foresight, and remove regulatory obstacles to the provision of open and digital education” (Bologna Process, 2018: 3).

The Rome Communiqué built on the themes of the Yerevan and Paris Communiqués. Like the Yerevan Communiqué, the Rome Communiqué treated digitalisation as a solution to challenges and asked for larger deployment of digital technologies. According to the Rome Communiqué, the limitations of the use of digital means must be overcome, and the opportunities offered by technological development for research-based learning and teaching and lifelong learning must be expanded. The “new opportunities provided by digitalisation” should be used “fully” (Bologna Process, 2020a: 5). The ministers asked the BFUG to propose “ways in which all learners can benefit from the new technologies” (*ibid.*: 5). The ministers committed to “investing in the development of digital skills and competences for all” (*ibid.*: 6). The Rome Communiqué mentioned numerous opportunities associated with the deployment of digital technologies.

The Rome Communiqué only hinted at the potential negative impacts of digital transformation in a sentence on ethics: “While our societies increasingly rely on innovative technologies, including artificial intelligence, we must ensure that these observe ethical standards and human rights and foster inclusion” (*ibid*.: 5).

2.4 The Bologna Process Researchers’ Conference 2020

The sentiment of the 2015 Yerevan and 2020 Rome Communiqués seems to have been shared by EHEA researchers at the time. The fourth edition of the Bologna Process Researchers’ Conference indicates how the role of digitalisation and its impacts on higher education were perceived within the EHEA’s research community just before cross-border mobility was blocked by the COVID-19 crisis. The edited book (Curaj et al., 2020a) published after the conference reflects the state-of-the-art acceptable to editors and peers.

The introduction that sets the scene is an echo from the 1990s: “Digitalization has suddenly become the way of preserving our social contacts and thus our humanity, instead of being viewed as an obstacle to real human interaction … [D]igitalizing every academic process … is a huge opportunity for a leap forward.” (Curaj et al., 2020b: xxxi–xxxiii).

In the part titled “Bologna Process in the Global Higher Education Arena. Going Digital?”, the first and sixth chapters stand out.

The sixth chapter stands out because it promises to address fundamental questions: “Digitalisation does not specify what type of goals it is ultimately following … It does not answer the ‘why’ question. Furthermore, it also doesn’t answer the ‘how’ question—i.e., how this ‘transformation’ will happen. This insight uncovers a first set of key factors to consider in the context of digitalisation in higher education.” (Orr et al., 2020: 583). Since digitalisation is not values-neutral (Kranzberg, 1986), digital transformation is indeed a question of values (“why”), and it would be important to understand the mechanisms of digital transformation (“how”) in order to understand what is going on before choosing proper action. The sixth chapter also identifies “a second set of key factors which are important to consider in the context of digitalisation. These refer to the type of organisational structures common in a higher education system.” (Orr et al., 2020: 584). It certainly would be important to assess the organisational and system-level mechanisms and impacts of digitalisation.

However, rather than answer the fundamental questions, the sixth chapter mainly focuses on a White Paper titled “Bologna Digital 2020” (Rampelt et al., 2019). The six focus areas of the White Paper are: “More Proactive Preparation, Admission and Transition”; “Skills for the Digital Age”; “New Mobility Patterns: Virtual Exchange and Blended Mobility”; “Recognition of (Prior) Learning”; “Quality Assurance”; and “Strategies for Teaching and Learning in the Digital Age” (Orr et al., 2020: 588). These focus areas mainly reflect traditional learner-level questions with “Quality Assurance” potentially raising some system-level challenges.

If system-level challenges are one side of the coin, the other side chooses to address them as the object of quality assurance. For example, the authors of the sixth chapter mention “concerns about degree mills …, fraud … and indeed lack of control and oversight in the formal education system" (*ibid*.: 589). However, the authors take a learner-centric approach: "If digital learning leads to students acquiring learning in many different settings, this less institution-focussed provision means that quality assurance must also be less institution-focussed and more learner-centric." (*Ibid*.: 589). The learner-centric approach may mean that the authors miss some system-level phenomena (Simon, 1996). The authors do point out in another context that "bottom-up and 'grassroots' initiatives … tend to have the disadvantage that they lack a realistic view of the whole system", but the authors only recognise this as a hindrance on the path to digital transformation as "this might inhibit an adoption of … practices at scale" (Orr et al., 2020: 590; see also Kampylis et al., 2014).

The first chapter (Orr, 2020) is mainly about opportunities and possibilities but stands out by making a connection to some values and addressing some risks. According to Orr, "a review of how higher education might benefit from the opportunities and possibilities provided by digitalisation will have to start out from a question of what the main goals for higher education should be" (*ibid*.: 503). To Orr, higher education seems to be a question of skills development and meeting the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals[2] (SDGs). Orr mentions the need for a package of skills termed "digital literacy" (*ibid*.: 506) and points out that the Paris Communiqué calls on "higher education institutions to prepare their students and support their teachers to act creatively in a digitalized environment" (Bologna Process, 2018: 3; Orr, 2020: 510). Moreover, Orr mentions how the Paris Communiqué emphasises the ministers' commitment to meeting the SDGs (Orr, 2020: 508).

Orr identifies two kinds of risks. The first type includes "more extreme versions of developments … according to the new public management paradigm … based on an administrative understanding of higher education" and, "everything being even more measurable than before", "strengthening the neoliberal concept of a fully utilitarian version of higher education" (*ibid.:* 504 citing Dougherty & Natow, 2015; Stahlke & Nyce, 1996; and Johnston et al., 2018). Moreover, Orr briefly mentions "the ethical consequences of Artificial Intelligence" (Orr, 2020: 509).

This chapter largely leaves both the "why" and the "how" questions unanswered. The system-level risks and challenges remain open as the references to the "new public management paradigm" and "the neoliberal concept" fail to describe the fundamental drivers of the digital transformation, the mechanisms of digital economy, and their connection to the values of higher education.

The other chapters of "Going Digital?" are variations of the same theme. The second chapter "stems from a strong belief in preparing university students for the demands of a rapidly evolving business world" (Planells-Artigot & Moll-Lopez, 2020). The fifth chapter (Grosseck et al., 2020) refers to barriers to going digital as action priorities for digital transformation and identifies some opportunities which can be easily implemented in a university. The third chapter (Whitworth, 2020) is about pedagogy, and the fourth about digital humanities (Chitez et al., 2020). These

[2] https://sdgs.un.org/goals, accessed April 10, 2024.

chapters are not designed to flag concerns about the system-level risks of the digital transformation of higher education.

Since the part titled "Going Digital?" largely focuses on opportunities for individuals, it fails to properly address individual-level and system-level risks. There seems to have been an EHEA research silo with little interdisciplinary input. Were the speed of digital transformation slow in higher education, it could take some time for long-term problems to emerge and critical digitalisation studies from other social sciences to become interesting in higher education. However, higher education has been adopting digital technology relatively fast (Williamson, 2021; UNESCO, 2023b: 4, 7, 8). Therefore, the focus on opportunities for individuals seems to reflect a bias. For example, the contributors did not address the effects of digitalisation on the higher education market (UNESCO, 2023b: 54), institutional organisation (Komljenovič et al., 2024; McGill, 2023), and scientific publishing (UNESCO, 2021a).

3 Reality Check After COVID-19

3.1 General Remarks

If we shared the optimism of the 1990s, it would be easy to list numerous opportunities provided by digital technologies and describe how all values of higher education are potentially enhanced by digital transformation. However, reality does not match the hype. The deployment of digital technologies in higher education also creates risks for individuals and, at the system level, for higher education institutions, other organisations, and society in general. It would not be reasonable to assume that higher education remains free from the risks that are characteristic of digital transformation in general.

The opportunities and risks of the digitalisation of education have been discussed in two recent waves of studies. Due to the global nature of digital transformation and the inevitable need to make national policy choices worldwide, international organisations have played an important role in the discourse. The first wave of studies has a connection to the digitalisation of education during the COVID-19 pandemic, with an initial optimism turning into a more sombre view. While many of these first-wave studies focus on young learners (e.g., Gottschalk, 2019; Small et al., 2020; Näpärä, 2019; Schleicher, 2023; Munoz-Najar et al., 2021; Barron Rodriguez et al., 2022), there are also studies that address higher education and system-level impacts (Williamson, 2018; Williamson & Hogan, 2020; West, 2023; Komljenovič, 2022; Komljenovič et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2023b; Øvrelid et al., 2023). The second wave was triggered by the development of ChatGPT and generative AI tools (e.g., DeLoss, 2023; UNESCO, 2021b; Sabzalieva & Valentini, 2023; Ouyang et al., 2022; Pisica et al., 2023; Crompton & Burke, 2024; Escotet, 2023; UNESCO, 2023a). In education, the AI policy discourse seems to be a balancing act between perceived commercial potential and ethical challenges (e.g., Verbeek & Lundqvist, 2021).

3.2 Learners

Learners will need digital literacy skills. For this reason, it is "vital" that "teaching and learning innovate to ensure education stays relevant" (Schleicher, 2023: 7). In OECD countries, the knowledge and skills of young students are regularly tested by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA[3]). The learning outcomes connected to the digitalisation of education have raised concerns.

On the one hand, PISA shows that the majority of 15-year-olds have embraced learning through digital technologies (*ibid*.: 31) and that there is "a positive relationship between the intentional integration of technology in school education and student performance" (*ibid.*: 33). On the other hand, the global trend is that the proficiency of 15-year-olds in maths, reading and science is "heading in the wrong direction" (*ibid.*: 7).

Digital transformation has contributed to declining proficiency levels. First, effective learning in digital settings requires a foundation of skills. Students who were "more self-assured in their ability to learn independently and remotely scored higher in all studied subjects" during the pandemic, according to PISA (*ibid.*: 32). This indicates a risk of polarisation and requires focusing on the foundations: "The rising bar for educational success in the digital age puts even greater pressure on education systems to secure strong foundations. The great risk is that technology will super-empower those with strong knowledge and skills while leaving weaker performers further behind" (*ibid.*: 23). Second, time spent on digital devices plays a role. While some time spent on digital devices can improve learning outcomes, too much time will make learning outcomes worse (*ibid.*: 34). Third, "devices used for leisure such as smart phones can distract from learning, expose students to cyber bullying and compromise their privacy" (*ibid.*: 33).

While the digital transformation of society overall can hamper learning in light of the declining proficiency levels of 15-year-olds, the intentional integration of technology can improve learning outcomes. This inherent contradiction between the digital transformation of society and the deployment of digital technologies in education creates a challenge. The challenge is "to foster the purposeful and productive integration of digital technology into learning environments, while minimising their potential to distract" (*ibid.*: 34). Generally, the conclusion of PISA is that "[l]earning analytics hold perhaps the greatest promise of digital technologies" (*ibid.*: 32).

According to a UNESCO (2023b) report on technology in education, the suitability and value of digital technology need to be proven in relation to a human-centred vision of education. In other words, change does not always mean progress. The report points out that decision-makers are faced with four challenging – and value-based - trade-offs: personalisation and adaptation v. the need to maintain the social dimension of education; inclusivity v. exclusivity; the commercial interests of the education technology industry v. the commons; and short-term efficiency advantages v. the full long-term costs. According to the report, overreliance on technology is not appropriate. The report cites evidence showing that learning benefits disappear

[3] https://www.oecd.org/pisa/, accessed April 10, 2024.

if technology is used in excess or in the absence of a qualified teacher. Moreover, learning inequities between students widen when instruction is exclusively remote. The report on technology in education also calls for appropriate governance and regulation (*ibid*).

A World Bank twin report on the impact of COVID-19 on education (Munoz-Najar et al., 2021; Barron Rodriguez et al., 2022) reaches the conclusion that the availability of technology is a necessary but not sufficient condition for effective remote learning, that education is an intense human interaction endeavour, and that teachers are more critical than ever. The twin report points out that inequalities were amplified during the crisis and discusses an opportunity to reimagine the traditional model of school-based learning. A study from UNESCO paints a sombre picture of the outcomes of edtech and makes a case for the primacy of school-based learning (West, 2023).

Such studies tend to focus on younger learners but are relevant for higher education for two reasons. First, students enter higher education with a package of cognitive and learning skills that today are affected by digitalisation (Gottschalk, 2019; Small et al., 2020). Second, it is reasonable to assume that the use of digital tools has a similar impact on learning in higher education. For example, attention problems caused by extensive use of digital technology might hamper learning at all educational levels. Scarcity of attention is the dark side of the wealth of information (Simon, 1971).

As regards higher education, replacing teaching in the classroom with a digital learning space during COVID-19 may have produced as many credits as before, but it has reduced the perceived learning outcomes and increased loneliness. It has turned out that the social aspects of both structured education and student life play an important role (Øvrelid et al., 2023: 65). Moreover, the digitalisation of learning is complemented by the digitalisation of subjects, that is, by increased study of digital objects, increased use of digital sources, and a move towards a digital representation of professional knowledge (*ibid*.: 57). Digitalisation has so far meant increased use of English. Nearly 90% of the content in higher education repositories with open education resource collections was created in Europe and Northern America (Santos-Hermosa et al., 2017), and 92% of the material in the Open Educational Resources Commons global library is in English (Janssen et al., 2023).

To sum up the message of these studies, there is no high-quality learning for all without the primacy of school-based learning with qualified teachers teaching in the classroom. There are limits to the digitalisation of education. It is more important to ensure the foundations of education than digitalise education (see already European Commission, 2012, Sect. 1.2). The fundamental goals should always be human-centred education and high-quality learning rather than digitalisation. Having said this, digital technologies should be integrated into higher education where it is a purposeful and productive tool to reach educational goals. Students need to acquire the necessary digital skills for the purposes of learning and future employment. Since digital technologies penetrate all sectors of society, all students should learn to use them at a professional level (see also European Commission, 2022, Sect. 5.2; Brady, 2019). Moreover, as citizens, students should acquire knowledge of the connection between digital transformation and societal processes.

3.3 Institutions

Digital transformation means a growing higher education sector with increasing competition, polarisation, and commercialisation. Digital transformation changes the markets that institutions operate in, and the way institutions are organised.

Technological advancement has increased the volume of higher education since the invention of printing (McLuhan, 1962). Digital transformation has meant growth (Deeks, 2021; Sigalés, 2021). There is an increase in the number of students, institutions (Williams & Usher, 2022), alternative forms of education, alternative providers of education, alternative providers of quality assurance (EQAR, 2018, Vision; Tück, 2022), publishing channels (Nishikawa-Pacher, 2022), and publications (Wu, Wang and Evans; Park et al., 2023; Kozlov, 2023).

The growth of higher education means increasing international competition for talented students and staff (e.g., Marginson, 2006; Buckner, 2019). Competition in a large market tends to create hard-to-enter elite universities that have a better chance to combine the best talent with the best research resources and the best career prospects for graduates (e.g., Binder & Abel, 2019; Zhang et al., 2022). Institutional rankings tend to turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton, 1948; Espeland & Sauder, 2007), and positions at the two ends of the scale tend to be cemented over time (Hamann, 2016) due to the "Matthew effect" (Merton, 1968). If digital transformation has resulted in increasing differences between the students' skills at the secondary level, one can expect a widening gap between more selective and less selective institutions at the higher level.

Digital transformation has changed the position of higher education institutions in the market. While the marketisation and commodification of higher education started long ago (e.g., Skinner, 2019; Wilkinson & Wilkinson, 2023), the digital infrastructure of higher education has brought new aspects (Williamson, 2018). Institutions have become reliant on the intellectual property of large companies that can extract economic rent (Komljenovič et al., 2024), and institutions have become customers of digital platform companies (Komljenovič, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic speeded up this process by triggering a rapid shift to remote online learning and increasing the markets of commercial edtech sector (Williamson & Hogan, 2020).

This has created new commercial opportunities for companies. The availability of digital platforms has generally made it easier for new entities to provide education or educational products and compete against traditional institutions. There is plenty of potential for companies in consumer edtech. Edtech can be sold not only to institutions but also to students under a direct-to-consumer model of education. The merger of e-commerce and education can generally open the door to new kinds of for-profit online educational service providers. In the long term, the operators of large platforms such as Amazon are in a good position to sell their own edtech and provide for-profit but low-cost educational products (Williamson et al., 2022). Such educational products may include, for example, employment-based schemes, small modules of learning focusing on particular skills, or micro-credentials. In the digital economy, it is customary for the operators of large platforms to grow by entering new markets, offering new products, and becoming increasingly state-like corporations (*ibid*.; Eichensehr, 2019; Lehdonvirta, 2022).

The digital infrastructure that higher education is embedded in has also had an impact on institutional management. Digitalisation is one of the drivers of centralisation, a top-down management culture, increased competition for contracts, and more individualist institutional behaviour in two ways.

First, digitalisation has facilitated the financial business model in the management of institutions. In the higher education discourse, it is customary to refer to the new public management paradigm or label new professional management practices as neoliberalism (see, for example, Orr, 2020: 504; Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023). There may also have been a shift to a more hierarchical system due to government action (Shattock & Horvath, 2019: 122). In any case, changes in the practices of public management and university management reflect wider changes in corporate management and the reception of economic theory in the societal discourse (see already Polanyi, 1944). In the 1970s and 1980s, the traditional managerial business model of large US corporations was replaced by the contractual notion of the firm (Bratton, 1989) and a new business model that can be called transactional or financial. The financial business model is an application of neoclassical economic theory, in particular, the agency theory (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). Its societal impacts have been very controversial (Ghoshal, 2003; Ghoshal, 2005; Pfeffer, 2005; Colander et al., 2009; Wang et al., 2011). Nevertheless, the financial business model has influenced university management (Sanyal & Martin, 1996; Heaton et al., 2023). This model, in effect, treats the institution's central management as the hub of contracts and members of academic staff as resource providers who compete for contracts. The organisation of a higher education institution as a network of long-term, short-term, temporary, or project-based contracts would not be possible without digital platforms. Moreover, digitalisation has facilitated the use of metrics to optimise the utilisation of resources such as staff (see, for example, the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment, commonly known as DORA).

Second, the need to optimise the digital infrastructure at an institutional level requires centralisation. Digital transformation has required greater investments in digital technology and centralised administrative IT services (Deutsch et al., 2021; International Association of Universities and a Politecnico di Milano Research Group, 2023; Øvrelid et al., 2023: 55, 69–70). This has meant an increase in the relative weight of central administration.

3.4 Teachers

On the one hand, the digitalisation of higher education is not only top-down but also bottom-up. Academic staff are interested in how digitalisation can support education and research (Øvrelid et al., 2023: 55). Digital transformation has had an impact on the teaching, monitoring, and evaluation methods used by academic staff. The digitalisation of education is complemented by the digitalisation of subjects with increased access to algorithms and data (*ibid*.: 67, 69).

On the other hand, digital transformation has also had an impact on teachers' job security, assessment, workload, and psychosocial stress.

In the technical sense, "anything that can be done in a traditional classroom can also be done in a virtual learning environment", but the "choice depends on the purpose", that is, "the type of learning we want to provide and the type of students that it is aimed at" (Sigalés, 2021: 419). There is no quality education unless such choices are made by competent teachers. While the availability of technology may, to some extent, empower teachers, there can be a conflict between the teachers' pedagogical or content knowledge and external requirements as to the use of technology (Näpärä, 2019).

The quality of such decisions may be hampered by the changing nature of employment. Research and teaching faculty are recruited from an increasingly global pool under contracts that, to a large extent, are short-term, temporary, or project-based (Finkelstein et al., 2016; Finkelstein, 2017; Hildbrand, 2018; Wolf & Jenkins, 2020: 17–18; OECD, 2021). Moreover, digital transformation has increased the use of quantitative metrics (Muller, 2018) as proxies of quality in the assessment of teachers and recruitment decisions. There is an inherent conflict between doing what narrow metrics require and the broad values of higher education. DORA and the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment have been attempts to address this problem by recommending a more holistic evaluation (e.g., DORA principles 3–5 and 15; CoARA, 2022: 4, 8, commitments 1 and 2). In any case, when teachers and researchers compete for contracts, they need to focus on whatever secures employment. Evidence suggests that the temporary employment of teachers has adverse results for teachers and students (Jacoby, 2006; Jaeger & Eagan, 2009, 2010).

Digital transformation has increased the workload and psychosocial stress of academic staff (OECD, 2024: 84). This should be a cause of concern in light of the fact that higher education is one of the areas with the highest prevalence of burnout (Fernández-Suárez et al., 2021).

3.5 Productivity Growth

Expectations relating to productivity growth are important for higher education for three reasons. First, higher education suffers from low productivity growth due to its inherent nature (Baumol & Bowen, 1965). Second, student numbers have been growing across the EHEA as a whole (with some country variations at different periods; see European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020: 17–19), in the US (Gerber, 2014: 118) and worldwide, with global participation in tertiary education doubling between 2000 and 2020 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2022). Third, while this combination has made the public funding of higher education increasingly challenging, digital transformation has at least partly been expected to help cure the problem.

However, there is little evidence of a general societal trend of increased productivity growth linked to digitalisation (Gordon, 2000). In fact, productivity growth has declined sharply across OECD countries over the past decades (OECD, 2015; Gordon, 2016). The nature of the new technologies may have contributed to the decline. According to OECD studies, digital technologies are challenging to use (Sorbe et al., 2019; OECD, 2024: 43). This means that productivity gains may only materialise after large investments have been made in many areas of society (Kremer, 1993). In research, the exponential growth of published research (Bornmann et al., 2021) has gone hand in hand with declining qualitative productivity: major breakthroughs are becoming rarer and require more work than in the past (Bloom et al., 2020).

Thus, there is reason to be sceptical (see Facer & Selwyn, 2021) about promises that a certain digital technology will increase the efficiency of teaching and produce better results at a lower cost (for an example of such a promise, see Boel et al., 2023). The benefits may not materialise without a holistic approach, changes in many areas, and large investments (Gkrimpizi et al., 2023).

4 Values

If the digital transformation of higher education implies opportunities and risks at the individual level, the institutional level, and higher system levels, it has an impact on values in multiple ways.

It is customary to focus on potential benefits for learners. However, there can be risks as well. Furthering inclusion and providing quality higher education to all are threatened by the polarisation of learning outcomes and declining proficiency levels connected to the digitalisation of secondary education. There are similar cognitive, pedagogical, and societal mechanisms in higher education.

The fundamental values of higher education as defined in the EHEA include public responsibility *for* and *of* higher education (Bologna Process, 2020a: 5). Unrealistic expectations relating to productivity gains brought by digitalisation are a threat to sufficient public investment in higher education. Moreover, when alternative providers of education (e.g., European Council, 2022, paragraph 8(a)) and alternative providers of quality assurance (Tück, 2022) enter the higher education market, states may be tempted to rely more on market forces in the provision of higher education. Faced with rising costs, governments might assume that productivity in the provision of higher education can be increased by innovative technologies, argue that companies can provide quality education at a lower cost by digital means, and accept a more prominent role for companies in the provision of higher education (e.g., Rizvi, 2016; Fernández et al., 2023: 12,375, 12,366; Ljungqvist & Sonesson, 2022). There is a risk that the privatisation of education makes educational outcomes worse at the aggregate level (OECD, 2020: 158, 163) due to the economic drivers of private actors (Hart et al., 1997; Vlachos, 2012; Vlachos, 2019) and undermines the role of a nation's high education level as a public good. Privatised higher education markets–such as those driven by digital transformation–would thus raise questions about the public responsibility for higher education and the public responsibility of higher education.

There is neither institutional autonomy nor academic freedom without the "participation of students and staff in higher education governance" (Bologna Process, 2018, 2020a). The principle of "collegiality" (UNESCO, 1997, paragraph 32) belongs to the "essential components of meaningful autonomy for institutions of higher education" (*ibid.*, paragraph 2). Such meaningful participation and collegiality are likely to be hampered by the increased centralisation of institutional management, reduced employment security for staff, and distance working.

Academic freedom is hampered when researchers or teachers have fixed-term or temporary employment contracts, and the quality of their work is assessed based on narrow quantitative metrics. When institutions are organised around digital platforms, it is easier to organise them as contract-based networks. This amplifies the impact of performance measurement on faculty. While performance measurement has traditionally been necessary to produce accountability and ensure the fairness of evaluations, the digitalisation of higher education has increased the availability of performance data. Combined with the focus on economic efficiency, the wealth of digital data may have contributed to a quantification or metric fixation (Muller, 2018: 47; Mau, 2019; Infantino & Bussani, 2023) that has forced academics to focus on outputs that are easy for management - or the government (e.g., United Nations, 2020, paragraph 56(b)) - to measure as a precondition of employment or funding. A metric fixation can thus dilute academic freedom that belongs to the fundamental values of the EHEA. This also explains the need for DORA and the CoARA Agreement.

At the societal level, digital transformation has increased economic and political polarisation and undermined trust in representative democracy and European values. There is a risk that the digital transformation of higher education will make it more difficult for society to address such fundamental challenges. Higher education has a qualification function, a socialisation function, and an individualisation function, that is, the function of helping students become more autonomous and independent in their thinking and acting (Biesta, 2010: 20–21). While the deployment of digital technologies has been closely connected with the qualification function, the classroom may be better for socialisation and individualisation. The classroom may act as "a preparation stage for the individual becoming a citizen in a democratic society" (Holmes et al., 2022: 63). Digital transformation makes it more important to focus not just on information-processing skills such as literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy but also on socio-emotional, communication, and meta-cognitive skills (OECD, 2023: 23, 145–146, 152, 161–163).

5 Recommendations for the EHEA Policy and Practice

The rapid digitalisation triggered by COVID-19 has created lasting and transformational changes in higher education. Digital transformation affects all members of the higher education community nationally and internationally. It requires complex values-based choices (see e.g., Rudschies et al., 2021 on AI) at all levels, from individuals to institutions and governments. The Bologna Process is no exception. Since digitalised higher education seems to be the new normal, there can be no meaningful international higher education policy without addressing digitalisation. There should be a stronger focus on digitalisation in the EHEA policy dialogue, policy making and analysis (policy discourse). Moreover, its broad connections to the fundamental values of higher education in the EHEA should be clarified in order to facilitate reasonable values-based choices. A balance should be found between multiple potentially conflicting goals and between digitalised and other forms of education. The Ministers of the EHEA should ask the BFUG to continue its work on digitalisation and prepare a balanced view.

The members of the EHEA should not put technology first in higher education. Instead, they should adopt a humanistic approach as an overarching principle for their higher education policies. Moreover, they should respect the fundamental rights of individuals (e.g., AI HLEG, 2019: 10; UNESCO, 2021a, para. 8).

To address the opportunities and risks of digital transformation in the EHEA policy discourse, it would be necessary to adopt a holistic approach. The holistic approach should also take into account the existence of risks for the members of the higher education community and system-level risks. In the EHEA policy discourse, prior studies on the outcomes of digital transformation at other educational levels should be complemented by research focusing on the outcomes of digital transformation in higher education. The EHEA policy discourse should draw insights from a larger pool of scientific disciplines.

A major new challenge for the member states of the EHEA is polarisation. The digital transformation of society has contributed to economic and political polarisation. In the narrower context of higher education, polarisation takes the form of a widening gap in the skills of entrants, a widening gap between permanent and temporary or fixed-term staff, a widening gap between highly selective universities and the rest, and a widening gap between political views on campus. The widening gap between people creates a serious threat to the values that the EHEA is based on and to democracy.

It is necessary to address such polarisation. To ensure quality education for all, the members of the EHEA should discuss actions to improve the proficiency levels of secondary-level students and reduce the growing gap in their skills. In higher education, the members of the EHEA should emphasise the need to ensure that students first obtain strong foundations or the package of skills without which it is not possible to concentrate on the actual substance of the studies at a high academic level in a digital environment. Moreover, the members of the EHEA should build on the primacy of in-person, school-based and human-to-human education as a way to address polarisation and build strong foundations. Students, teachers, and researchers should meet under the same roof.

Regardless of the digital transformation of education, there is no quality higher education without competent teachers. Rather than reduce the need for teachers, digitalisation has increased their workload. To improve the quality of education, the members of the EHEA should more strongly highlight employment security and attractive researcher and teacher careers as a fundamental component of quality education. Moreover, the members of the EHEA should focus more on the development of teacher skills.

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Frameworks for Doctoral Education: Academic Freedom of Doctoral Candidates Across Europe

Pil Maria Saugmann and Hannah Schoch

Abstract Both the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Union (EU) consider academic freedom a fundamental value of higher education. As several recent policy reports highlight (Maassen et al. in March State of play of academic freedom in the EU member states: overview of de facto trends and developments, European Parliament, 2023; Kinzelbach et al. in FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg and V-Dem Institute, 2023; Bennetot Pruvot et al. in University autonomy in Europe IV, The scorecard 2023, European university association, 2023; Beiter et al. in Vanderbilt J Trans Law 49(3), 2016; Freedom House in Freedom in the World, 2023), academic freedom is in decline globally, including across Europe. For Europe, these reports focus on the academic freedom of researchers, teachers, and students—with students being at the bachelor's or master's level while researchers and academic staff are assumed to be holders of doctorates with permanent employment. However, as stipulated in the Salzburg Principles and Recommendations adopted by the European University Association (EUA), doctoral education is a research education and, as such, differs markedly from bachelor's and master's education. Furthermore, doctoral candidates, like other contingent faculty, often work under precarious conditions that differ significantly from the conditions of researchers with tenured or permanent positions. This means that their very specific circumstances cannot be addressed if they are subsumed under either the group of students or researchers. In Europe, doctoral candidates and early career researchers in non-permanent positions make up a considerable proportion of researchers working in academia. This paper addresses this blind spot in the current European discussion on academic freedom by providing an overview of national, regional, and, in some cases, institutional frameworks of doctoral education across Europe. It specifically looks at what these frameworks mean for the academic freedom of doctoral candidates in ten European countries,

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particularly in light of the fact that none of them explicitly take the fundamental values of the EHEA into account.

Keywords Academic freedom · Doctoral education · Regulatory frameworks · Bologna process · European Higher Education Area

1 Introduction: Academic Freedom in the Context of Doctoral Education

Recent policy reports highlight that academic freedom is under pressure globally as well as in Europe (Kinzelbach et al., 2023; Maassen et al., 2023; Bennetot Pruvot et al., 2023; Beiter et al., 2016; Freedom House, 2023). Academic freedom is, however, fundamental to both a functioning higher education system and a healthy democracy and thus should be enjoyed by all members of the academic community (Fuchs, 1963:1; European Higher Education Area 2020a, b; Bergan et al., 2020a). These recent policy reports focus on the academic freedom of researchers, teachers, and students–with students being at the bachelor's or m aster's level while researchers and teachers in Europe are usually assumed to be holders of doctorates. None of these reports pays specific attention to the distinct context of doctoral education. Though the reports by Kinzelbach et al. (2023) and Maassen et al. (2023) mention concerns regarding the precarious employment conditions of academic staff, they do not discuss further the complexity of what this entails. Precarity is thereby treated as an anomaly, though doctoral candidates–together with other academics i n non-permanent positions–constitute more than half of the researchers in Europe (ETER, 2024; Eurostat, 2023).

With the increase of the number of doctoral candidates in many countries across Europe in the past decade (Eurostat, 2024; OECD, 2021:24) and the professionalisation of doctoral education (Andres et al., 2015), this layer of education has come to figure as a crucial arena where the higher education institutions' core mission is shaped. It lays important groundwork for the future generations of senior researchers and teachers and thus for how they will shape the higher education and research sector in the decades to come. Taylor proposes that "academic freedom is an integral part of generating academic success that cannot be commanded from the top down but must be nurtured from the bottom up" (Taylor, 2013:85). This, in turn, means that doctoral education can serve to anchor at the core of academia the fundamental values of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), namely academic freedom and integrity, institutional autonomy, participation of students and staff in higher education governance, and public responsibility for and of higher education (European Higher Education Area, 2018).

The Salzburg Principles define doctoral education as research education (European University Association, 2005).[1] Thus, the doctorate in Europe–with some exceptions such as professional doctorates–centres on an individual research project with an original contribution to academic knowledge. Thereby, it differs significantly from bachelor's and master's education. As researchers with no or non-permanent academic employment, their condition also differs significantly from senior faculty, in particular in their dependence on one or more supervisors. This means that the specific circumstances of doctoral candidates[2] cannot be addressed if they are subsumed under either the group of students or senior researchers.

The structure of doctoral education, including admissions requirements, is less standardised than for bachelor's or master's programmes. It not only varies greatly across Europe, but its regulations are also located at different levels–national, institutional (university, faculty, or departmental), or doctoral schools. Such regulations are important to describe not only the responsibilities and rights that doctoral candidates have but also the rights and expectations the academic communities and wider society have when it comes to the governance of doctoral education. A focus on academic freedom in the context of doctoral education brings to the fore the potential tensions between different actors—such as doctoral candidates, supervisors, other faculty, the institution, and public authorities—and key vulnerabilities.

A key vulnerability regarding the academic freedom of doctoral candidates is their precarity,[3] expressed in specific working conditions, such as no or non-permanent employment, short-term contracts, and often lower pay.[4] "One institutional enabler of academic freedom is tenure," Austin and Jones note, and "tenure provides job security to academic peers and provides a mechanism to protect scholars and their work […] In other words, tenure is an institutional protection of academic freedom" (Austin & Jones, 2015:130). Since doctoral candidates do not have the protection of tenure, institutional, national, or international frameworks and policies are especially important for the protection of their academic freedom.[5] However, these often fail

[1] While bachelor's and m aster's students may contribute to the research at higher education institutions, they are not expected to contribute to the production of scientific knowledge with individual original research.

[2] 'Doctoral candidate' refers to any individual enrolled in the third cycle according to the qualifications framework of the European Higher Education Area (European Higher Education Area, 2005)) (QF-EHEA).

[3] This importantly extends to other academic staff in non-permanent positions such as postdoctoral researchers. In 2021, the OECD published a report that highlighted the aggravation of precarity for postdoctoral researchers.

[4] As compared to non-academic salaries for individuals with a master's degree. For example, Switzerland: the median salary for PhD students is CHF 53,000/year, the median salary for master's graduates one year after graduation is CHF 78,400/year; Sweden: the lowest PhD salary is SEK 26,500/month, the minimum wage is SEK 24,098/month, the average wage for newly graduated B.sc is SEK 35,000; Denmark: a Ph.D. salary is KR 27,554/month, a salary for newly graduated master's degree is KR 38,000/month; Hungary: Ph.D. scholarships are between € 365-470/month, the minimum wage is €400-500/month, the average wage is €800/month.

[5] Chakraverty et al. observe furthermore that (prospective) doctoral candidates are themselves increasingly taking academic freedom into consideration when making choices for their research:

to take into account the academic freedom of doctoral candidates. This underscores what Liviu Matei determines more generally, namely that academic freedom has been neglected as a value that anchors higher education policies in Europe: "As a result of its neglect during the process of designing and building the EHEA […], academic freedom as a conceptual reference needed to orient and anchor key aspects of the work in higher education and higher education policy reached a state of underdevelopment, maladaptation and lack of effectiveness in a new historical context" (2023:274). The lack of attention paid to academic freedom for doctoral candidates, combined with the fact that this population is crucially important for the future of academia, underlines the significance of the blind spot in the current European discussion.

Though there is no single established definition of academic freedom (Maassen et al., 2023:7–10), the Rome Ministerial Communiqué of the EHEA considers academic freedom as comprising the freedom to teach, the freedom to learn, and the freedom to conduct research without fear of reprisal (2020). It is a multicomponent value that cannot be considered in a vacuum. Paying attention to doctoral education and academic freedom draws out the complexity of the interplay between different frameworks and regulations, between individual rights, academic self-governance, institutional autonomy, and accountability. To explore how that interplay is dealt with in Europe when it comes to the academic freedom of doctoral candidates, we first analyse existing national frameworks for doctoral education, then discuss what these regulatory frameworks mean for the academic freedom of doctoral candidates, before concluding with five key recommendations.

2 Survey of Select European Countries

The lack of explicit acknowledgement of doctoral candidates' academic freedom in regulations and legislations that pertain to doctoral education means that other indicators need to be used to assess how academic freedom and the other fundamental values of the EHEA are embedded in doctoral education. The analysis of the frameworks for doctoral education presented below includes ten countries: Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Poland, Romania, Sweden, Switzerland, and Ukraine. This choice of countries allows us to cover all major regions of Europe and includes both countries that rate high and countries that rate low on academic freedom according to five key policy reports: Maassen et al. (2023), Kinzelbach et al. (2023), Bennetot Pruvot et al. (2023), Beiter et al. (2016), and Freedom House (2023).

In Table 1, we compile the findings of four of these reports. Maassen et al. (2023) is not included in the table as it is based on data from three of the other studies (Kinzelbach et al., 2023, Bennetot Pruvot et al., 2023, Beiter et al., 2016).

"In recent years, a new factor, that of explicit political interference in research themes, is having an impact on doctoral education. National policies that limit academic freedom and restrict funding for certain research areas can be a driver for outward migration" (Chakraverty et al., 2022:135).

Table 1 State of academic freedom for the sampling countries according to Freedom House scores (2023), Kinzelbach et al. (2023), Beiter et al. (2016) and Bennetot et al. (2023)

	Denmark	Germany	Hungary	Italy	Norway	Poland	Romania	Sweden	Switzerland	Ukraine
Freedom House scores (scale 100%-0% and 4/4)										
Political Rights and Civil Liberties	97%	94%	66%	90%	100%	81%	83%	100%	96%	62% (50%)+
Academic Freedom	4/4	4/4	2/4	4/4	4/4	3/4	3/4	4/4	4/4	3/4 (2/4)+
Kinzelbach et al., 2023 (scale 100% -0% and A-E)	Top 10–20% (32) A	Top 10% (4) A	Bottom 20–30% (136) D	Top 10% (4) A	Top 10–20% (23) A	Top 40–50% (87) A	Top 20–30% (42) B	Top 10% (12) A	Top 10–20% (36) A	Bottom 20–30% (129) D
Beiter et al. 2016 (scale A-F)	38.5 F	64.3 C	36 F	57.5 D	Nl	54.4 D	53.5 D	39.5 F	Nl	Nl
Bennetot Pruvot et al. (2023) (scale 100%-0%)										
Organisational autonomy	87	58–77%[a]	NI	65	78	71	54	59	55	Nl
Financial autonomy	69	35–44%[a]	NI	70	35	60	75	56	72	Nl

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

	Denmark	Germany	Hungary	Italy	Norway	Poland	Romania	Sweden	Switzerland	Ukraine
Staffing autonomy	86	58–63%[a]	NI	49	63	87	84	97	91	Nl
Academic autonomy	72	87–88%[a]	NI	56	83	68	61	67	72	Nl

+The second number (and drop in rating) reflects the particular situation in the occupied areas
[a]In Bennetot Pruvot et al. Germany the following regions were analysed and included individually in the report: Brandenburg, Hesse, and North Rhine-Westphalia

As can be seen in Table 1, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland rank high in the Academic Freedom Index scores (Kinzelbach et al., 2023). Poland and Romania are located in the top third tier, while Hungary and Ukraine are placed in the bottom third tier. However, for all countries, the picture becomes more nuanced once academic freedom or institutional autonomy is broken down into multiple dimensions, as is done in the reports by Bennetot Pruvot et al. (2023) and Maassen et al. (2023). The picture will shift again once the focus is trained on doctoral education.

In order to develop a picture of the state of play of academic freedom for doctoral candidates across Europe, we focused on the national legislations and regulations in place as these create the regulatory framework that sets the standards for doctoral education and doctoral candidates in a given country. Since, as can be seen in Table 1, the picture gets more nuanced if different components are taken into account, we pay attention to the academic freedom of doctoral candidates on different levels: from the individual level (e.g., supervision and the defence of the doctoral thesis) and the level of doctoral candidates as a group (e.g., their right to participate in academic self-governance) to the level of the entire academic communities' freedom to strategically shape research foci and the future of higher education through doctoral education. In that latter point, we follow Austin and Jones, for example, who explicitly link academic self-governance to academic freedom, as "self-determination means that the research and scholarly activities in a university are conceived, directed, and executed by scholars and researchers themselves" (2015:131). However, since academic freedom is always embedded in a larger context, we also look at institutional autonomy and the role of public authorities when it comes to doctoral education. Public authorities set framework conditions for doctoral education not just through legislation and regulations but also through funding and quality assurance, with direct consequences for equitable access to research and learning, as well as for how doctoral candidates can pursue their learning and research. Institutional autonomy, in turn, "refers to the ability of higher education institutions to set and implement their own policies and priorities for teaching and research" (Bergan et al., 2020b:45) without outside pressure or interference. This institutional ability to set priorities and policies for doctoral education links directly to academic freedom in so far as the decision of which doctoral programmes a given higher education institution offers influences fundamentally what kind of research the individual doctoral candidate can pursue, as well as how the research community can cluster research in specific areas through doctoral programmes.

Our analysis of the regulatory frameworks for the selected countries was supplemented, where necessary, by semi-structured interviews with one or two native speakers familiar with doctoral education in each country.[6] We devised 13 questions[7] to be answered for each country through the survey of the legislations and

[6] Many of them expressly asked to remain anonymous and not even disclose the association or institution they are affiliated with.

[7] The questions were sorted into five categories labelled A–E: (A) Academic freedom, (B) Academic governance, (C) Institutional autonomy and the role of public authorities, (D) Percentage of funded

regulations as well as the semi-structured interviews. Importantly, for something to be true for a given country, it had to be in place for *all* of the higher education institutions:

- **Academic freedom**: (A1) Do doctoral candidates have the right to defend their doctoral thesis?; (A2) Is the defence procedure transparent (i.e. is it public, is the thesis publicly accessible, and is the supervisor excluded from being part of the assessment committee)?; (A3) Do doctoral candidates have the right to supervision?; (A4) Do doctoral candidates have the right to change supervisors?
- **Academic self-governance**: (B1) Do doctoral candidates have the right to elect representatives of their own group to ensure their interests are represented?; (B2) Do doctoral candidates belong to one election group?; (B3) What election groups do doctoral candidates belong to?
- **Institutional autonomy and the role of public authorities**: (C1) Does the higher education institution award the doctoral degree?; (C2) Can higher education institutions introduce doctoral programmes without the approval of public authorities?; (C3) Is there quality assurance of doctoral education at the national level?

Meeting these conditions is not necessarily sufficient to guarantee that the fundamental values of the EHEA are embedded in doctoral education on a framework level. However, they provide some indication of what academic freedom looks like in practice for doctoral candidates.

As mentioned above, the countries have been selected for the diversity in their frameworks for doctoral education. The most important findings from the survey are presented in Table 2. It also confirms Matei's observation that "the predicaments of academic freedom in Europe in the first two decades of the twenty-first century amount to a crisis with distinctive regional characteristics rather than national or global" (2023:269). In this table, there is a noticeable shift compared to Table 1. In particular, the picture that emerges for Poland is more positive than in the mentioned policy reports, whereas the opposite is the case for Germany and Switzerland.

Importantly, the working conditions of doctoral candidates frame the space in which they can pursue their research and education. The conditions are central to exacerbating or reducing precarity and, thereby, provide the context for the state of academic freedom and the other fundamental values of EHEA in doctoral education. Here also, clusters of countries emerge: Denmark, Norway, and Sweden form a region that scores high on working conditions, even when the candidates are financed through project funding, and there is a right to change supervisors without losing financing. The number of self-funded candidates is limited.

Then, there are clusters of countries where much of the funding of doctoral candidates is via scholarships. In Romania and Ukraine, respectively, doctoral candidates belong in relatively similar numbers to one of the following three groups: scholarship-funded and exempt from tuition fees; unfunded but exempt from tuition

doctoral candidates and their access to social security, (E) Individual Doctoral Education Plan (IDEP). The labels thus indicate the category of the question and its number.

Table 2 Alignment of doctoral education with the fundamental values of EHEA for select European countries

Question	Denmark	Germany	Hungary	Italy	Norway	Poland	Romania	Sweden	Switzerland	Ukraine
Academic Freedom										
AI	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**		**Yes**	**No**	**Yes**
A2	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**		**Yes**	**No**	**Yes**
A3	**Yes**	**No**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**No**	**Yes**
A4	**Yes**	**No**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**
Academic self-governance										
B1	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**
B2	**No**	**No**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**
B3	**1 and 2**	**1 and** 3	3	**1**	3	3	1	1	3	**1**
Institutional autonomy and the Role of Public Authorities										
CI	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**No**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**No**
C2	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**No**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**No**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**No**
C3	**No**	**No**				**No**		**Yes**	**No**	**No**
Percentage of funded doctoral candidates and their access to social securitv										
D1	>90%	50–70%	>90%	70–90%	>90%	>90%	<50%	>90%	50–70%	<50%
D2	**Yes**	**No**	**No**	Maternity	**Yes**	**Yes**	**No**	**Yes**	**No**	**No**
Individual Doctoral Education Plan										
El	**Yes**	**No**	**No**	**No**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**No**	**Yes**	**No**	**No**

fees; unfunded and tuition fee-paying.[8] Hungary[9] and Poland, in turn, are examples of systems where doctoral candidates are completely funded through state scholarships. These are tied to the academic institution and the doctoral candidate but decoupled from the supervisor, ensuring that all enrolled doctoral candidates have a basic financing and the right to change supervisors. The number of self-funded and even unfunded candidates is limited. However, there is no systematic paid parental or sick leave in Hungary. In Poland, the social security system provides paid parental leave, and an optional possibility of paying for sick leave insurance exists.[10]

The Italian system has similarities to the ones in Hungary and Poland. However, there are some differences that warrant attention. Though limited to a maximum of 25% of the total number of doctoral candidates in each institution, it is more common to find unfunded doctoral candidates. Unfunded doctoral candidates are otherwise enrolled under the same conditions as funded doctoral candidates. Furthermore, if they are required to teach as part of their doctoral education, they effectively teach without financial compensation.[11] Social security rights for doctoral candidates in Italy are weak, too, with only limited access to maternity leave and with doctoral candidates from non-EU countries having to pay for access to basic healthcare.

In Germany and Switzerland, the doctoral candidates' dependency on the supervisor is particularly high.[12] Both countries have significant numbers of doctoral candidates who are self-funded or on stipends and for whom social security such as sick leave and parental leave are not provided. What is also specific to these two countries is the high variability in frameworks across higher education institutions and states ("Kantone" or "Bundesländer"). Neither Germany nor Switzerland has a nationally established duration of doctoral education, and it is common in both countries for doctoral candidates to finish their doctorate unpaid once financing has run out. With more than 80% of all academic staff on non-permanent, short-term contracts, precarious conditions remain a reality for most long after the completion of their doctorate (Hildbrand, 2018:40).

As can be seen from the above, regulatory frameworks and working conditions of doctoral candidates differ significantly across Europe. These differences affect the space in which doctoral education takes place and provide the context for doctoral candidates' academic freedom in different European countries. Regulations and legislation for doctoral education are, however, what actively shape doctoral candidates' experience of academic freedom and the other fundamental values of higher education, though in most cases, legislation was not consciously done with these values in mind. However, with doctoral education being central for the future higher education

[8] Numbers for Romania are from 2017.

[9] As there are not enough applicants for funded positions, there are only a few unfinanced doctoral candidates in Hungary.

[10] The scholarships for doctoral candidates with documented disabilities are increased by 30% in Poland.

[11] Switzerland is the only other country from the ones surveyed where certain disciplines have a similar set-up with unpaid teaching.

[12] For example, in these two countries, funding or employment is often tied to the supervisor, and the supervisor(s) are always also part of the evaluation committee.

institutions, explicitly aligning doctoral education with the fundamental values could anchor these values at the centre of higher education and research.

3 Institutional Frameworks of Doctoral Education and Doctoral Candidates' Academic Freedom

While academic freedom is always exercised within a larger institutional, societal, and political context, when it comes to doctoral education, structures and frameworks *within* the higher education institution become particularly visible in how they shape doctoral candidates' academic freedom.

3.1 The Right to Supervision and the Defence of the Thesis

As part of the academic research community, doctoral candidates are responsible for their own research and are held to many of the same academic standards as more senior researchers, such as for publications. Thus, they have a responsibility for the choice of their research questions and methods, and with this comes a legitimate claim to academic freedom of research. That doctoral candidates are enrolled at a higher education institution means that said higher education institution has responsibilities with regard to the doctoral candidates' right to research and education. The frameworks in place for supervision and for the doctoral defence are central for calibrating the doctoral candidate's simultaneous independence from and dependence on their supervisor(s).

There are some key standards of doctoral education that we want to highlight for their importance for academic freedom. The first is supervision and whether doctoral candidates have the right to a supervisor. This determines if and how candidates can change supervisors without risking the discontinuation of their studies and research and related to this, whether the doctoral candidates lose their funding if they change supervisor.[13] When such a right exists, higher education institutions have to support the doctoral candidate in finding a new supervisor in case a supervisor cannot fulfil their role. The same goes for the right to defend the doctoral thesis: while it is, in general, difficult to defend your thesis without your supervisor's support, in all of the countries surveyed, except for Germany and Switzerland, this is possible. As doctoral candidates are, in general, more bound to a higher education institution than bachelor's and master's students, the right to supervision and the right to defend the doctoral thesis are crucial to ensure a minimum level of legal security and protection of the doctoral candidate's freedom to research and to learn.

These considerations extend to the conditions under which the doctoral defence takes place: examinations that ensure transparency and mitigate the candidate's

[13] This is the case in all countries surveyed except Germany and Switzerland.

dependence on their supervisor are important to protect the doctoral candidate and their research. In most of the countries surveyed, it is mandatory that the defence is open to the public and that the supervisor is not a member of the defence committee. In Ukraine, the awarding of the doctoral degree differs significantly from the other countries surveyed: the defence can only be conducted at a university that has an academic council in the field, with the council acting as the defence committee. In Germany and Switzerland, the supervisor is usually part of the defence committee.[14]

3.2 The Individual Doctoral Education Plan

As a research education with its singular focus on individual original work, frameworks for doctoral education need to equally allow for the setting of individual conditions. In recent years, the use of study plans or individual doctoral agreements has become more widespread but not necessarily in a systematic way. Since no single term has been established, we will speak in the following of the "Individual Doctoral Education Plan" (IDEP). One of the functions of the IDEP is to establish the rights and responsibilities of the doctoral candidate, the supervisor(s), and the institution. In addition to creating clarity on mutual expectations, it also allows for balancing the tensions of the academic freedom of the doctoral candidate against other legitimate interests, such as the academic freedom of the supervisor or the legal obligations or economic interests of the institution. Mandating that IDEPs fulfil certain key criteria also enables the systematic quality assurance of doctoral education on the individual level through the quality assurance of the framework for the IDEP, without unnecessarily infringing on the institutional autonomy and academic self-governance when it comes to designing and shaping doctoral education. Thus, in our survey, we specifically looked at whether there is a requirement for an IDEP. In Denmark, Norway, and Sweden,[15] IDEPs are mandatory as is the case in Poland, but the scope of the IDEP is limited to supervision. In Hungary and Switzerland, IDEPs are not required, though some universities or doctoral programmes implement them. In Germany, Italy, and Ukraine, they are neither mandatory nor widespread.

Most doctoral candidates enrol in a programme with field-specific enrolment conditions, i.e., their acceptance into a programme is contingent on meeting certain

[14] In Switzerland, there are still cases where the defence is not public, with only the supervisors and an observer being present, thereby maximising the doctoral candidate's dependence on their supervisors while minimising transparency of the defence process.

[15] An example of how such a system can be introduced is Sweden, where the requirement of an IDEP (called the Individual Study Plan) is established legally in the higher education ordinance (Högskoleförordning, 1993:100). However, the higher education institution has freedom in designing the IDEP such that it fits the needs of their doctoral programmes. In cases where the higher education institutions wish to withdraw resources, financially or educationally, they must prove that they have provided the necessary conditions for the doctoral candidate to complete their education. In cases where the higher education institutions have failed their responsibility, they cannot withdraw resources from the doctoral candidate or exmatriculate them.

research and study standards. At the same time, once they are enrolled, doctoral candidates should be granted academic freedom to shape their research and education within the scope of the programme. If the supervisor(s) fail to grant the doctoral candidate the possibility to shape their own research, the higher education institution has the responsibility to intervene to protect their academic freedom. The need to balance potentially divergent legitimate interests becomes particularly visible when the doctoral candidate is conducting their research on collaborative/joint projects. In such cases, the supervisor(s) have legitimate interests in shaping and defining the overall research of the doctoral candidate. However, these interests need to be balanced against the doctoral candidate's academic freedom to shape the details of their own research. While this is the case for all researchers engaged in collaborative research projects, the doctoral candidate's dependency on the supervisor to complete their doctoral education necessitates even more careful attention to the protection of their academic freedom. The IDEP would provide a regulatory framework for the institutions to balance institutional requirements, the doctoral candidate's academic freedom, and the supervisor's academic freedom.

4 The Significance of Doctoral Candidates' Representation Rights

It is essential that doctoral candidates have not only representational rights but also equitable self-representation, that is, that they are part of an electoral constituency whose interests are represented. Engels et al. address the problem of inadequate representation of one's interest in a report of the European University Association in relation to postdoctoral researchers: "It is important to reflect on how the postdoctoral population can be represented within the university staff structure and support efforts to build a formal representation. Postdoctoral researchers are often not visible as a specific staff category within the institution. This leads to the risk that their specific perspective is not sufficiently taken into account" (Engels et al., 2024:14). Adequate self-representation and, thus, adequate participation in academic self-governance are equally important for doctoral candidates to ensure that their perspective is visible and they can be part of shaping the research context within which they pursue their research work and learning.

Doctoral candidates have the right to participate in academic self-governance in all the countries included in the survey. However, we identified three main versions of participation: (1) they are part of the general student electoral group; (2) they are part of the general academic electoral group; (3) they are part of an electoral group composed either solely of doctoral candidates or both doctoral candidates and other non-permanent academics.

Version 1 creates the risk of doctoral candidates being underrepresented: As they are significant minorities in their electoral groups, representation of their interest by someone from their own category is not guaranteed, meaning that it is not ensured that doctoral candidates are included in academic self-governance through self-representation.

In Italy, Romania, Sweden, and Ukraine, doctoral candidates are included in version 1. Hungary, Norway, Poland, and Switzerland, follow version 3. In Denmark, doctoral candidates belong to different electoral groups depending on the election. For elections to the doctoral school council, they belong to version 3. However, for all other elections, they belong to either version 1 or version 2, depending on their funding. This means that in these elections they do not have the weight of their entire group within the respective body in terms of voting and deliberation. In some German universities, on the other hand, doctoral candidates can belong simultaneously to versions 1 and 3 (i.e., '*Mittelbau*'), with voting rights in both.

Equally relevant for the representational rights of doctoral candidates are hidden barriers to participation. We want to highlight two central hidden barriers: The first is the question of how far legislation creates frameworks that cater to the specific conditions of doctoral education, namely whether mandates and election cycles are such that doctoral candidates have reasonably the possibility to stand for election and to vote in these. The second pertains to the internationalisation of academia: not only is the degree of internationalisation particularly high for doctoral candidates but researchers are also expected to continue to be mobile in the years after attaining their doctorate. This makes expectations of full integration in terms of language proficiency much less feasible than for tenured staff. However, if the fundamental values are to be taken seriously, representation rights and participation in self-governance need to be accessible to all doctoral candidates and not just some of them. Specifically, this would mean that all legislation, frameworks, and relevant documents are made accessible and that meetings are conducted in a shared language. In all but Poland, Romania and Ukraine, language barriers were clearly identified as an issue.[16] Thus, to ensure both the doctoral candidates' academic freedom and their right to participate in academic governance, it is essential that all doctoral candidates are provided with the prerequisites that allow for informed participation and have delegates that represent them as a specific group.

5 Institutional Autonomy and the Role of Public Authorities in Framing Academic Freedom in the Context of Doctoral Education

With the Bologna Process, "the Council of Europe has emphasised their [higher education institutions'] core mission of education, research and public service and the importance of higher education as a public good and public responsibility" (Gallagher, 2020:241). Ensuring the higher education institutions' accountability and responsibility as a public good has encouraged the increase of transparency

[16] The low number of international doctoral candidates may explain why language is not seen as a barrier in these three countries.

through the introduction of clear governance systems in the past decades. As Bergan et al. observe: "Public authorities set the legislative framework within which higher education institutions operate, so they are crucial for the establishment of contexts that enable or constrain academic freedom and institutional autonomy" (2020a:10). At the same time, legitimate public interest in the quality of the research and education provided has to be balanced against the institution's autonomy and researchers' and students' academic freedom.

In terms of institutional autonomy, Italy is highlighted by Bennetot Pruvot et al. (2023) and Maassen et al. (2023) as a country where higher education institutions enjoy a high degree of institutional autonomy. These same reports raise concerns, however, when people external to the institutions are mandated to the highest decision-making body, and particularly when they make up the majority of these bodies (Bennetot Pruvot et al., 2023, Maassen et al., 2023), as is the case in Denmark and Sweden, as well as in some higher education institutions in Germany, Norway, and Switzerland.[17] However, the state of play of institutional autonomy looks slightly different when it comes to doctoral education.

In the context of doctoral education, it is central to institutional autonomy as well as to academic freedom that the higher education institutions decide on the programmes they offer or discontinue. For one, doctoral education clusters the research of doctoral candidates through doctoral programmes and thereby contributes to setting the institution's research foci. For another, doctoral education plays a central role in educating future senior academics who, in turn, will shape higher education institutions in the decades to come. In Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Norway, Poland, Sweden, and Switzerland, legislation establishes which higher education institutions have a full right to offer doctoral education. The introduction and closure of doctoral programmes are, however, included in the autonomy of the respective higher education institutions. This is not the case in Italy, Romania, or Ukraine, where all higher education institutions must seek permission from the government to open new doctoral programmes. In these countries, public authorities thus have a direct influence on the choice of research areas and topics with implications for the entire research community. Furthermore, in Ukraine and Romania, the government bestows the doctoral title. While this is primarily a formality in Romania, how such a mechanism infringes on institutional autonomy and academic freedom becomes clear in the case of Ukraine, where the Ministry of Higher Education grants the doctoral degree only if it *approves* of the doctoral defence. It thus has the power to overrule the decision of the higher education institution (e.g., doctoral candidates can be asked to re-defend even though they had passed it according to the institution). Chiappa et al. similarly note that "Academic self-regulation plays a key role when it comes to shaping the forms, cultures, and conditions of ethical doctoral education worldwide. However, such intrinsic forces reach their limits when research and doctoral education get politicised" (Chiappa et al., 2022: 223–224). It is, then, a clear infringement on both institutional autonomy and academic freedom if governments have the legal

[17] At the same time, such governance models can also be seen as allowing public authorities to ensure accountability.

power to make decisions on the specific areas or programmes for doctoral education or can interpose in the bestowing of the doctoral title, and thereby, in both cases, make decisions in terms of the research being pursued.

Public authorities have, however, the overall responsibility for the national education system and its quality. As Guri-Rosenblit notes: "Government steering in many higher education systems has grown significantly in the last decades. In many countries, universities and other higher education institutions are subjected nowadays, more than ever before, to stringent quality control mechanisms and accountability measures" (Guri-Rosenblit, 2015:17). In contrast to the first or second cycle, such control mechanisms and accountability measures have been implemented only to a limited degree for third-cycle education. Yet, the interest of public authorities in the quality of doctoral education warrants its systematic inclusion, not least because doctoral candidates are often an integral part of the research and teaching conducted by higher education institutions, and doctoral education is central to the institution's future.

Quality assurance of doctoral education should establish whether or not the higher education institutions offering doctoral education have frameworks and evaluation processes in place that ensure transparency, accountability, and the quality of doctoral education, particularly in terms of provision of supervision, assessment and examination procedures, and that stipulate that the defence of the doctoral thesis is public with the majority of examiners not being part of the supervising committee. Mandating the comprehensive introduction of the IDEP and controlling the framework conditions thereby set allows for quality assurance on a structural level in a form that, at the same time, answers to the individual nature of doctoral education. However, public authorities should *not* make decisions on or interfere with field- or discipline-specific requirements. As with bachelor and master education, it is a delicate balance to impose a quality assurance system of doctoral education, particularly with the higher education institution's autonomy and academic self-governance. Quality assurance of third-cycle education is far from being in place or standardised across Europe. Lacking these accountability structures, however, puts the doctoral candidates' right to learn at risk.

In addition to quality control, public authorities are often also responsible for setting regulatory frameworks for the working and employment conditions, not least because they are one of the most important funders of higher education institutions. Without funding, most research would not take place or only to a limited degree. Funding thus can directly steer research (and teaching) foci, which is why it is important that much of the funding is allocated by the research community itself to ensure their autonomy in deciding on the research agenda free from political indirect interference.[18] However, public authorities *are* responsible for the framework

[18] It can be legitimate for public authorities to decide that there are specific areas where, for the benefit of society, intensified research or additional teaching foci are acutely necessary. This, however, should be kept separate from the systemic funding of higher education to ensure the latter's autonomy.

conditions their funding creates and, as part of their larger societal responsibility, for the working conditions that are in place.

Doctoral candidates are necessary for the higher education institutions to fulfil their core tasks; thus, their underfunding has consequences for the entire system. As Resnik (1998) argues, it is not the lack of funding of the individual that is an attack on academic freedom, but the systemic underfunding. Allowing for unfinanced doctoral candidates, in effect, means that higher education institutions rely on unpaid labour or staff in precarious conditions to carry out their core mission as assigned to them by the public authorities.[19] Underfunding of the higher education system or the defunding of specific research fields, then, means that researchers' capacity to carry out their work is fundamentally infringed on. Furthermore, the systemic underfunding of doctoral education and doctoral candidates creates or maintains some of the precarious working conditions, such as low pay or part-time employment and reduced social security. Underfunding doctoral education thus serves as a hidden but strong barrier that severely limits who can afford to pursue doctoral education and thus is a crucial factor that hinders diversity and equity in higher education. This underfunding, then, poses a threat to academic freedom for the individual candidates, for the entire research community, and for the future of the higher education institutions.

6 Conclusion

Comparing current frameworks for doctoral education created by national legislations and regulations across select countries in Europe reveals that most of these countries have practices in some areas that ensure the doctoral candidates' academic freedom and balance legitimate competing interests, but it is a chequered picture at best. None of the frameworks and policies for doctoral education are explicitly aligned with considerations of academic freedom and the other fundamental values of the EHEA.

So far, considerations regarding academic freedom have only been included in passing in much of the discussions on the values and standards of doctoral education, as is the case, for example, in *Towards a Global Core Value System in Doctoral Education* (Nerad et al., 2022). At the same time, the current reinvigorated discourse around academic freedom–even if born out of a sense of crisis (cf. Matei, 2023)–also holds potential. As Matei concludes: "What is peculiar to Europe is the existence of a common space for dialogue and practice in higher education with real substance (models, standards, rules and regulations, institutions). If this space is to endure and develop, it also needs a common conceptual reference for academic freedom, like

[19] It is for these exact reasons that we included information about the percentage of financed doctoral candidates in each country in Table 2. It is clear from these numbers that a high proportion of doctoral candidates are unfinanced, indicating systemic underfunding of doctoral education in large parts of Europe.

it has for other areas" (2023:265). Anchoring the fundamental values of the EHEA in doctoral education can centre these at the core of higher education across Europe since, as Bergan and Harkavy note, "Higher education institutions must be 'whole institutions'–they cannot preach without practising" (2020a:17).

In future reports on academic freedom, as well as in future EHEA implementation reports, doctoral candidates and other non-permanent academic staff should explicitly be included as separate groups. Doctoral candidates and contingent faculty should be an important part of the considerations when states are called upon to promote and protect academic freedom and integrity in Europe (e.g., European Commission, 2022:11), but also in the re-charting of the conceptual frames for academic freedom that are currently underway (Matei, 2023).

7 Recommendations

To mitigate the consequences of the precarity of doctoral candidates that also impact academic freedom and the other fundamental values of EHEA, it is important to ensure the existence of frameworks that adequately address their conditions. To do so, we have identified five key recommendations to embed academic freedom and other fundamental values at the core of doctoral education:

(1) Introduce the IDEP, comprehensively to cater to the individual nature of third-cycle education, while also establishing the rights and responsibilities of the doctoral candidate and the higher education institution. The IDEP provides a framework that can explicitly take into account and safeguard the doctoral candidates' academic freedom and allow for quality assurance of the individual doctoral education without undue interference by public authorities.
(2) Place the rights of granting the doctoral degree, deciding on the doctoral programmes offered, and defining any field-specific requirements within the higher education institutions to ensure that the academic community can decide on research foci and shape its research disciplines free from direct governmental interference.
(3) Ensure doctoral candidates' representational rights and assure self-representation of doctoral candidates in the academic governance of the higher education institutions as well as in any committees that advise public authorities on the conditions of doctoral education and doctoral candidates.
(4) Develop long-term strategies for funding doctoral education and doctoral candidates with a focus on equitable access and systemic funding to safeguard academic freedom. Align competitive public funding with the fundamental values of the EHEA.
(5) Provide education in "Fundamental Values of Higher Education" (including academic freedom, research integrity and ethics, and institutional policy and legal framework of the higher education institution).

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Newly Emerging Frameworks of Reference and Conceptual References for Academic Freedom: Institutional, National, Regional, and Global

Liviu Matei and Giulia D'Aquila

Abstract Starting from 2015–2017, significant progress can be observed in Europe, possibly more than in other parts of the world, in developing new and better adapted frameworks of reference for safeguarding academic freedom. This includes the adoption for the first time of a European Higher Education Area (EHEA)-wide common conceptual reference for academic freedom in 2020, shared at least nominally by 49 countries. The present paper proposes a new analytic framework for studying and understanding these developments. When employing this new perspective, it becomes evident that similar developments regarding new conceptualizations, codification, monitoring, and practice of academic freedom are happening in other parts of the world and at other levels in higher education systems as well (i.e., institutional, national, and global). A specific question to be asked in this context is how European developments fit with and interact with global developments and trends in this area. In particular, the paper examines the possibility and desirability of a global conceptual reference for academic freedom, one that transcends national and regional frameworks, including that of the EHEA. Answers are sought through an analytical overview of the scholarship regarding the feasibility and desirability of a common global conceptual reference for academic freedom and by interrogating the results of a curated expert dialogue dedicated to this topic.

Keywords Frameworks of reference for academic freedom · Conceptual references for academic freedom · European Higher Education Area · Global · national · regional and institutional developments in academic freedom · Decolonization of academic freedom

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1 Introduction

Europe has made remarkable progress, possibly more than in other parts of the world, in developing new and better adapted frameworks of reference for safeguarding academic freedom and the other "fundamental values of higher education". This includes the adoption for the first time of a European Higher Education Area (EHEA)[1]-wide common conceptual reference for academic freedom in 2020, shared at least nominally by 49 countries. The present paper proposes a new analytic framework for studying and understanding these developments.

Moreover, when employing this new analytical perspective, it becomes evident that similar developments–regarding new conceptualizations, codification, monitoring, and practice of academic freedom–are happening in other parts of the world as well, and at all levels in higher education (i.e., global, regional, national, and institutional).

An important question in this context is how the European developments fit with, influence, and are influenced by global developments and trends in this area. In particular, the paper examines the possibility and desirability of a global conceptual reference for academic freedom, thus one that transcends national and regional frameworks, including that of the EHEA. Answers are sought through an analytical overview of the scholarship regarding the feasibility and desirability of a common global conceptual reference for academic freedom and by interrogating the results of a curated expert dialogue dedicated to this topic.

The paper concludes that while several global conceptual references and even a few global frameworks of reference for academic freedom do exist, there is little research on this topic. In a way, scholarship is less advanced than the reality on the ground. The explanations for this situation can be important from the perspective of the efforts to safeguard academic freedom globally. Moreover, within the existing scholarship, there is a diversity of positions, and there are marked disagreements regarding both the desirability and possibility of a common global reference for academic freedom. This is significantly different from the approach of the experts invited to take part in a dedicated dialogue on this topic. Coming from higher education systems in different parts of the world on all continents, they clearly agreed both on the need for and possibility of such a reference.

[1] See the official EHEA website: https://www.ehea.info/page-members, accessed on 9 April 2024. Formally, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was launched in 2010 as a common European space for dialogue and practice in higher education. EHEA is considered the result of the Bologna Process. This Process was launched in 1999 with the Bologna Declaration (Bologna Process 1999) and, from its very start, envisaged the creation of the EHEA. The "EHEA" phrase has been used since these early years, before 2010. The Bologna Process is ongoing as a voluntary intergovernmental initiative in higher education based on jointly agreed principles, objectives and standards, governance mechanisms, and the implementation of these within national education systems. As of 2023, 49 European states have agreed to implement the Bologna Process. They form the EHEA. Russia and Belarus were suspended following the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Matei, 2023a).

2 The Prominence of Academic Freedom Within and Beyond the EHEA. New Frameworks of Reference and Conceptual References for Academic Freedom

Academic freedom is currently a prominent matter of concern and subject of debate in the EHEA, within the academe itself, but also in policy circles, in politics, as well as in the media. This is a special, maybe unprecedented, period for academic freedom in Europe in this regard.

While specific and remarkable European dynamics with regard to academic freedom can be clearly identified and analyzed, in particular after 2015 (Matei, 2024), this period may well be a special one in the history of academic freedom globally, too (Popoviă et al., 2022). There are important new developments with regard to academic freedom in other parts of the world as well (Ignatieff & Roch, 2017; Popoviă et al., 2022). How should we study and understand them? What is the evidence for the exemplary nature of these developments within and beyond Europe?

By new developments here, we do not mean only a wave of momentous instances of challenges to academic freedom during this time, extensively documented elsewhere (Scholars at Risk, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022a, b, 2023), which vary in their exact morphology but have in common the experience of severe restrictions on the freedoms to engage in the production, transmission, dissemination, and use of knowledge in the university, which operationalize academic freedom. They happened in countries or higher education systems like Turkey, Hungary, Florida in the US, Hong Kong, Russia, Afghanistan, Myanmar, or Nicaragua, to mention only some of the most often discussed instances of this kind.

Significant as they are, not all of these are new types of challenges. In the past, we can document at least some similar restrictions, for example, during the Cold War, and which are now returning during some kind of "New Cold War" (Altbach et al., 2022, Matei, 2023b). On the other hand, many of the challenges to academic freedom during this period are indeed new, even unprecedented (Matei & Kapur, 2022).

We would like to posit that what is even more remarkable and makes this period of time special beyond just considerable empirical challenges is a different set of developments that comprises:

- the emergence of new conceptualizations and codifications for academic freedom (Popoviă et al., 2022) at the level of higher education institutions themselves (albeit not very frequently) and also nationally, regionally, and globally.
- the emergence of new attempts to monitor, even measure systematically, academic freedom regionally (see, for example, Maassen et al., 2023, Matei et al., 2023) and globally (e.g., Academic Freedom Index[2]).
- the adoption of new formal guidelines (different than legal regulations) for the practice and protection of academic freedom at the level of particular higher education institutions, such as the Model Code of Conduct developed by AFIWG-the

[2] https://academic-freedom-index.net/, accessed on 9 April 2024.

Academic Freedom and Internationalisation Working Group in the UK (Heathershaw et al., 2022)*;* at the system level; regionally; or globally, such as the Principles for Implementing the Right of Academic Freedom (Scholars at Risk, 2022b) developed by a Working Group on Academic Freedom following the Report on academic freedom and the freedom of opinion and expression (United Nations, 2020) of the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression.

We would like to further propose that a productive way to frame and analyze these developments is by employing the concepts of "frameworks of reference for academic freedom" and "conceptual references for academic freedom".

During this period, we can identify various attempts, some successful, to develop new frameworks of reference for academic freedom and new conceptual references for academic freedom, also at various levels, from the institutional and inter-institutional level (emerging from and applicable inside higher education institutions or groups of institutions), to the national or higher education system, regional (such as the EHEA) and global levels.

2.1 Definitions and Exemplifications: Developments in the European Higher Education Area

Developments in the EHEA referred to in this paper are illustrations of both concepts at the regional level. A new framework of reference for academic freedom started to take shape, in particular after the 2020 Rome EHEA Ministerial Conference,[3] and this framework includes but is not limited to a new conceptual reference for academic freedom, presented in the Statement on Academic Freedom adopted on the same occasion (Bologna Process, 2020a).

There are other examples of both frameworks of reference and conceptual references for academic freedom, some of which will be mentioned only briefly in the present paper since they are not the main thrust of our analysis and argument.

"Conceptual reference" is understood to be not only a definition or a link to an existing definition but a sufficiently long conceptual elaboration available in a text format that serves as a common reference or go-to conceptual source (or "anchor") for actors inside and outside the university, and which they use in sync for the understanding, codification, and practice of academic freedom (Matei, 2024). The Rome Statement on Academic Freedom mentioned above is a clear example of a document that puts forward a conceptual reference for academic freedom in the EHEA. It frames academic freedom as a value (not a right or governance principle), or a fundamental value of higher education, to be more precise, and as one in a cluster of values–six in total. It explicitly details what are considered to be the main dimensions of academic freedom. This Statement, adopted by 49 European countries and

[3] https://ehea2020rome.it/, accessed on 9 April 2024.

the European Commission with the support of eight European intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, creates a first official "European reference" for use in the entire EHEA. It promotes a new and particular understanding of academic freedom, one that is meant to orient the work of the university and its internal constituencies (students, staff, leadership), of national/system-level authorities, and other organizations that are active in higher education.

The UN and UNESCO documents mentioned in this paper also put forward different conceptual references for academic freedom, meant to be shared by different groups of actors or stakeholders.

A "framework of reference for academic freedom", on the other hand, includes a conceptual reference, but beyond that, it may also contain, variably, guidelines for the practice and, possibly, protection of academic freedom, elements of codification (such as legislative norms, regulations, codes of conduct, etc.), and provisions about institutions and institutional mechanisms that should or could be utilized to implement the respective understanding and codification of academic freedom. The 2020 Rome Communiqué contributed decisively to the creation of a framework of reference for academic freedom in the EHEA:

– It details a series of specific obligations vis-à-vis these fundamental values assumed voluntarily by all EHEA members (European governments and the EU Commission). In short, these obligations, or voluntary commitments, are to protect the fundamental values as jointly defined within EHEA through legislation and promote them through policies and other concrete initiatives. In the language of the Communiqué itself: "We reaffirm our commitment to promoting and protecting our shared fundamental values in the entire EHEA through intensified political dialogue and cooperation as the necessary basis for quality learning, teaching and research as well as for democratic societies" (Bologna Process, 2020b: 5).
– Lists five other fundamental values that should be "protected and promoted" together with academic freedom and details their interrelations.
– Gives a mandate to the executive structure supporting the Bologna Process in between the Ministerial Conferences, the Bologna Follow-Up Group, to create a permanent mechanism for monitoring all these values as jointly defined here and across the entire continent. This effort can also be understood as monitoring the implementation of the commitments assumed by the signatories.
– Identifies certain institutions, such as quality assurance agencies and the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), that should play a role in both building up and making this framework work.

2.2 Other European Frameworks of Reference and Conceptual References for Academic Freedom

The EHEA does not have the monopoly on frameworks of reference and conceptual references for academic freedom that can be identified during this period, whether they are old, updated, or completely newly emerging. In Europe alone, there are several more such developments or initiatives in the European Union (EU),[4] in individual higher education systems as well as in given universities.

2.2.1 Regional Developments

In 2017, the European Commission sued Hungary for infringement of academic freedom in the case of Central European University (CEU).[5] During the proceedings, it became evident that there was no specific EU legislation that would allow the European Court of Justice to adjudicate this case without serious difficulties. The Court needed to make reference to commercial legislation. To remediate this situation and in order for the EU to be in a better position to protect academic freedom, the Panel for the Future of Science and Technology (STOA)[6] of the European Parliament later initiated a process aiming to develop not just a common conceptual reference for academic freedom in the EU but also binding legal references (EU legislation) for all member states. This is an ongoing process, not without difficulties.

The EU Commission, the executive branch of the EU, currently runs two separate projects that can also be described as attempts to create frameworks of reference for academic freedom. The first takes place in the institutional context of the European Research Area[7] and aims specifically to safeguard the freedom of scientific research (thus not all dimensions of academic freedom) by creating a monitoring mechanism that would show to what extent member states of the EU fulfill their obligations assumed in this area when they signed the Bonn Declaration on Freedom of Scientific Research in 2020 (European Union, 2020). This Declaration contains a specific European Union, "shared" conceptual reference for freedom of research. In a second project, this time run by the EU's Directorate General for Education and Culture, a process is underway that somewhat mirrors the EHEA developments discussed above, with the declared goal to adopt guiding principles for a list of "fundamental

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[4] As a common space of dialogue and practice in higher education, EHEA is different from the EU. The EU is a union of independent states, and it has its own strategies, policies, and processes in higher education and research, which only occasionally and partially overlap with the EHEA. The EU Commission is a member of the Bologna Process, and the EU often has an impact on higher education policy beyond its member states.

[5] See Judgement of the Court in this case at https://curia.europa.eu/juris/document/document.jsf;jsessionid=8E4DA0A72A98E30145D3223D87BA630B?text=&docid=232082&pageIndex=0&doclang=EN&mode=lst&dir=&occ=first&part=1&cid=10718744. Accessed on 9 April 2024.

[6] Panel for the Future of Science and Technology (STOA). European Parliament https://www.europarl.europa.eu/stoa/en/home/highlights; accessed on 9 April 2024.

[7] The European Research Area (ERA) is a European Union initiative launched in 2000. ERA is different from the EHEA. It has "the ambition to create a single, borderless market for research, innovation and technology across the EU"–*cf.* https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/strategy/strategy-2020-2024/our-digital-future/european-research-area_en#:~:text=The%20European%20Research%20Area%20(ERA)%20is%20the%20ambition%20to%20create,and%20technology%20across%20the%20EU.&text=ERA%20was%20launched%20in%202000,revitalise%20it%20began%20in%202018. Accessed on 9 April 2024.

academic values" (most probably academic freedom, academic integrity, and institutional autonomy). This process, which uses the language of fundamental *academic* values, as opposed to fundamental values *of higher education* in the EHEA, can be seen as another attempt to adopt a conceptual reference for academic freedom and put in place tools and mechanisms to promote it, albeit only in the EU, throughout its member states.

This series of EU efforts illustrates, on the one hand, once again the prominence of academic freedom in the European policy and political agendas and, on the other hand, a multiplicity of concrete attempts to safeguard it on the continent by developing sometimes overlapping and even competing conceptual references and frameworks of reference.

2.2.2 National Developments

The adoption of the law on Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) in the UK in 2023[8] is another example of the emergence of a framework of reference with both intellectual/conceptual elements (academic freedom is basically redefined as freedom of speech) and also legal/regulatory aspects, including the creation of new government structures for the implementation of this new codification.

In France, new understandings of academic freedom were put forward during and immediately after the Covid pandemic, but not through legislative means. Rather, a new political discourse, new policies and administrative practices in higher education have resulted in modifying the existing national framework of refence for academic freedom, and not always in ways that are supportive of academic freedom (Joly, 2023).

2.2.3 Institutional/Inter-Institutional Developments

There are very few institutional initiatives (i.e., initiatives coming from universities) attempting to create frameworks of reference for academic freedom and develop conceptual references for it. However, they do exist.

In 2022–2023, King's College London created a global platform for dialogue and organized a series of research-based debates addressing the question of whether there is a need to reimagine academic freedom at present and, if yes, how should this be realized.[9] The series did not propose a new conceptual reference for academic freedom, although it concluded that there was a need to reimagine academic freedom and that this was, in fact, already happening. Rather, it has put forward a set of

[8] https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2023/16/enacted, accessed on 9 April 2024.

[9] https://www.kcl.ac.uk/events/series/kings-presidential-series-on-academic-freedom, accessed on 9 April 2024.

Principles for Reimagining Academic Freedom,[10] which address, among others, the need for universities and academics to take active part in this process rather than leaving it all to the public authorities.

One of the most remarkable examples of the engagement of the universities themselves in designing frameworks of reference for academic freedom is the Model Code of Conduct of AFIWG, mentioned above, an inter-university endeavor that has put forward both a university-generated conceptual reference (how universities in the UK should understand academic freedom at present) and also principles and guidelines for putting in place this understanding, in particular the context of international cooperation activities (Heathershaw et al., 2022).

2.3 *Efforts to Develop Global Frameworks of Reference and Conceptual References for Academic Freedom*

The United Nations has endeavored to create what can be considered a global framework of reference for academic freedom, including global conceptual references for academic freedom in the context of the global human rights instruments, such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (United Nations, 1966). As mentioned above in this paper, more recently, the UN has supported work that resulted in the development of a set of guidelines for the implementation of the "right to academic freedom".

UNESCO, the UN's Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, has endeavored separately to work in this area. Its 1997 Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel (UNESCO, 1997), ratified by more than 100 countries, put forward one of the most frequently quoted conceptual references for academic freedom. It can be considered a global reference, although it is most often ignored in practice. Separately, UNESCO's 2017 Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers (UNESCO, 2017) created a tentative global conceptual reference for freedom of science, which is but one dimension of academic freedom, along with a reference for the related concept of responsibility of researchers. Currently, UNESCO is engaged in a process of updating these references.

One of the most influential efforts to measure academic freedom is represented by the development of the Academic Freedom Index (AFI) since 2017.[11] Although AFI is intended to be only a measurement or monitoring tool, in reality it also puts forward, implicitly rather than explicitly, a particular global conceptual reference for academic freedom which is understood to be applicable globally.

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[10] https://www.kcl.ac.uk/ecs/assets/draft-principles-for-reimagining-academic-freedom-27-nov.pdf, accessed on 9 April 2024.

[11] https://academic-freedom-index.net/, accessed on 9 April 2024.

Another interesting and influential global experience in this context is Magna Charta Universitatum.[12] Adopted originally in 1988 (Magna Charta Universitatum, 1998) by almost 400 university rectors from Europe only and revised in 2020 (Magna Charta Universitatum, 2020), this document puts forward a conceptual reference for academic freedom, which is now defined as a universal (global) value in higher education. Magna Charta is an inter-university declaration currently signed by almost 1000 universities from all continents. Maybe this development could be better placed in the category of institutional/inter-institutional initiatives. The revised Magna Charta talks about the obligations of the universities to uphold the set of Principles, Values, and Responsibilities mentioned in this declaration, with academic freedom as one of them (Magna Charta Universitatum, 2020).

2.4 National Developments Outside Europe

In a development similar to some extent to the EHEA, albeit at the national level, the South African Council of Higher Education carried out a project that proposed national conceptual references for several higher education values (academic freedom, university autonomy, and public accountability) while also aiming at creating a regulatory national institutional system to enforce these conceptualizations (CHE, 2008).

As we can see from these examples, new conceptual references for academic freedom and frameworks of reference for academic freedom emerged or have been attempted not just in Europe or the EHEA in the past ten years or so. There is very little research about these developments, and even less when we move outside Europe. We believe it is important to signal that they are happening and study them for different reasons. One reason is that developments in Europe may appear at first look to be quite singular, when in reality they are not necessarily so. There certainly are European specificities; however, we can understand better what is really happening, where all is coming from and leading to in the EHEA itself, for example, which is one of the most remarkable individual cases, if we use the analytical approach proposed here and broaden the scope of the investigation. This analysis can also help to understand what is specific to Europe more broadly, noting that there are different meanings of "Europe", and what we in Europe can learn from others in order to make more progress in safeguarding academic freedom, avoid the trap of a detrimental Eurocentric approach, and also contribute to the cause of decolonization of academic freedom.[13]

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[12] Magna Charta is maintained by a non-governmental organization, the Magna Charta Observatory (https://www.magna-charta.org/magna-charta-universitatum/mcu2020, accessed on 9 April 2024).

[13] The discussion about decolonizing academic freedom is very confusing in the academic literature and the higher education policy discourse. This is another area in need of more research and action, not detailed here.

In line with this concern to avoid Eurocentrism, it is important, we believe, to ask the question of whether global conceptual references and maybe also global frameworks of reference for academic freedom would be useful, effective, or even possible. As we will see in the analysis presented in the next section, some believe it is not possible to have common global references at all, while others insist that global references exist already and what is at stake is simply to "implement" them. Yet, others believe that what is needed is new global references for academic freedom and related frameworks of reference that would be up-to-date and effective and that it is possible to develop them.

3 Is a Global Conceptual Reference for Academic Freedom Possible? Is It Desirable?

3.1 Answers from the Scholarship of Academic Freedom

3.1.1 Method

This section of our study seeks answers to the questions about the possibility and desirability of a global reference (or references) by exploring the current status of the scholarship of academic freedom in this specific area.

The primary objectives are twofold: firstly, to determine whether there is a consensus regarding a singular global reference in existence already and where that would be located at present (possibly in the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, for example). Or, alternatively, if there is a variety of global references already, which ones are most commonly cited? Secondly, the study aims to ascertain whether the scholarly literature on academic freedom views the establishment of a global framework of reference as desirable, and, if so, what potential difficulties or challenges are associated with such an endeavor.

Our study primarily focuses on research literature (peer-reviewed articles, conference papers, and conference reports). It does not cover policy documents, statements, or reports from international organizations, public authority bodies, or professional organizations, some of which were referred to in the previous sections of this paper. The rationale for this methodological choice is rooted in the discussions at King's College London mentioned above. During the Presidential Series on Academic Freedom, it was concluded that a process of reimagining academic freedom is underway. However, key stakeholders, namely universities and academics themselves, are largely absent from this process. We envisaged conducting this study to assess the current state of the scholarship on the possibility and desirability of reimagining academic freedom as a global concept as a step towards potentially rectifying this situation and involving academics more actively in the critical process of reimagining academic freedom.

The research materials were primarily gathered through electronic searches on electronic databases (Scopus, Google Scholar) and independent article searches. Various keyword combinations were employed, such as "global framework" and "academic freedom", or "framework" and "academic freedom", or "universal" and "academic freedom", with the aim of identifying existing scholarship that specifically addresses academic freedom and discusses questions about its suitability as a global or universal concept, or emphasizes its significance as a global conceptual reference and/or framework of reference. After an initial screening and subsequent selection of studies aligning with the scope of this inquiry, a total of 29 papers were identified that met the criteria established for this research, later reduced to 25 after a selection of papers published after 2010 only.

This enquiry considers, more specifically:

- What legal or scientific references to academic freedom are used in scientific literature;
- To what extent academic freedom is understood as a global or universal concept;
- What themes and issues arise when conceptualizing academic freedom as a global or universal concept;
- The current scholarly discussion around the possibility of a global conceptual reference for academic freedom.

No study to date has carried out a systematic review of the state of the art in the academic scholarship in this area, with the specific aim of enquiring into the universality or globality of academic freedom. A somewhat similar study was carried out by Adu and Odame (2023), but only as a systematic review of content analysis studies that described academic freedom in Africa.

3.1.2 Findings; Main Themes

Our review identified several recurring themes, as follows:

(i) **A tension between global/universal and local conceptions of academic freedom**. There was no consensus in the literature regarding the need for or even desirability of a global or universal value of academic freedom. Some studies arguing against this possibility insisted on the relativity of norms and values and how global norms concretely adapt differently to different political and cultural contexts (Ren & Li, 2013) or stated that any universal approach would indicate a 'settler norm' which should be better replaced by alternative, indigenous concepts which are to be preferred over ones externally imposed by anything that would be a universal reference (Derbesh, 2023; Laurila and Carey, 2022).

Advocates of a universal understanding of academic freedom, on the other hand, such as Blell et al. (2022), caution against current national or governmental[14]-level endeavors to reshape and reconceptualize academic freedom. They argue that these efforts actually represent a political strategy aimed at diminishing academic freedom. For instance, the government may label certain academic areas, such as critical race theory, as 'dangerous'. Simultaneously, however, there is a co-opting by the government of the language of academic freedom, creating a narrative of a 'crisis of academic freedom'. This narrative serves to divert the attention of broader audiences from structural threats to academic freedom. In this context, some argue that, despite historical and geographical variations, there is a universal idea of academic freedom, as there is a universal idea of infringements of it (Beaud, 2020; Hao, 2020; Tierney & Lanford, 2014). This is demonstrated, it is stated, by the existence of concepts relatable to academic freedom in many different traditions beyond the Western one, including China and Japan, for a long time, and its further universalization due to globalization (Hao, 2020). Finally, Börzel (2022) noted how, in the absence of a global understanding and definition of academic freedom, international institutions have so far been unable or largely limited in their capacity to play a significant role in shaping and spreading norms for academic freedom across the globe, thus highlighting the importance of a global understanding in order for international efforts to be effective.

(ii) **The epistemological status of the concept of academic freedom**. The scrutiny of recent studies on academic freedom reveals the existence of multiple, and often contradicting, epistemological values associated with academic freedom (that is, what kind of entity is academic freedom thought to be). These partially reflect the diversity in the existing conceptual references for academic freedom, which may be framed as a human right, fundamental right, professional right, value, governance principle, or philosophical/moral principle.

In tracing existing frameworks cited by recent studies on academic freedom, we note that some studies mentioned more than one framework and compare between different references. Among the most frequently cited references were:

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948): in 7 papers.
- AAUP Statement (1915, 1940): in 12.
- UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel (1997): in 8.
- UNESCO Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers (2017): in 5.
- Magna Charta Universitatum (1988, 2020): in 6.
- EHEA Fundamental values (2020): in 3.
- International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966): in 10.

Perhaps surprisingly, the most often cited reference was the American Association of University Professors' Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure

[14] A better term could be "public authorities", or "public authorities-led endeavours", as used in the EHEA.

(1915 and 1940), which, interestingly, did not have the aim or ambition to represent a global conceptual reference but was written as a professional declaration representing academics in the United States only.

Some papers contained references to local and indigenous sources of academic freedom, such as the Qur'an (Derbesh, 2023) and Confucianism (Ren & Li, 2013).

The predominant understanding of academic freedom is as a right. Most of these papers agree on the definition of academic freedom as a right, be that a constitutional right, a human right, or a professional right (Adu & Odame, 2023; Arowosegbe, 2021; Beaud, 2020; Beiter, 2019; Berggren & Bjørnskov, 2022; Blell et al., 2022; Börzel, 2022; Derbesh, 2023; Grimm & Saliba, 2017; Khamitovich et al., 2022; Kinzelbach et al., 2021; Marini & Oleksiyenko, 2022; O'Dwyer, 2023; Olsson, 2023; Prelec et al., 2022; Quinn & Levine, 2014; Ramanujam & Wijenayake, 2022; Silvernail et al., 2021; Spannagel, 2023; Spannagel & Kinzelbach, 2022). Some papers specifically emphasize a strong connection between academic freedom and human rights (Arowosegbe, 2021; Beiter, 2019; Blell et al., 2022; Derbesh, 2023; Kinzelbach et al. 2022; Marini & Oleksiyenko, 2022; Quinn & Levine, 2014; Ramanujam & Wijenayake, 2022; Spannagel & Kinzelbach, 2022).

Others call for a more restrictive definition of academic freedom, moving away from a generic understanding as a right. Beaud suggests the term "professional freedom", which he defines as "freedom granted to individuals because they belong to a group, in this case the university community" (Beaud, 2020: 613). Here, academic freedom is conceptualized as a special freedom reserved to those who profess as academics and thus should not be understood as a human right.

Other papers, instead, conceptualize academic freedom as a moral-philosophical principle (Beaud, 2020; Khamitovich et al., 2022; Ren & Li, 2013; Spannagel, 2023; Tierney & Lanford, 2014), and as a value/ideal (Berggren & Bjørnskov, 2022; Hao, 2020; Laurila and Carey, 2022; Prelec et al., 2022; Tierney & Lanford, 2014).

Finally, others conceptualized it as a governance principle (Laurila and Carey, 2022; Nurul Huda et al., 2020) or as a university practice (Prelec et al., 2022; Silvernail et al., 2021; Spannagel & Kinzelbach, 2022).

As can be observed, these epistemological categories are not mutually exclusive. Some papers conceptualized academic freedom as a right, human right, and university practice simultaneously (Spannagel & Kinzelbach, 2022), and others focused more on the human right value of academic freedom in one study and on a different aspect of academic freedom in another study (Spannagel, 2023).

(iii) **Academic freedom, freedom of speech, institutional autonomy, and related concepts**. Many studies point out the relation between academic freedom and related concepts, most often institutional autonomy and freedom of speech.

Some argue that institutional autonomy is a necessary condition for academic freedom, while others state that academic freedom can still exist, in its own form, in countries where institutional autonomy is not granted, strengthening the already noted tension between localized vis-à-vis global conceptions of academic freedom.

Autonomy is listed as a required element for the exercise of academic freedom in the 1997 UNESCO Recommendation on the Status of Higher Education Teaching

Personnel: "The proper enjoyment of academic freedom and compliance with the duties and responsibilities listed below require the autonomy of institutions of higher education" (UNESCO, 1997: V.A.17). Beaud (2020) quotes Collini (2012) in stating that autonomy is one of the key four conditions necessary to make a university[15]; Spannagel and Kinzelbach (2022) included 'university autonomy' as one of the factors for measuring de facto academic freedom as part of the Academic Freedom Index.

Ren and Li (2013) commented that the framework linking academic freedom to university autonomy is modeled on Western style democracy and cannot be applied literally to the context of contemporary Chinese universities. They point out that 'Western' notions of academic freedom and autonomy cannot be applied to China and that contemporary Chinese higher education, which developed under the influence of Confucian epistemology, tends to be hierarchical, adjacent to the government, and still responsible for their own survival. The concept they propose to describe this model is "self-mastery", not "autonomy".

Academic freedom and freedom of speech are also often discussed together. Several studies point out the difference between the two. Beiter (2019) noted a difference between them from a legal perspective. He points out that academic freedom, in the form of right to science, or "REBSPA" - The Right to Enjoy the Benefits of Scientific Progress and Its Applications, is protected by Article 15(1)(b) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. This grants to the general public a right to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and to scientists a "freedom of science as their own right" (Beiter, 2019: 237). Academic freedom is presented as an 'enhanced' version of the freedom of science, which is reserved to academics only and is based on the human right to pursue the truth. Freedom of expression, on the other hand, is a human right enjoyed by every individual in democratic societies, in respect for a multitude of coexisting views, and even covers the 'right to tell lies' (*ibid.*: 248). Beaud (2020), who vouches for a restrictive conception of academic freedom as a professional freedom and not a human right, conceptualizes freedom of expression as an integral part of academic freedom, together with freedom to research and freedom to teach.

English and American scholarship tends to equate freedom of speech with academic freedom (Blell et al., 2022).

On the contrary, Derbesh (2023) points out that drawing a rigid distinction between freedom of speech/expression and academic freedom, especially asserting the superiority of the latter, is only feasible within the framework of institutions operating within democratic political regimes. His rationale is grounded in the notion that such a distinction becomes meaningful only when individual freedom of expression is inherently acknowledged. Derbesh highlights a contrast with less democratic societies, such as the Arab world, where these two concepts are intricately linked. While

[15] The other three conditions are: (i) to provide post-secondary education, which cannot be reduced to professional training; (ii) to conduct research whose scope is not dictated by the need to solve immediate or practical problems, and (iii) that these activities are conducted in more than one discipline or cluster of disciplines. See Collini (2012) in Beaud (2020: 621).

not interchangeable, academic freedom, cantered on critical and rigorous research, to some extent equates to freedom of expression for academics in such regions. Here, the proximity between the two arises from the absence of a Western-style freedom of speech, which guarantees the right even to uninformed or subversive speech.

(iv) **A link between academic freedom and democracy**. Another common theme is a positive connection between academic freedom and democracy. Some linked the two concepts indirectly. For example, Adu and Odame (2023) linked the relative scarcity of scholarly studies on academic freedom in Africa to the chequered and deteriorating conditions of democracy in African countries. Similarly, Arowosegbe (2021) noted how non-developmental-oriented state action in African countries has hindered the development of academic freedom, which is seen as a crucial component in the process of building a democratic society.

Others more explicitly linked regime types with varying levels of academic freedom. Berggren and Bjørnskov (2022) carried out a study linking de facto levels of academic freedom with differing political systems and found communism to be particularly detrimental, as opposed to bi-cameral democracies being particularly favorable to the development of academic freedom.

(v) **Positive or negative freedom**. Debates about the epistemological status of academic freedom often focus on the difference between a negatively defined academic freedom (freedom *from*) vis-à-vis a positive definition of academic freedom (freedom *of*). The concept itself is understood to contain both elements. Positive freedom refers, for example, to guarantees that allow academics the space and liberty to carry out research, including employment security and tenure. Beaud (2020) defines this positive freedom as a ‘freedom made of freedoms’: “freedom to research and publish; freedom to teach; and freedom of expression” (*ibid.*: 618). Negative freedoms, on the other hand, refer to protection from interference, coercion, or threat. Beaud (2020) and Beiter (2019) mainly highlight the negative component of academic freedom, focusing on the importance of freedom from any restraints. Grimm and Saliba (2017) point out that the difference between the two dimensions is subtle but significant, as some scholars might be formally free from explicit coercion or interference, but they may be denied the resources they need for the free and unrestricted pursuit of their academic freedom.

A key element in the distinction between the two is tenure, which refers to employment security and stability guaranteed to academic staff. One of the main factors leading to the lack of tenure is the corporatization of the university and academic capitalism, which favors less stable and casualized forms of employment (Blell et al., 2022) and pressures academics to produce research output in indexed journals, with a devaluation of teaching (Hao, 2020). These factors are a direct reflection of the increasingly reduced role and influence played by academics in decisions concerning universities, which have the direct effect of eroding academic freedom for faculty. This is directly related to one of the key points raised by our paper, namely that academics, being the key stakeholders of academic freedom, should have a more prominent role in key decisions concerning its application, which is one of the aims of the focus of this study.

(vi) **Prescriptive vis-à-vis descriptive conceptualizations of academic freedom**. Our literature review revealed a tension between prescriptive and descriptive notions of academic freedom. This is especially evident in the light of certain qualities and external and collateral elements, which are nevertheless generally thought to be essential for the correct functioning of academic freedom as understood by the Western tradition, such as the inextricability of academic freedom, democracy, and institutional autonomy.

On the one hand, Western conceptualizations of academic freedom aspire to be universal, global references. On the other hand, in reality, many non-democratic countries do not have a clear separation between university and government or do not have democracy and freedom of speech in the first place (Derbesh, 2023; Ren & Li, 2013). However, they do have a tradition and interpretation of academic freedom and still claim it to be one of the leading principles of university. According to Hao, it can be concluded that academic freedom is a universal value, accompanied by a universal belief and differing sets of norms (Hao, 2020: 4–5). It is important to reflect on these issues because, we are told, on the one hand, not including voices beyond those traditionally found in debates and definitions of academic freedom standards would pose questions of cultural superiority and repeat patterns of colonial and settler practices in getting to define what a 'genuine university' is.[16] As Beaud hints: "In all countries with genuine universities, academic freedom is seen as a defense against the interventions of external powers capable of jeopardizing the freedom that is required by the universities to carry out their tasks" (Beaud, 2020: 615). On the other hand, even when it is thought to be universal, the value and belief of academic freedom are hardly everywhere and fully realized in practice. For this reason, it remains important not to ignore actual situations that threaten, and indeed harm, academic freedom across the globe.

In this regard, it is also important to bear in mind that threats to academic freedom are not limited to non-democratic countries, as exemplified by recent attacks on academic freedom in France or the United Kingdom (Joly, 2022), where critical race theory was labeled in a parliamentary discussion as a 'dangerous trend in race relations' (Blell et al., 2022: 1823), and corporatization of universities is threatening tenure and job security.

Decisions on who to include in the debate should not discriminate against the voices of academics working in different contexts, which may see reduced levels of academic freedom, as that would indeed be contrary to the value of academic freedom itself. Existing threats to academic freedom are indeed of both global and local scale and are often posed by those trying to re-define academic freedom in

[16] This is a serious issue–see our previous note about the state of the debate regarding the decolonization of higher education.

policy circles, including policies which are re-orienting academic institutions against research interests.

3.2 Answers from a Curated Expert Dialogue

For another set of answers to the questions of whether a global conceptual reference for academic freedom is possible and desirable, we draw in this section on a curated expert dialogue. This exercise was organized as part of the King's College London Presidential Series on Academic Freedom in 2023. All documents and the full recording of the final two debates are publicly available.[17] The experts involved were legal scholars, philosophers, social scientists, university administrators, and leaders of university organizations from all continents, including organizations dedicated to the promotion of academic freedom. It was a "curated" dialogue in the sense that prior to the two public debates in which the two questions were openly addressed, the experts attended preparatory meetings with the organizers in various formats and exchanged academic publications as a way to prepare for the debates.

Their answers were quite clear, unlike those extracted from the literature review: yes, it is certainly desirable to have a common global reference for academic freedom, and that should also be possible. The existing global conceptual references (also mentioned in the literature review above) are either outdated, inefficient, or largely ignored in practice. It is not enough to insist on the application of the existing global references; we need new, up-to-date, and effective ones. Individual arguments were debated, many of which also came up in our literature review. For example, there was consensus that while cultural variability exists and must be accounted for in order to avoid further colonial approaches in higher education and science, academic freedom is a matter of concern everywhere in the world, and it is a precondition for the production, transmission, and dissemination of knowledge in the university everywhere in the world. By way of consequence, it follows that academic freedom is a universal value, and it must be possible to have common global conceptual references for it. There was also agreement that new and more effective global conceptual references for academic freedom are also needed as part of the ongoing process of reimagining academic freedom. The success of some regional experiences, such as in the EHEA, gives hope that this could work.

There was not much discussion regarding how to go about the task of creating such (new) references while avoiding a number of significant traps. Most of the experts agreed to continue this dialogue, and they are currently preparing a collective volume, the title of which will be the two questions they addressed during the debate and which is due in 2024.

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[17] https://www.kcl.ac.uk/events/is-A-global-reference-for-academic-freedom-desirable-is-it-possible, accessed on 9 April 2024.

4 Conclusions

The present paper shows that an analytical framework using the notions of a conceptual reference for academic freedom and framework of reference for academic freedom can be effective in understanding the remarkable evolutions with regard to academic freedom at the institutional, national, regional, and global levels in the last decade, including the efforts to address some significant, even unprecedented challenges to academic freedom during this period.

This analysis is also helpful in understanding both the specificities of the European efforts to address the predicaments of academic freedom during this period, in particular within the European Higher Education Area, and elements of commonality with similar efforts and developments in other parts of the world.

Our study shows that the scholarly literature with regard to the possibility and desirability of a global common reference for academic freedom is neither extensive nor very consistent. These are controversial and difficult matters for research for reasons that have been discussed in the respective sections of the paper. At the same time, existing studies dedicated to this topic indicate that academic freedom is a matter of concern everywhere, certainly for academics and students, and that academic freedom is a universal value. More research and reflection are needed in order to figure out how to go about the task of putting forward new global conceptual references for academic freedom that would be fair and effective at the same time while also allowing to promote decolonization of academic freedom and higher education more generally.

Not everybody that matters in the equation of academic freedom is supportive, which adds practical (political, in particular) difficulties to the task. But there are significant intellectual challenges, too. The fact that global references exist already, as our study has also shown, is encouraging, as is the success in several attempts to develop new conceptual references and frameworks of reference for academic freedom, maybe most remarkably during these recent years in the European Higher Education Area.

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Digitalization and the Future of European Higher Education: Implications for Public Policies (Coordinated by Adrian Curaj and Cezar Hâj)

Bologna Process in the Era of Digital Transformations and New EU Initiatives

Cezar Mihai Hâj and Adrian Curaj

Abstract The most recent EHEA Communiqués emphasize digitalization's role in enhancing accessibility, personalized learning, and international collaboration. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated remote learning adoption, exposing both opportunities for virtual mobility and systemic inequalities in digital access. This article examines the integration of digital transformations within the Bologna Process framework, analyzing its implications for the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) among rapid technological advancements and EU policy developments. The EU AI Act mow establishes regulatory frameworks for ethical AI deployment in education, addressing concerns around data privacy and transparency. Innovations like adaptive learning systems, immersive technologies, and predictive analytics highlight digital potential, but challenges in bridging the digital divide, securing funding, and ensuring educator readiness remain. By harmonizing technological innovation with EHEA objectives, European higher education can strengthen global competitiveness while addressing socio-technical challenges and establishing learning ecosystems that are both resilient and interconnected.

Keywords Bologna Process · Digital transformation · EU AI Act · Virtual mobility · Artificial Intelligence · Digital equity

1 Introduction

The Bologna Process, initiated in 1999 with the ambitious goal of creating a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010, stands as a pivotal framework in the evolution of European higher education, particularly within the context of rapid digital transformation.

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The Yerevan Ministerial Communique (Bologna Process, 2015) emphasised the importance of digitalisation in enhancing the quality and relevance of higher education, fostering innovation in teaching and learning, and easing access to education for all individuals. It stressed the necessity of integrating digital technologies into higher education systems and institutions to encourage greater collaboration, mobility, and employability of graduates. This call for action was later reiterated in the 2018 Paris Communique.

> Digitalization plays a role in all areas of society and we recognize its potential to transform how higher education is delivered and how people learn at different stages of their lives. We call on our higher education institutions to prepare their students and support their teachers to act creatively in a digitalized environment. (Bologna Process, 2018)

The Rome Ministerial Communiqué (Bologna Process, 2020) acknowledges the critical role played by digital solutions in sustaining the functionality of higher education systems amidst the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. It recognises that while digitalisation has enabled many systems to continue operations, it has also revealed certain limitations, underlining the imperative for higher education institutions to assume a leading role in exploring and advising on how to address and overcome these limitations. The ministers also committed to support higher education institutions in leveraging digital technologies and investing in the development of digital skills and competences for all members of the academic community, recognising the transformative potential of digitalisation in advancing the goals of inclusivity, innovation, and interconnectedness within the EHEA.

In the ‘digital age’, digitisation has been embedded in (and enabled the evolving of) ecosystems that employ digital materials facilitating digital transformation (Brennen & Kreiss, 2016). The landscape of higher education is undergoing a profound transformation, driven by the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and digital technologies. These advancements are redefining how education is delivered, extending the reach of educational opportunities and revolutionising the paradigms of knowledge acquisition and dissemination. Digital tools offer personalised learning pathways, streamline educational administration, and support cutting-edge research techniques. The alignment of the Bologna Process’s principles with these technological advancements underscores the critical need for integrating digital progress with the foundational goals of the EHEA. This ensures that the digital evolution of higher education complements and enhances its fundamental missions (Zawacki-Richter & Latchem, 2018).

The potential impact of AI and digital innovations on higher education is profound, promising to revolutionise teaching and learning. Adaptive learning systems customise education to individual learner profiles, offering a personalised approach that holds promise for enhancing academic achievement. Moreover, digital platforms facilitate the internationalisation of higher education, offering virtual mobility and access to global learning communities, thereby echoing the Bologna Process’s emphasis on mobility and international collaboration (Bates, 2019; Daniel, 2020).

The digital shift, however, introduces significant challenges for public policy in ensuring that the technological transformation of higher education upholds high standards of quality while promoting equity and accessibility. As higher education institutions navigate this transition, there is a pressing need for policy frameworks that address digital divide issues, maintain data privacy standards, and ensure the credibility of online learning formats. It is imperative for policymakers to craft strategies that not only harness the advantages of digital technologies but also adhere to the values of the Bologna Process, promoting academic integrity, institutional autonomy, and societal engagement (European Commission, 2020).

This overview paper seeks to explore the digitalisation implications for public policy and the strategic alignment with the Bologna Process, drawing on insights from selected contributions that spotlight recent advancements in this evolving landscape, highlighting both opportunities for future developments and the need for strategic policy interventions to navigate the challenges posed by this digital shift.

2 The Digital Transformation of Higher Education

2.1 Navigating Digital Transformation in the COVID-19 Era

The COVID-19 pandemic has been an unprecedented catalyst for the acceleration of digitalisation within higher education, forcing institutions to rapidly adapt to remote learning and virtual engagement. This sudden shift, while challenging, has underscored the vital importance of digital technologies in maintaining the continuity of education during global disruptions. One aspect that has become evident during the early months of the pandemic is that digitalisation alone cannot solve the various issues of inequality. Limited access to technology clearly hindered learning for people from different societal groups, with disadvantaged communities being among the most severely affected during the pandemic (Eurydice, 2020). The rapid shift to online teaching has increased awareness of the need for mentoring, guidance, and support to alleviate problems and prevent dropout rates from increasing. Working out and targeting support to improve the quality of the learning experience will still be a key challenge going forward.

The integration of online platforms, digital tools, and virtual classrooms became essential overnight, showcasing the resilience and adaptability of educational systems in the face of adversity (Marinoni et al., 2020). This period of accelerated digitalisation has not only facilitated the immediate need for remote learning but also highlighted the potential for digital technologies to enhance accessibility, flexibility, and personalised learning experiences in the long term.

This shift towards digital education has also opened up novel avenues for international cooperation and virtual mobility, enabling students to access cross-border learning opportunities without physical relocation. This digital pivot aligns with the

Bologna Process's goals of promoting student mobility and international collaboration, albeit in a virtual format, thereby potentially expanding the reach and impact of higher education across Europe and beyond (Gaebel et al., 2020).

As digital and blended learning formats become more prevalent, there is also a pressing need to adapt quality assurance frameworks to address the specificities of online education, ensuring that digital learning experiences meet the high standards of quality, integrity, and equity that are central to the Bologna Process. Furthermore, the pandemic has underscored the necessity for flexible and innovative approaches to the recognition of digital credentials and learning achievements, ensuring that students' academic progress is valued and acknowledged in the face of unprecedented challenges (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020).

As higher education institutions continue to navigate the aftermath of the pandemic, the lessons learned and the digital advancements made during this period offer valuable insights for enhancing cooperation, mobility, quality assurance, and recognition within the EHEA. Embracing digitalisation as a strategic priority will be crucial for building a more resilient, inclusive, and interconnected European Higher Education Area.

2.2 Digital Trends

The rise of artificial intelligence in higher education

AI has been around since the 1950s, with the first mention of the term in 1956 (Russel & Norvig, 2010). AI encompasses a range of technologies and methods, including machine learning, natural language processing, data mining, neural networks, and algorithms (Baker & Smith, 2019). AI and machine learning are often mentioned in the same breath as machine learning is considered a subfield of AI that includes software that can recognise patterns, make predictions, and apply newly discovered patterns to situations not included or covered by their initial design. (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019).

In March 2024, the European Parliament adopted the world's first comprehensive regulatory framework on AI: the "EU AI Act" (European Parliament, 2024). The Act categorises AI systems based on risk level, ranging from prohibited practices to high-risk and low-risk applications, with corresponding regulatory requirements. High-risk AI systems, including those in education, will be subject to stringent regulatory requirements, including thorough documentation, risk assessment, and compliance with high standards of data governance and transparency.

The Act also introduces specific rules for general-purpose AI (GPAI) systems, which form the basis for numerous downstream AI applications, including those in education. Providers of GPAI systems will be mandated to adhere to procedural requirements, assess and mitigate systemic risks, and ensure transparency and cybersecurity. The AI Act's phased implementation until mid-2027 allows stakeholders in the education sector to adapt to these new regulations, fostering innovation while safeguarding fundamental values and rights.

The integration of digital technologies and AI is dramatically reshaping the landscape of higher education, marking a significant shift in teaching and learning methodologies, learning environments, and institutional management across Europe. This evolution, widely recognised as the digital transformation of higher education, signifies a deep and comprehensive adoption of digital tools that extends beyond mere technological upgrades to redefine educational paradigms and operational frameworks.

Furthermore, putting aside the issue of necessary regulation, AI is considered a fundamental technology boosting organisational competitiveness and worker productivity. While it can be disruptive in specific contexts, the PwC's Global Workforce Hopes and Fears Survey 2023 (PwC, 2023) shows that 52% of respondents (workers) foresee a positive impact on their careers, acknowledging the benefits of using it at work. At the same time, AI can enable the accomplishment of 134 targets across the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), while, at the same time, it may inhibit 59 other targets (Vinuesa et al., 2020). Regarding SDG4, the authors consider that AI can enable all targets while, at the same time, inhibit targets 1–6 and C (Fig. 1).

Global tech trends and their relevance to higher education

Diversifying the discussion on the significance and further implications of AI (and digital technology) for higher education, there are numerous knowledge resources available that capture technology generation and point towards plausible technological 'futures' (prospective scenarios). By identifying emerging technological trends that have the potential to open new pathways, they can provide various perspectives for education. The 'tech trends' reports help to structure knowledge about technological change. For example, discussing "a brief history of the future", the tech trends report published by Deloitte in 2023 extrapolates on the three fundamental functions of digital technology–Interaction, Information, Computation, defined as "three enduring eternities"–and introduces three essential topical trends converging towards simplicity, intelligence, and abundance (Deloitte Insights, 2023):

Trend 1 (regarding interaction and the simplicity endgame). "Through the Glass: Immersive Internet for Enterprise": For a generation, connection to the digital world has been mediated through an increasingly smaller series of rectangular screens. Now, as it becomes evident that screens cannot continuously shrink, the paradigm

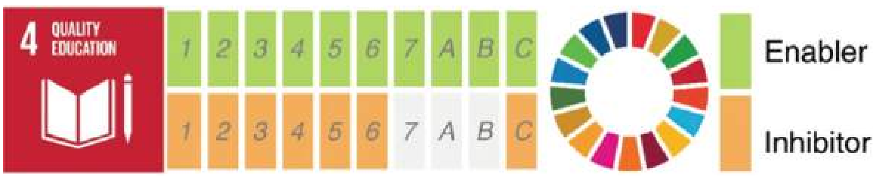

Fig. 1 Detailed assessment of the impact of AI on the SDGs within the Society group–SDG 4 (Vinuesa et al. 2020)

shifts once again, moving towards interfaces that take users through the glass and into immersive virtual experiences, including the digital world known as the metaverse. In the coming years, tangible, conversational, and virtual interfaces are likely to continue to transition from technology to toys and then to organisational tools. In the business sector, while some companies build profitable business models around the unique capabilities offered by an 'unlimited reality', others provide immersive environments for employees to streamline operations or for learning and collaboration. As technology advances further in the next decade, organisations, including universities, should be prepared to see reality shifting online through extended ways of interacting with mixed reality.

Trend 2 (regarding information and the intelligence endgame). "Opening Up to AI: Learning to Trust Our AI Colleagues": With AI tools becoming increasingly standardised and accessible, few businesses can gain substantial competitive advantages from creating a better algorithm. Instead, what will truly differentiate the entire spectrum of organisations powered by AI from the rest is how robustly it uses AI across all their processes. The key element here, which has developed much slower than machine learning technology, is trust. As machines approach human tasks that go beyond simple numerical calculation and enter the realm of reasoning and decision-making through AI, the education sector together with the business world need to develop a new understanding of what it means to trust machines.

Trend 3 (regarding computation and the abundance endgame). "Above the Clouds: Taming Multicloud Chaos": To simplify multicloud management, some organisations are beginning to resort to a level of abstraction and automation that positions itself above the expanding multicloud. Also known as metacloud or supercloud, this family of tools and techniques can help simplify multicloud environments by providing access to common services such as storage and computing, AI, data, security, operations, governance, and application development and deployment. The metacloud provides a single control interface for organisations overwhelmed by multicloud complexity. (Deloitte Insights, 2023).

Innovations in educational practices

The adoption of AI and digital technologies introduces a suite of educational innovations, fundamentally altering the delivery and use of educational content. E-learning platforms, digital libraries, and AI-enabled personalised learning systems have transcended the physical confines of classrooms, enabling flexible and accessible education for all. Such technologies cater to diverse learner needs by customising learning experiences and providing immediate feedback, a development that has been extensively discussed in literature for its potential to democratise education (Zawacki-Richter & Latchem, 2018). Furthermore, adaptive learning technologies, which adjust instructional material based on learner performance, are essential for enhancing student engagement and learning outcomes, as noted by Bates (2019) in his guide on teaching in the digital age.

Transformation of learning environments

The emergence of advanced digital technologies has also led to the creation of enriched, interactive learning environments. Immersive technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) provide students with experiential learning opportunities that were previously unimaginable, simulating complex real-world scenarios that facilitate deep learning and skills development (European Commission/EACEA, 2023; Daniel, 2020). These innovative learning environments, supported by digital tools, foster a sense of collaboration and global connectedness, aligning with the Bologna Process's emphasis on internationalisation and cross-border cooperation.

At the same time, digital learning environments are providing more flexibility to students from underrepresented groups. Those who are uncertain about their study programme decisions can benefit from the digitally-based bridging and support schemes which do not require physical presence for access, thus helping to alleviate concerns about their study programme decisions or provide opportunities for study orientation (Ubachs & Lizzie, 2018, p. 48 f.)

The adaptation of student support services

In the administrative area, digitalisation offers a multitude of advantages, including the automation of difficult tasks and enhanced decision making through data analytics. Digital administrative systems simplify operations such as enrolment, academic tracking, and resource allocation, significantly improving efficiency and reducing operational costs (European Commission, 2020). Predictive analytics powered by AI can play a crucial role in forecasting institutional development needs, offering strategic insights that inform policy and decision-making processes within higher education institutions. In this sense, universities can embrace predictive analytics as a promising avenue for identifying at-risk students and reducing dropout rates, especially among first-generation students.

As European higher education systems continue to navigate the digital transition, they face challenges related to ensuring equitable access to technology, safeguarding data privacy, and fostering digital literacy among students and staff. Taking steps to tackle these challenges is essential to fully harness the advantages of this digital transformation.

3 Challenges for the Digital Transformation of Higher Education

The digital transformation in higher education introduces numerous opportunities for innovation and accessibility in learning. However, it also presents significant challenges that policymakers and decision-makers must navigate to ensure equitable, effective, and sustainable integration of digital technologies.

Ensuring equitable access to digital learning

Access to digital technologies is unevenly distributed across socioeconomic, geographical, and institutional lines, leading to a digital divide. Policymakers must address issues of access to reliable internet and digital devices to ensure all students can benefit from digital education. This challenge also extends to digital literacy, where students and educators require adequate training and support to effectively utilise digital tools (Selwyn, 2016; Dawadi et al. 2024).

Protecting personal data in the digital environment

The collection and analysis of educational data through digital platforms raise significant concerns about privacy and security. Policymakers are challenged to develop regulations that protect students' and educators' personal information while allowing institutions to leverage data for educational improvement and personalised learning experiences (Jones & Salo, 2018).

Empowering educators to teach for tomorrow's challenges

The shift to digital learning requires significant changes in teaching practices. Policymakers must support the development and dissemination of innovative pedagogical models that leverage digital tools. This includes investing in professional development for faculty to adapt to new teaching modalities and effectively integrate technology into their pedagogy, including freeing up time to allow faculty to participate in these professional development activities (Bates, 2019).

Providing financial sustainability for digital transformations

The journey of digital transformation in higher education is facing financial difficulties, requiring substantial investment in technological infrastructure, software licenses, content digitisation, and ongoing system maintenance. Hill and Barber (2014) emphasise the significant initial and sustained financial commitment required to facilitate this transition, highlighting the challenge policymakers face in securing adequate funding. This view is echoed by Bates (2019), who notes the critical need for investment in digital learning tools and platforms to enhance educational delivery without escalating costs for students. Additionally, Grajek and Reinitz (2020) discuss the financial implications of maintaining and updating digital infrastructure to meet evolving educational needs, underlining the necessity for strategic financial planning and sustainable funding models. These authors collectively underscore the challenge confronting policymakers: how to navigate the financial demands of digitalisation in a manner that ensures accessibility and quality of education remain uncompromised. The task demands innovative funding strategies that can adapt to the rapid technological advancements that characterise the digital age, ensuring higher education institutions can thrive without putting undue financial strain on students or teachers.

Facilitating global learning in a virtual era

Digital transformation offers new opportunities for international collaboration and virtual mobility. However, policymakers must navigate complex regulatory, linguistic, and cultural barriers to facilitate these opportunities and ensure they are accessible and beneficial to all students (Knight and de Wit, 2018). The emergence of networked participatory scholarship, as discussed by Veletsianos and Kimmons (2012), underscores the increasing importance of digital networks and open scholarship in fostering global academic collaboration. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic, as detailed in the report by Marinoni et al. (2020), has acted as a catalyst for rapid digital adoption, compelling institutions worldwide to rethink and innovate in their approaches to internationalisation and mobility in the digital age. This period of enforced innovation has highlighted the need for hybrid models of education, which blend online and offline interactions to facilitate cross-border educational experiences, as explored by Linder (2017) in the context of hybrid teaching and learning.

Providing adapted policies for an evolving digital landscape

The rapid pace of technological change demands regulatory frameworks that are flexible and adaptable. Policymakers are challenged to create policies that encourage innovation in digital education while ensuring accountability and alignment with educational goals (European Commission, 2020).

4 Current Research on Digital Transformations and Other EU Initiatives

4.1 The Use of AI Technologies in Education

The paper on the integration of Chat Generative Pre-Trained Transformer (ChatGPT) and other AI technologies in education by Enrique Planells-Artigot et al. (in this volume) provides valuable insights into the adoption of AI in education. The analysis of the implications of ChatGPT for academic integrity and student reflection revealed varying preferences and usage patterns across different academic disciplines, with some fields showing higher reliance and proficiency in using AI for academic tasks. Trust in AI among university students is stratified, with concerns about accuracy and data protection. The findings advocate for a balanced approach to integrating AI in education, emphasising ethical use, policy development, and ongoing dialogue to ensure alignment with principles of academic integrity and optimal learning outcomes.

4.2 Insights from Industry x.0 Initiatives

In the paper "Leveraging International Platforms and Projects for Industry x.0 Skills in Higher Education" by Roxana Voicu-Dorobanțu and Cătălin Ploae (in this volume), the authors underline that in the era of Industry x.0, characterised by the seamless integration of digital technologies into manufacturing processes, higher education faces a profound transformation. The successor to Industry 4.0, Industry x.0 emphasises efficiency, customisation, and automation, necessitating a re-evaluation of educational systems to meet the demands of the new industrial age. This entails not only offering practical experiences through internships and research projects but also adopting digital tools and platforms to upskill and reskill students for rapidly evolving industries. Through strategic partnerships and European university alliances, institutions are leveraging transnational collaboration to provide quality education, research, and innovation aligned with digitalisation and sustainability trends.

The transformative impact of digital platforms in higher education is exemplified by initiatives like BLOCKS and FOReSiGHT supported through the ERASMUS + programme. They provide valuable insights on how emerging technologies can help bridge the gap between academia and industry. By promoting gamification, blended learning, and international collaboration, these digital platforms can serve as catalysts for a future-oriented workforce prepared to navigate the complexities of Industry x.0.

4.3 Challenges and Opportunities in Higher Education Internationalisation

The COVID-19 pandemic has propelled higher education institutions (HEIs) into a digital transformation, reshaping teaching, learning, and administrative processes. This shift has presented new prospects for internationalisation, facilitating virtual student mobility and collaborations between universities. Virtual course formats have emerged to provide students with international experiences irrespective of physical location, opening avenues for enhanced inclusiveness and accessibility in higher education.

The paper by Jana Berg and Luzia Ferreira Santos, "Why digitalise? An Investigation of Virtual Internationalisation Governance in German Higher Education" (in this volume), provides valuable insights about the multiple factors that shape the digitalisation of international higher education, including the value-based and competition-related approaches that often motivate HEIs to embrace digitalisation.

The implementation of virtual internationalisation requires comprehensive strategies that address stakeholder expectations, regulatory frameworks, and the need for sustainable digital infrastructures. The governance of virtual internationalisation involves navigating collegial and hierarchical structures by balancing institutional prestige with societal values of inclusiveness and sustainability. As HEIs continue to grapple with the complexities of digital transformation, a multidimensional approach that integrates technological innovation with social responsibility will be essential for shaping the future of internationalisation in higher education.

4.4 Predictive Insights into the Adoption of the European Degree Label

The paper by Iucu et al. on ¨Exploring Degrees of Connection: Challenges and Acceptance of the European Degree Label towards Shaping the Future of Higher Education¨ (in this volume) delves into the complexities of integrating the European Degree Label (EDL) into joint degree programs, employing Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour as a predictive framework. By exploring the influences of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (PBC), the study offers valuable insights into stakeholders' intentions and behaviours regarding EDL adoption.

Amidst significant changes in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), initiatives like the EDL emerge as pivotal drivers of transnational cooperation and student mobility. The findings highlight the significance of attitudes and perceived behavioural control as strong predictors of the intention to use the EDL, aligning with the principles of the TPB. However, challenges such as bureaucratic hurdles, resource constraints, and cultural resistance underscore the importance of organisational support structures and policy interventions in facilitating EDL adoption.

5 Implications for Policy and Strategy Development

The continuous advance of digitalisation, including AI, across the educational spectrum needs a re-evaluation and strategic realignment of policy frameworks and institutional strategies within higher education. This transition not only impacts the methodological approaches to teaching and learning but also extends to the very core of policy considerations, strategic planning, and institutional governance.

Data privacy, online security, digital equity, and access

Issues of data privacy, online security, digital equity, and access have become essential, and law at the EU level requires HEIs to develop policies that protect stakeholders while promoting an inclusive and equitable digital learning environment. Moreover, the rapid pace of technological change necessitates flexible policy frameworks that can adapt to emerging trends and technologies, ensuring HEIs remain agile and responsive to the evolving digital landscape.

In the 2020 overview paper "Bologna Process in the Global Higher Education Arena. Going Digital?" (Orr, 2020), the author underlined that in 1999, no one had heard of a smartphone, and mobile phones were only just entering the mainstream while 21 years later, in 2020, 'Digital' was just becoming a common attribute of descriptions of communication and production processes. Only months later, with the COVID-19 pandemic, 'digitalisation' was becoming the main objective /attribute for most communication as universities struggled to keep up with the requirements of online learning. Less than four years later, artificial intelligence has become a common attribute to be considered when discussing digitalisation and future trends.

Strategic planning within HEIs

Strategic planning within HEIs must evolve to incorporate digital transformation as a central component. This involves not only the integration of digital tools and platforms into teaching and learning practices but also the strategic use of digital technologies to enhance institutional efficiency, research capacity, and global engagement. Strategic plans should articulate clear visions for digital transformation, outlining the resources, infrastructure, and support systems required to achieve these objectives. Furthermore, engaging stakeholders in the strategic planning process ensures alignment with the broader institutional mission and fosters a culture of collaboration that has been at the forefront within the Bologna Process.

Ensuring the quality of online and blended learning

As digital learning modalities become more prevalent, ensuring the quality of online and blended learning programs is critical. The principles of the Bologna Process, with its emphasis on comparability, compatibility, and coherence in higher education, provide a valuable framework for developing quality assurance mechanisms for digital education. This includes the establishment of standards and guidelines for online course design, delivery, and assessment, as well as accreditation to ensure programmes meet the standards expected within the EHEA.

Enabling virtual exchanges

The Bologna Process has long championed the mobility of students and staff to enhance the quality of higher education and promote cross-cultural understanding. Digital technologies offer new avenues to achieve these goals, enabling virtual exchanges and collaborative online learning projects that can reach a wider audience than traditional mobility programmes. By leveraging digital platforms, HEIs can facilitate international collaboration and learning opportunities, breaking geographical barriers and fostering a more interconnected global educational community.

Equity and access

As HEIs navigate the digital transformation, developing policies that address digital equity and access becomes critical, as the need to ensure students have the necessary resources and support to participate fully in digital learning environments becomes a key stage in preventing the digital divide from widening. This includes access to technology, digital literacy training, and support services to ensure that digitalisation does not exacerbate existing inequalities within higher education.

Digital literacy

The successful integration of digital innovations within HEIs requires the development of a digital culture that embraces change, innovation, and continuous learning. Policies and strategies should promote digital literacy among students, faculty, and staff, fostering an environment where digital technologies are viewed as tools for enhancing learning, research, and institutional efficiency. By embedding digitalisation within the institutional culture, HEIs can ensure that they are prepared to meet the challenges and seize the opportunities of the digital age.

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Conversations with a Purpose: The Impact of ChatGPT Among Higher Education Students

Enrique Planells-Artigot, Santiago Moll-Lopez, and Adolfo Nuñez-Perez

Abstract Artificial intelligence (AI) tools are reshaping the educational landscape. Multiple international organisations are alerting about the benefits as well as risks associated with the deployment of this technology. Large Language Models (LLMs) like ChatGPT, a conversational AI, emerge as a notable player, offering dynamic interactions with humans. This study focuses on how this tool challenges traditional learning paradigms and how students use ChatGPT to obtain information. This study seeks to understand the extent and nature of ChatGPT's use in academic contexts based on a survey of under- and postgraduate students (n = 1,372 students) in Spain from different areas of knowledge. The questionnaire evaluates the frequency of ChatGPT usage in various academic activities, including homework, classroom interactions, and knowledge reinforcement. At the same time, students were asked how much they rely on the results obtained from the AI. The responses illustrate the moderate level of trust in ChatGPT as well as the different uses depending on the academic disciplines. The study offers revealing results on how students reflect on their own learning process, the future of education, and the role of instructors along their academic progress. A significant finding underscores ChatGPT's rise as the primary educational information source, surpassing long-established mediums like textbooks and online resources. Additionally, videos maintain a robust position as a secondary source of information. This research casts light on the shifting preferences and trends in modern educational tools, underscoring the pivotal role of AI-driven platforms in today's academic endeavours.

Keywords Artificial Intelligence · ChatGPT · Large Language Models · Academic integrity · Digital tools

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1 Introduction

At the time of writing this study, Chat Generative Pre-Trained Transformer (ChatGPT) was the fastest-growing application in history, obtaining over a million subscribers in less than a week (Farrokhnia et al., 2023) and reaching 100 million active users two months after its launch on 30 November 2022 (Hu, 2023). This groundbreaking software became so popular due to the ease of interaction thanks to the use of natural language. These models have been trained on massive volumes of written and audiovisual material and can make predictions and inferences after certain words (Lin, 2023). It may even produce human-like interactions (Susnjak, 2022), sometimes undistinguishable from writing by humans (Elkins and Chun, 2020). Through that generation of content, ChatGPT presented multiple opportunities to produce from simple texts, writing code to academic writings (Lim et al., 2023; Cotton et al., 2023).

Simultaneously, the use of any technology needs to take into account all their ethical implications and how to use them responsibly (Sánchez-Ruiz et al., 2023; Graf and Bernardi, 2023; Gilat and Cole, 2023; Rudolph et al., 2023). Therefore, there is a debate on the benefits as well as the multiple risks this technology could have in society. Many international organisations and governmental bodies, conscious of the unknown multiple implications AI will have, have been drafting reports to start regulating it (United Nations, 2023; European Parliament, 2023). Grassroots organisations and businesses have equally raised their voices. For instance, All Tech is Human, a global organisation of technologists, elaborated a guide on the complexity of the interaction of technology and societal issues (All Tech Is Human, 2023). Equally, the Center for Humane Technology (Summit, 2023) drew attention to the need to carefully deploy this technology in our society and be cautious of the problems it may originate. As a matter of fact, the use of language and hacking into how humans use it is a way of "hacking into humanity" (Aza Raskin in Summit, 2023). Similarly, there have been open letters (Future of Life Institute, 2023) and public statements (Center for AI Safety, 2023), both signed by thousands of petitioners, requesting to consider the multiple risks involved in the use of this technology. Although the deployment of LLMs has spread into all aspects of society, this study will focus on its impact on education, where the whole learning process, assignments, search for information, and writing have been shaken since the launch of the software.

The Bologna Process presented a change from a teacher-centred model to a student-centred one, stressing the needs and pace of the students (Sánchez-Ruiz et al., 2023). The introduction of ChatGPT and other methodologies like blended learning, flipped teaching, or game-based learning pretends to turn the learning process into an interactive, entertaining, and stimulating process. The use of one or the other or their combination depends on the learning outcomes of the course. Because of the capabilities to generate content with the prompts and no intellectual effort, there is a chance that students resort to ChatGPT. Through its use, the learning process decreases as much as the efficiency of the methodology employed by the teachers (Sánchez-Ruiz et al., 2023; Eke, 2023, Solker-Walker, 2022). The use of technology will always present challenges as much as opportunities, given the external factors involved in a situation. Similarly, the opinion on the use of AIs balances between accessible or restricted and legislated, where the EU has moved ahead of other countries (European Parliament, 2023) and made some early decisions on how to regulate AI.

In the area of education, in a post-pandemic world, the introduction of digital technologies as part of the learning process has equally triggered a series of consequences. There are opposing views on how to integrate the use of AI in a course (Crawford et al., 2023; Rudolph et al., 2023), but studies welcome both the threats and opportunities ChatGPT presents (Farrokhnia et al., 2023). Teachers need to reach a balance of the integration of ChatGPT in their courses, including the possibility to integrate the technology as a way to encourage its proper, ethically-driven use (Crawford et al., 2023), as well as stressing a creative mindset among the students. The use of AI does not substitute learning, and it could be integrated along with other software tools, like Grammarly (Crawford et al., 2023; Meyer et al., 2023).

This study is set on the implications of ChatGPT for academic integrity and the reflection of students upon their own use of the software. This study recognises a gap in empirical data on the usage and impact of ChatGPT and similar AI tools in academic settings, so a comprehensive survey aimed at university students was designed. This survey serves as a critical tool to quantify and analyse the actual usage patterns, perceptions, and effects of AI technologies on the learning process across various disciplines in higher education. The subsequent methodology section details the survey design, including question formulation, dissemination strategies, and participant selection criteria. The answers obtained from this survey are thoroughly analysed in the results section where the empirical data collected is presented. The conclusions provide an analysis of the impact of implementing ChatGPT in education, stressing the balance between technological innovation and academic integrity, bearing in mind the constant threats to integrity and the learning process (Rudolph et al., 2023).

2 Methodology

Survey Design and Dissemination

The survey was specifically designed to assess the impact and usage of GPT and AI technologies in educational settings. A comprehensive questionnaire consisting of 28 questions in Spanish was developed, focusing on various aspects of AI interaction and its influence in academic environments. The questions were a mix of open questions, Likert scale, and multiple-option types, ensuring a broad range of responses.

The questionnaire was distributed via Typeform, targeting university students in Spain from diverse academic disciplines. The survey was designed to be completely anonymous, prioritising the privacy and confidentiality of the participants. No personal data was collected, adhering to the ethical standards of research involving human subjects.

By distributing the questionnaire online, this methodology may have excluded individuals lacking reliable internet access or digital proficiency, which could introduce a selection bias. Since the objective of the survey was to assess the impact and usage of AI technologies in educational settings, this bias is potentially mitigated as the target demographic is likely to be familiar with and have access to digital tools.

Data Collection and Initial Screening

The survey was conducted from February to July 2023, obtaining 1,895 responses. However, 523 responses were either incomplete or improperly answered, leading to their initial exclusion from the data analysis. Finally, a total of 1,372 completed surveys were gathered for the analysis. This screening ensured the analysis was based on complete and correctly filled surveys.

Validation and Pilot Testing

Prior to the broad dissemination, the survey was pilot-tested with a small cohort of 42 students. This preliminary phase aimed to validate the findings and ensure the appropriateness of the questions. Furthermore, experts in statistics and social sciences were consulted to verify the survey's validity, adding credibility to both the survey design and the results it aimed to yield.

Demographic and Academic Profile of Respondents

With 1,372 valid responses, the sample showcases a gender distribution of 56.2% female and 43.8% male participants. The age composition is heavily centred around the traditional college age range of 18 to 22 years, with each group contributing approximately 17% of the total responses, which reflects the primary demographic of university students.

Furthermore, the study spans across 22 fields of study, including both STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and non-STEM disciplines, with similar participation percentages across each field (see Fig. 1). The fields with the smallest percentages correlate with university degrees that traditionally see lower enrolment numbers. This distribution is important to note as it may introduce limitations to the study, suggesting that the findings are more reflective of certain disciplines over others. Figure 1 illustrates the percentages of participants from each field of study, providing a visual representation of the academic diversity within the sample.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the survey process, ethical considerations were rigorously maintained. The anonymity of the respondents was a key consideration, ensuring their privacy was respected. The survey did not collect any personal data, and participants were made aware of the survey's purpose and the anonymity of their responses.

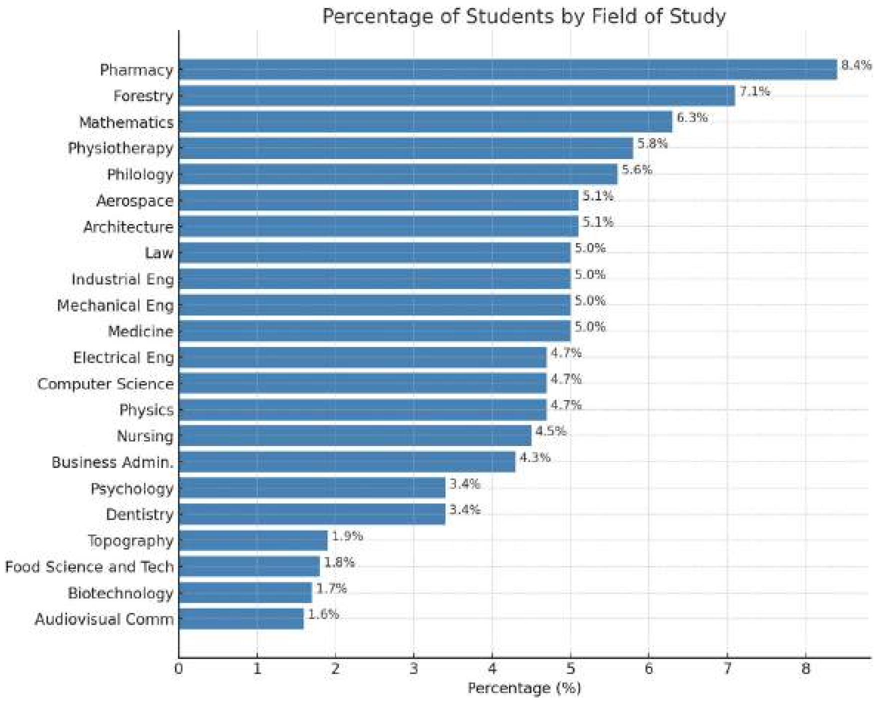

Fig. 1 Percentage of students by field of study

3 Results

This section presents a detailed analysis of the responses gathered from the survey, which aimed to evaluate the use and impact of GPT and AI in educational contexts. The data, collected from a diverse group of university students, offers critical insights into how these technologies are integrated into academic and personal spheres. This analysis aims to highlight key trends, preferences, and perceptions among students regarding AI tools like ChatGPT, providing a clearer understanding of their role in modern education. This section is pivotal in interpreting the data to inform future educational strategies and technological advancements in learning environments.

Self-perception of Technological Proficiency

One of the initial questions in the questionnaire, aimed at contextualising students' responses, was "How would you describe your level of technical knowledge in technology and AI?" This was measured using a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, where 1 represented 'Very Low', 2 indicated 'Low', 3 signified 'Moderate', 4 denoted 'High', and 5 corresponded to 'Very High' technical knowledge. These results yield insightful data on university students' self-perception of their technological proficiency across various fields of study. The overall distribution of technological proficiency levels further highlights a general trend towards higher proficiency among university students, with most respondents rating themselves at levels 3 (32.1%), 4 (34.6%), and 5 (26.7%). This trend suggests an overall high level of comfort and confidence with technology and AI tools among the student population.

When considering students' fields of study, statistically significant differences (Kruskal-Wallis, p-value = 0.001) in their perceptions can be observed. The findings indicate that students in engineering and technology-related fields, such as Biotechnology, Computer Science, and Mechanical Engineering, tend to rate their technological skills higher (see Fig. 2). This suggests a correlation between the nature of the academic discipline and the self-assessed proficiency in technology. Interestingly, fields traditionally less associated with technology, such as Law and Philology, exhibited lower median scores, reflecting a more conservative self-assessment of technological skills. This variation across disciplines underscores the diverse nature of technological engagement and confidence among students.

This section underscores a significant trend of high self-perception of technological proficiency among university students, especially in fields closely associated with technology. These findings seem to reveal a strong correlation between students' academic disciplines and their self-assessed technological skills, probably indicating a diverse landscape of technological engagement and confidence. This insight can be crucial in understanding how different student groups might interact with and benefit

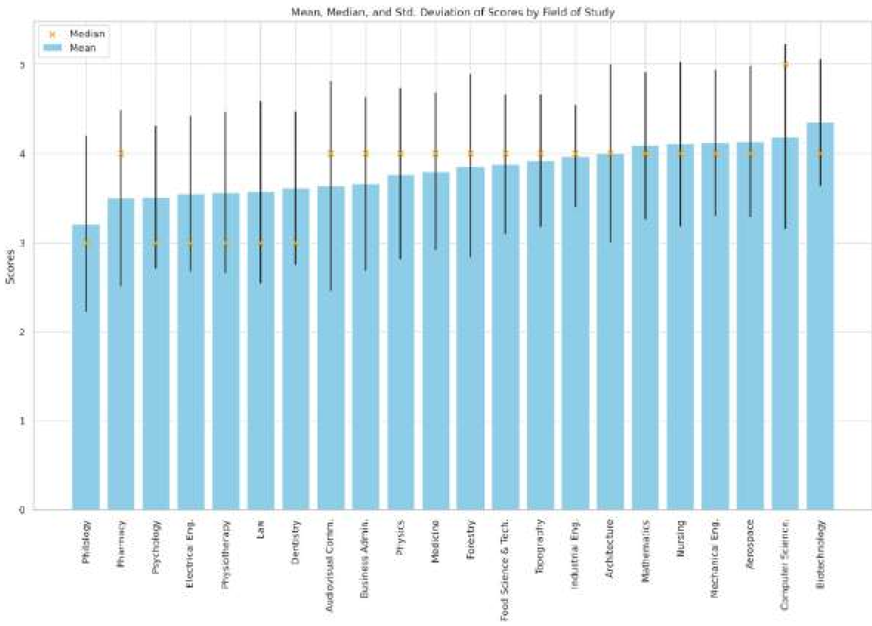

Fig. 2 Self-perception of technological proficiency among university students across various fields of study

from AI tools in their academic pursuits. The evident comfort and confidence with technology among most students set the stage for examining the adoption of GPT and AI in academia, which is explored in the next section.

Adoption of GPT and AI in Academia

All 1,372 university students surveyed reported using AI tools like GPT in their studies, signifying AI's pervasive role in education today. These technologies are increasingly becoming integral to the learning process, aiding research, writing, and concept comprehension. This shift prompts critical discussions on academic integrity and the need for a balanced educational approach. Educators need to guide ethical AI usage while preparing students for a future where AI is integral to academia and professional life.

General use of ChatGPT or other AI

Having established the widespread use of AI and GPT tools among students, this section delves into their responses to the question: "How often do you use ChatGPT (or other AI) in an academic context (in general)?" As with previous questions, this was measured using a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5. In this context, 1 signified 'Never', 2 indicated 'Rarely', 3 denoted 'Occasionally', 4 represented 'Frequently', and 5 corresponded to 'Always'. This question aims to illuminate how frequently students engage with these tools. Initially, an overall perspective is provided, not considering the field of study. Subsequently, the focus shifts to the significant differences in usage frequency across various disciplines.

The provided data reveal a moderate self-perceived usage of AI tools among students, with 43.9% indicating an average frequency. Additionally, 28.4% of the students report fairly regular use of these tools. At the extremes, we observe that 19.8% of students use these tools very frequently, while only 8% seldom or rarely use them. These findings suggest that the general adoption of AI tools in academia has become a widespread practice in students' daily academic activities.

The analysis of ChatGPT and AI tool usage across various academic disciplines, as detailed in Figure 3, reveals notable differences (Kruskal-Wallis, p-value = 0.002) in the application of these technologies. Disciplines such as Audiovisual Communication, Philology, and Psychology display higher mean values, indicating a more frequent use of AI tools. This trend can be attributed to the reliance of these fields on language processing and data analysis, where AI tools like ChatGPT excel. In contrast, disciplines like Architecture, Nursing, and Food Science and Technology show lower mean scores, suggesting infrequent usage. This pattern generally extends to fields more closely related to STEM. The less frequent use in these areas could be due to a greater emphasis on practical, hands-on training or a dependency on calculus and mathematical problem-solving, where AI tools are not yet fully proficient. However, Computer Science shows a notably high usage, possibly due to familiarity with the AI environment and the fact that such tools are quite efficient in programming code in various languages and versatile in correcting code once implemented.

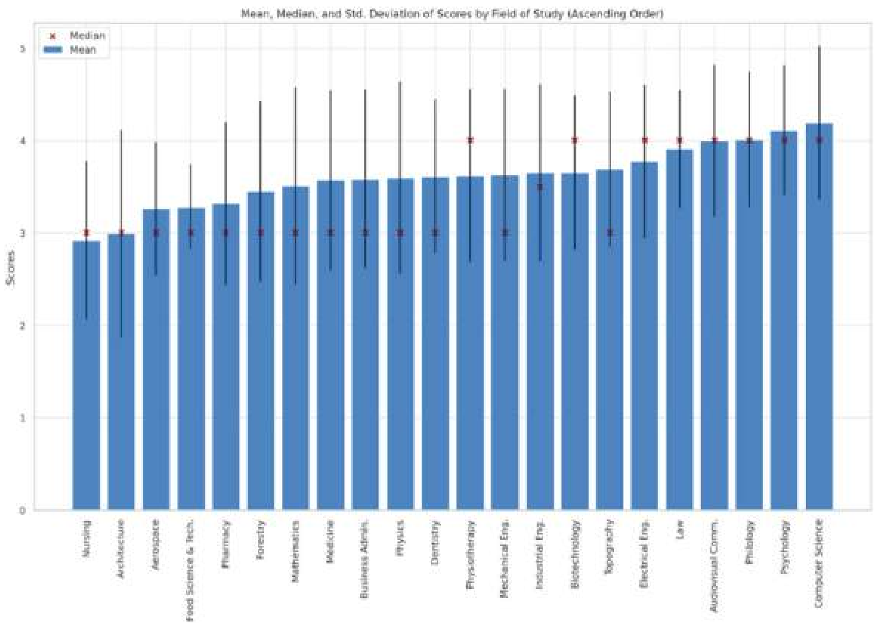

Fig. 3 ChatGPT and AI tool usage across various academic disciplines

The diversity in AI tool usage among different disciplines reflects the unique characteristics of each field, including those in STEM, and the varying degrees of technological integration in their curricula. It also underscores the disparities in awareness and accessibility of these tools among students.

General Frequency of ChatGPT Usage out-of-the-Classroom

The focus in this section shifts to responses provided to the question, "How frequently do you use ChatGPT for tasks and activities at home?" (Likert scale, 1–5). This enquiry aims to capture the use of the tool by students, specifically for completing tasks and activities outside the classroom. The relevance of this question stems from potential access limitations within the classroom environment, contrasted with the likelihood of freer usage outside of it as long as they have access to technology. General results indicate a significant utilisation of these AI tools outside the classroom, with a notable percentage of students selecting options indicating frequent (34%), quite frequent (32.1%), and very frequent (11.4%) use. This is set against a backdrop of a smaller proportion of students who seldom (6.3%) or infrequently (16.3%) engage with these tools.

When the field of study is considered, statistically significant differences (Kruskal-Wallis, p-value = 0.01) emerge again among student responses. Variations are evident in the descriptive statistics for each field, revealing disparities in mean usage levels of AI for academic tasks at home. Fields such as Law, Audiovisual Communication, and Computer Science are observed to have a higher tendency towards using ChatGPT or other AI tools for assignments (see Fig. 4), potentially due to coursework

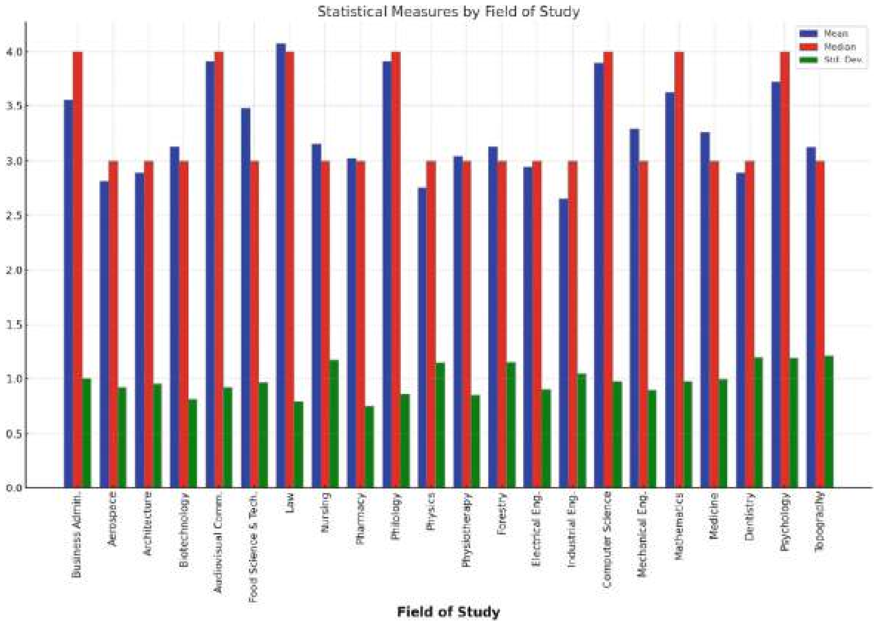

Fig. 4 General Frequency of ChatGPT Usage out-of-the-classroom

characteristics more amenable to AI support. Conversely, areas like Aerospace and Industrial Engineering demonstrate lower usage rates, possibly reflecting curricula less aligned with AI-compatible tasks, including the complexities of calculations.

AI usage in Different Fields

The provided answers offer a revealing glimpse into the varied applications of AI and GPT models in academic settings. Information Search emerges as the predominant use, with a significant 82.5% utilisation rate, underscoring the reliance on AI for data retrieval and knowledge acquisition. Academic Assistance follows at 57.2%, reflecting the increasingly substantial role AI seems to play in supporting educational activities and learning processes. Text Translation and Text Composition are utilised at 44.8% and 33.5%, respectively, indicating a strong dependency on AI for language-related tasks, be it in translating academic materials or aiding in the composition of texts.

Entertainment, although not a core academic activity, still shows notable usage at 20.3%, perhaps signifying the integration of AI in other engaging and interactive forms of learning. The use of AI for Email Response is relatively lower at 8.2%, suggesting a more limited application in managing academic communications. Exams and Programming, with respective usage rates of 40.2% and 24.4%, point toward the growing importance of AI in evaluating academic performance and in the increasingly vital field of computer science education. These statistics collectively highlight the diverse and significant impact of AI and GPT models in the academic landscape.

When considering the field of study, the data provides insightful observations regarding the reliance of students from different fields of study on AI-enabled resources and tools. In activities such as Information Search, Academic Assistance, and Text Translation, fields like Philology, Food Science and Technology, Psychology, and Biotechnology show high engagement levels (see Fig. 5). These high percentages suggest a significant reliance on AI-driven search engines, academic databases, and language translation tools, reflecting the apparent integral role of AI in facilitating research and academic endeavours. Similarly, high engagement in Text Composition in Business Administration and Audiovisual Communication indicates the use of AI tools for tasks like automated grammar checking and content generation. Meanwhile, the moderate use of Entertainment and Email Response across various fields implies the utilisation of AI for recreational and communication purposes, albeit to a lesser extent.

In contrast, the Programming activity highlights a more direct interaction with AI and technology, particularly in fields like Computer Science, Electrical Engineering, Mathematics, and Mechanical Engineering, where the percentages are notably high. This trend underscores the importance of programming skills in these technical domains. As expected, the negligible or non-existent engagement in Programming in fields such as Law, Nursing, Pharmacy, and Psychology indicates a different form of dependency on AI. This differential reliance on AI underscores the diverse ways in which AI permeates various academic disciplines, shaping the nature and extent of its integration into the educational and research processes.

Digital Tool Preferences to Specific Questions

The responses to the survey question, "When trying to understand a specific topic in your studies, assuming the information is available on ChatGPT and other resources, which tool would you employ first?" provide crucial insights into student preferences in academic research. It is essential to study these responses as they offer a clear perspective on the circumstances under which AI is favoured in the academic context, especially when compared with other traditional information sources. This understanding not only sheds light on the growing influence of AI in education but also helps in assessing its perceived effectiveness and reliability among students from various academic disciplines.

The survey data highlight the varying preferences of university students for digital tools when addressing specific academic questions, illustrating the diverse landscape of digital resource utilisation in academic settings. The figures reveal a considerable reliance on AI: 81.3% of students in Computer Science and 70.2% in Psychology prefer using AI tools like ChatGPT as their go-to specific resource (see Fig. 6). Conversely, Google is favoured by 45.7% of Dentistry students and 38.5% in Topography, showcasing its continued prominence in research-heavy fields. Moreover, the data show that students in Philology and Physics prefer Wikipedia, with respective percentages of 5.2% and 3.1%, which, while not the majority, indicates its value for initial research stages in these disciplines. Video content on YouTube is

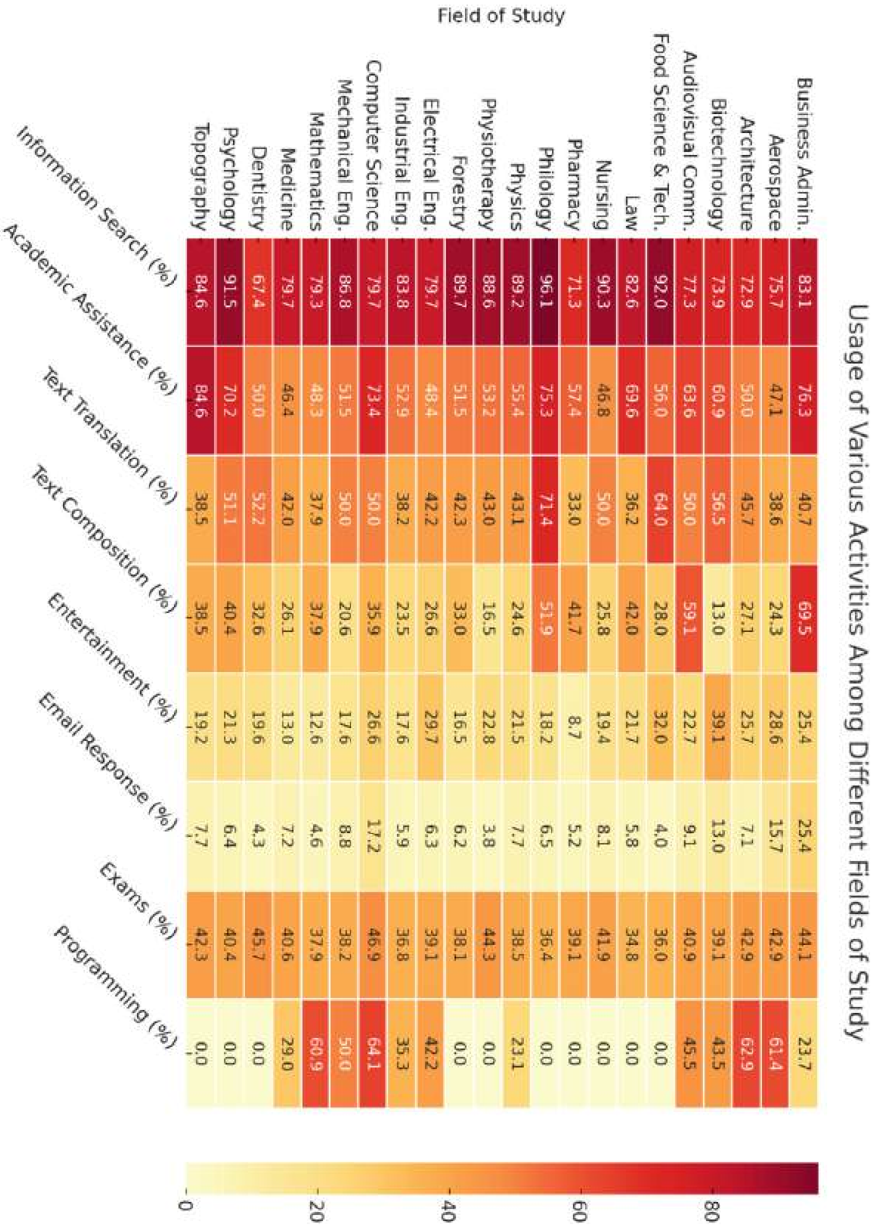

Fig. 5 Uses of AI and GPT in academic tasks

notably preferred by 33.9% in Business Administration and 42.9% in Architecture, suggesting the utility of visual and auditory learning in these fields. Educational Websites have a substantial impact on Biotechnology studies, where 26.1% of students use them as their primary resource, pointing towards the specialised nature of their enquiries.

In the overarching digital ecosystem, AI tools have established a significant presence, with a collective usage rate of 41.4% among students seeking academic information, indicating a strong trend toward AI reliance. Google, as a veteran in the realm of digital resources, still commands a substantial share of 24.9%. Meanwhile, other digital resources like YouTube and Educational Websites maintain considerable usage at 17.6% and 11.5%, respectively. Wikipedia, although used less frequently with a usage rate of 3.7%, and Social Media, at a marginal 0.8%, seem to play a non-significant role in the academic research toolkit.

These data underscore that while AI's ascendancy in the academic domain is noteworthy, there is a coexistence with and continued relevance of other digital resources. The integration of AI does not overshadow the utility of traditional digital platforms but rather seems to complement them, creating a diverse and symbiotic digital environment for students.

This section has provided an initial analysis of the adoption and application of AI and GPT tools in academic settings, as reported by a diverse group of university students. The findings from the survey may indicate a substantial engagement with AI tools in various academic contexts, reflecting their growing presence in education. The observed patterns of AI tool usage, both within and beyond the classroom, suggest varying degrees of reliance across different disciplines. This variation may point to the distinct needs and technological incorporation within each academic field.

The investigation into students' preferences for digital tools when seeking academic information reveals a trend toward the utilisation of AI resources. However, the data also indicates the persistence of traditional digital platforms such as Google, YouTube, and Educational Websites, suggesting a multifaceted digital landscape in academia. The presence of AI tools alongside these traditional resources may denote a complementary relationship, contributing to a diverse educational ecosystem.

In the next section, we will discuss the potential role of AI technologies in facilitating the learning process when dealing with new topics to provide insights into their implications for educational practices and student experiences.

Learning New Topics

The preferences of university students in accessing information to understand a specific topic within their studies, assuming availability through both ChatGPT and other resources, have been the subject of this research. Survey data reveal a shift toward AI-driven tools like ChatGPT despite the continued importance of specialised forums and traditional books. In the field of Psychology, 68.1% of students prefer AI tools, and in Informatics, the percentage is 59.4% (see Fig. 7). Yet, traditional books maintain a strong presence, especially in Medicine and Architecture, where they are the initial resource of choice for more than a third of students.

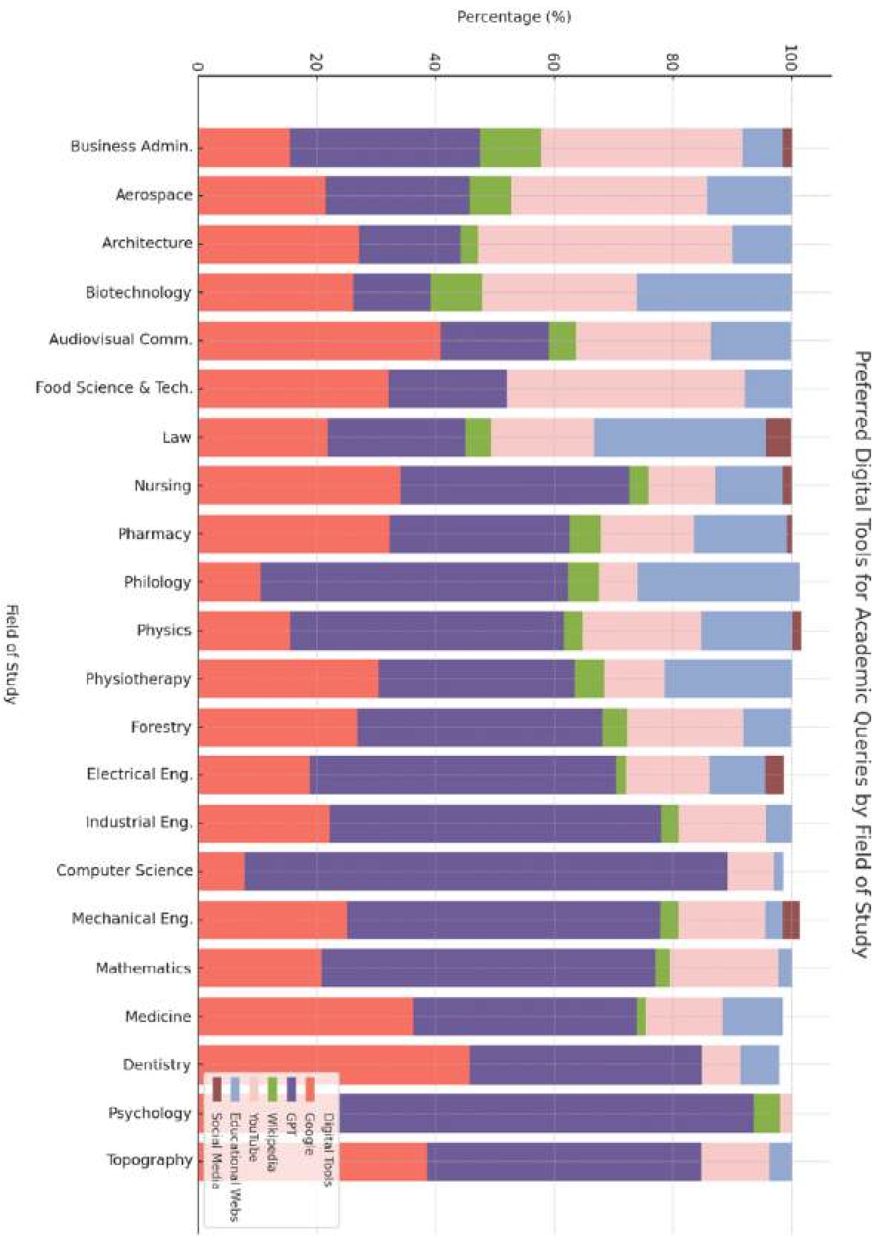

Fig. 6 Digital Tool Preferences to specific questions

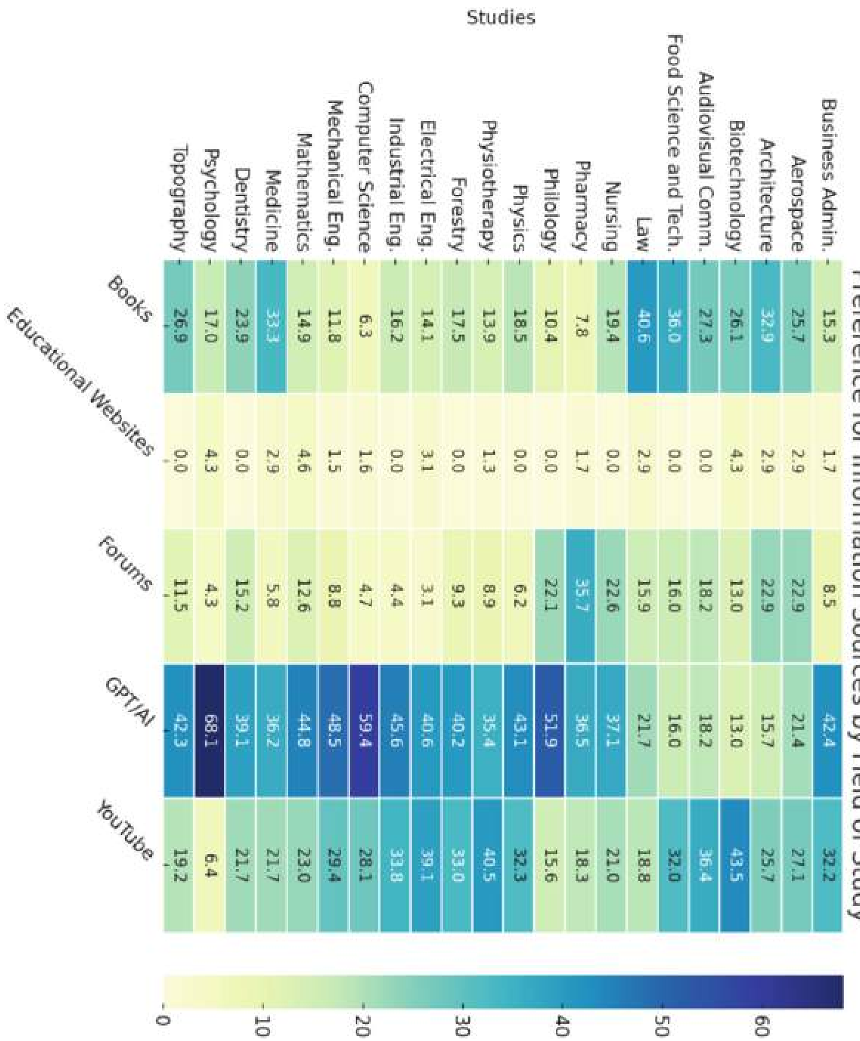

Fig. 7 Preferences for information on new topics

The move toward digital and AI resources indicates a significant shift in educational paradigms, reflecting changes in student engagement with information. Interactive and conversational AI tools are sought after for their immediacy and user-friendly interfaces, yet the sustained use of traditional resources points to their role as complementary to AI technologies. This situation necessitates that educational institutions maintain a balance, integrating AI tools while still valuing traditional academic resources to support a comprehensive educational framework.

Looking at the overall preferences for educational tools, books, whether digital or print, continue to be fundamental, chosen by 19.1% of participants. Educational websites and platforms, such as EdX and Coursera, are less common and preferred by only 1.7%. Specialised forums are favoured by 14.0% of students, highlighting the value placed on collaborative knowledge exchange. Nonetheless, AI platforms, particularly ChatGPT, have emerged as the dominant resource, with 38.6% of students using them, surpassing YouTube which holds a significant but lesser share of 26.6%.

The data seems to indicate a trend towards AI tools like ChatGPT for learning new topics among university students while also revealing the sustained importance of traditional resources. This blend of AI and traditional education methods reflects the diverse learning preferences observed in previous sections, mirroring the evolving landscape of academic resource utilisation.

In AI We Trust

In examining the pivotal issue of trust in responses from artificial intelligence platforms such as ChatGPT, it is necessary to consider the significant impact this has on educational paradigms. Confidence in AI is believed to be based on three pillars: the accuracy and truthfulness of the answers, digital security in the handling and transfer of data, which includes the data policy of companies, and in some way, the acceptance that these types of technologies have when adapting them to our day-to-day lives. In this paragraph, two of these questions will be evaluated: the accuracy in the responses assessed by the students, which contributes a considerable limitation to the study, and data protection.

On the one hand, the answers obtained from the survey provide a detailed picture of the level of trust students place in the answers provided by artificial intelligence across a spectrum of academic disciplines.

The answers indicate a stratified level of trust in AI among university students, with only 4.9% expressing the lowest level of trust (score of 1) and 4.7% exhibiting the highest trust (score of 5). The bulk of responses clusters around the mid-range (scores of 3 and 4), with 40.3% of students reporting a neutral stance and 26.2% leaning more towards trust. This distribution suggests a moderate level of confidence in AI-generated answers among the student population.

Considering the field of study, statistically significant differences exist among the levels of trust (Kruskal-Wallis, p-value = 0.002). Disciplines like Business Administration, Aerospace, and Architecture reflect a mean trust level of approximately 3, indicating a balanced scepticism and acceptance of AI capabilities (see Fig. 8). In contrast, fields such as Communication and Psychology exhibit a higher mean trust level, at 3.32 and 3.60, respectively (Fig. 8), likely due to a higher success rate in responding to topics or questions related to these areas of study.

This variation highlights the diverse expectations and experiences with AI, influenced by the nature of each discipline. STEM fields, in particular, present a unique context. There is an observed reticence in these areas, potentially due to AI's nascent and sometimes imperfect handling of complex calculations which are central to these disciplines. Mathematical problems and models often reveal the limitations

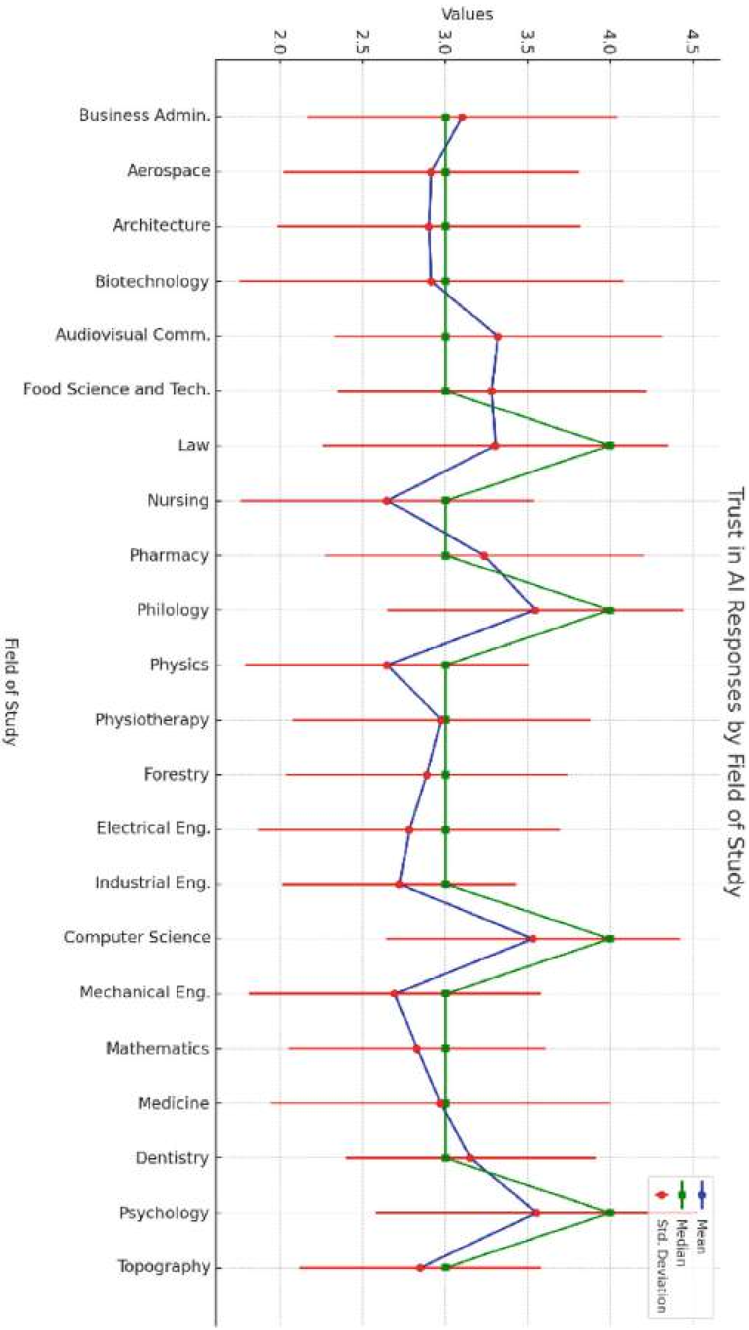

Fig. 8 Trust level in AI responses by field of study. Mean, median and standard deviation are shown

of AI, leading to a perception of fallibility in numerical reasoning among students. Computer Science stands out as an exception, possibly due to AI's allegedly robust performance in programming-related tasks, which aligns closely with the curriculum.

The underlying trend across the survey is cautious optimism about the accuracy of AI, with a clear acknowledgment of its growing role in educational settings. However, the data also call for a measured approach to incorporating AI into learning environments, ensuring that trust is built on a foundation of proven reliability and complementarity to traditional educational resources.

Despite the data occasionally reflecting a moderate level of trust in the responses provided by ChatGPT, the aspect of data protection reveals a different trend: 70% of users have not taken any specific measures to protect their data, while only 30% have implemented some form of protection. Among the measures taken, the most notable include limiting the sharing of personal information (15%), creating separate email accounts for interactions (8%), avoiding public networks (10%), using incognito browsing windows (5%), and using a VPN (3%). Interestingly, only 1% adjusted their privacy settings, and a significant portion reported deleting their chat history after interacting with GPT, though the effectiveness of this method in ensuring data privacy remains to be fully assessed.

These responses predominantly come from students in the field of Computer Science, which is understandable given their deeper knowledge and heightened awareness of the vulnerabilities in data exchange. Similarly, technical fields also show a higher tendency to adopt these measures, likely for the same reasons. Law students exhibit a moderate use of privacy protection measures, possibly due to the nature of their studies, which emphasise the importance of confidentiality and privacy.

The survey findings seem to reveal a moderate level of trust in AI among students, showing a tendency towards cautious optimism. Trust varies significantly across disciplines, reflecting the distinct expectations and experiences with AI in each field. Additionally, the insights on data protection practices indicate a notable gap in proactive measures among students, suggesting a need for increased education and awareness, particularly in non-technical disciplines.

In the next section, we will explore how students perceive the benefits of AI tools in enhancing their educational experiences.

Student Perspectives on the Positive Impact of ChatGPT on Learning

The integration of ChatGPT and similar AI tools into educational settings has sparked a considerable debate about their potential to influence student learning (Cotton et al., 2023; Farrokhnia et al., 2023). Understanding student perceptions of ChatGPT's impact can help inform about the acceptance level of such technologies in academia and their expected utility in enhancing the educational experience. This section focuses on the analysis of students' opinions regarding the positive impact of ChatGPT on their learning experience.

Student responses to the survey question regarding the positive impact of ChatGPT on their learning reveal a spectrum of opinions, with responses ranging from minimal to significant impact. Overall, a considerable majority of the students (57.2%) scored their belief in the positive impact of ChatGPT as high, indicating scores of 4 and 5 (see Fig. 9). This perception is mirrored across various fields of study, with certain disciplines exhibiting a particularly strong conviction in the benefits of ChatGPT, such as Topography, Medicine, or Biotechnology, possibly due to the latest advances in the application of this technology in these fields. Indeed, the field of 'Topography' shows the highest mean score of 4.08, with a standard deviation of 0.796, indicating a strong consensus about the beneficial role of ChatGPT. Meanwhile, 'Aerospace' students exhibit a more moderate mean score of 3.49, with a higher standard deviation of 0.928, suggesting varied opinions on the matter.

The responses to the question about the positive impact of ChatGPT on education indicate a generally positive outlook on its role in educational contexts, with significant variations across disciplines (Kruskal-Wallis, p-value = 0.01). The higher levels of perceived positive impact in fields like 'Topography', 'Informatics', and 'Medicine' (see Fig. 10) could reflect the effectiveness of ChatGPT in handling specialised information or aiding in complex problem-solving scenarios common to these studies. Conversely, the lower mean scores in fields such as 'Aerospace' and 'Communication' could stem from a perceived lack of precision or relevance of ChatGPT's current capabilities in these areas.

The overwhelmingly positive response at the higher end of the scale underscores the growing acceptance and potential reliance on AI tools like ChatGPT to supplement traditional educational resources. It suggests a shift towards embracing AI as a collaborative tool that can offer substantial support in the learning process. However, the variation across fields of study highlights the need for a contextual approach to integrating AI in education, ensuring that it meets the distinct needs and expectations of each discipline.

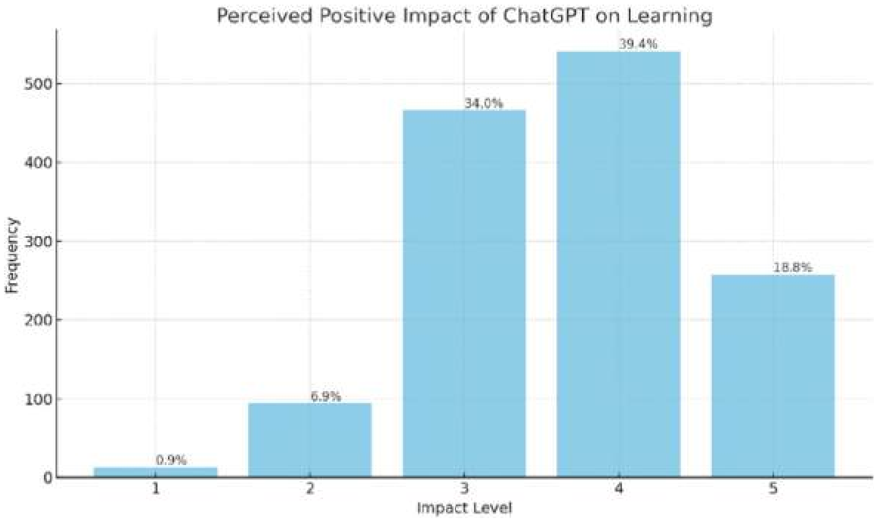

Fig. 9 Perceived positive impact of ChatGPT in learning

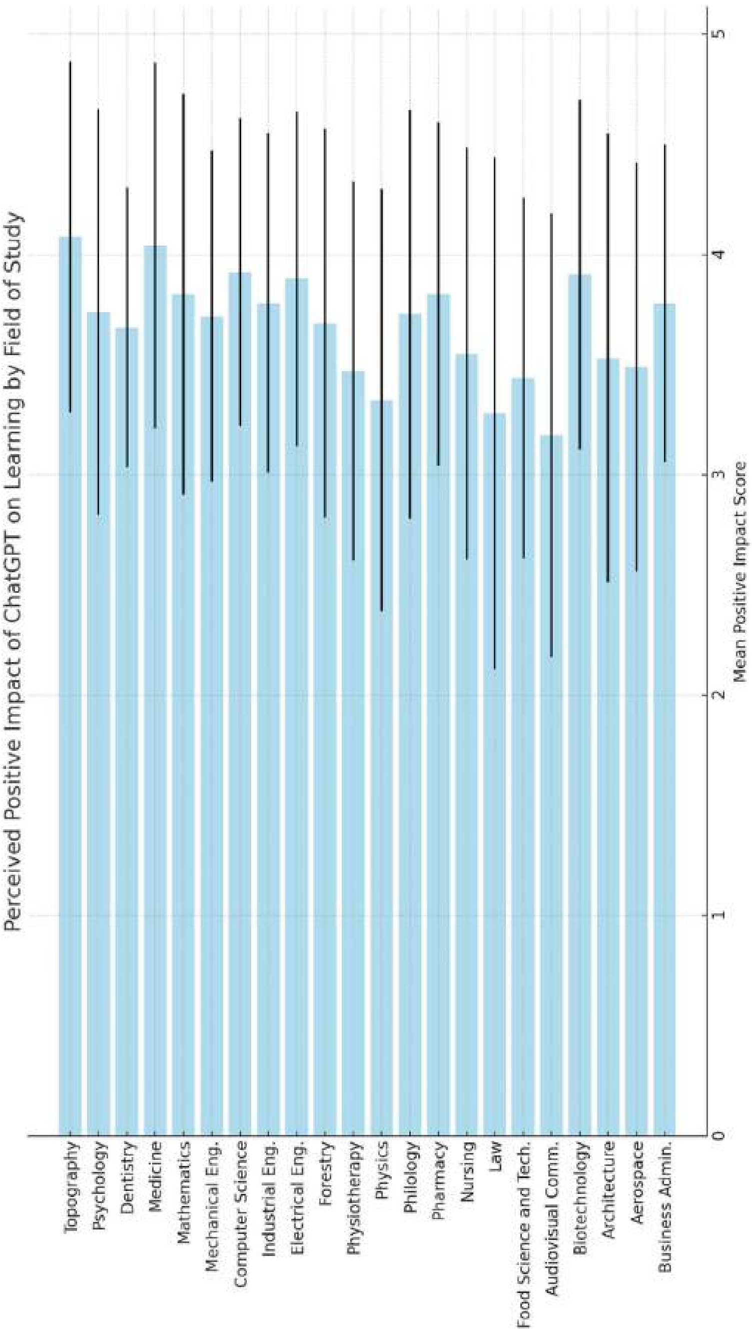

Fig. 10 Perceived positive impact of ChatGPT in learning by field of study

The survey responses reveal a generally positive perception among students about the impact of AI tools on their learning, with many recognising its potential benefits. The differences observed across academic disciplines suggest that the perceived effectiveness varies depending on the field's nature and requirements. This variation in responses may indicate the diverse ways students across various fields interact with and perceive AI tools. Moving to the next section, we will investigate how students perceive the impact of AI tools like ChatGPT on their academic performance, shedding light on the potential outcomes of AI usage in educational settings.

Influence of ChatGPT on Student Grades

This section focuses on evaluating the perceived impact of ChatGPT on students' academic performance, particularly regarding their grades in activities and assignments. The use of AI-driven tools like ChatGPT in academic settings has raised questions about their influence on learning outcomes. To this end, the survey aims to understand students' perceptions of whether ChatGPT has affected their grades.

The analysis of student responses regarding the impact of ChatGPT on their homework and activity grades indicates a general tendency perception towards a moderate to positive impact of ChatGPT, with a mean response of 3.44 (see Fig. 11, left picture). The mode and median, both at 3, suggest that the most common perception among students is a neutral impact. However, a substantial proportion of respondents (46.3%) perceive ChatGPT as having a positive influence (scores of 4 and 5), indicating a noteworthy reliance on AI tools for academic assistance (see Fig. 11, right picture). These findings suggest that while a significant number of students feel that AI tools like ChatGPT positively influence their academic performance, there remains a considerable portion who view its impact as neutral. This could reflect varying usage levels, reliance on, and trust in AI tools across different student groups.

When considering the field of study, the perceived influence of ChatGPT on grades across various fields of study shows statistical differences (Kruskal-Wallis, p-value = 0.02) (see Fig. 12). This variation might be influenced by the nature of

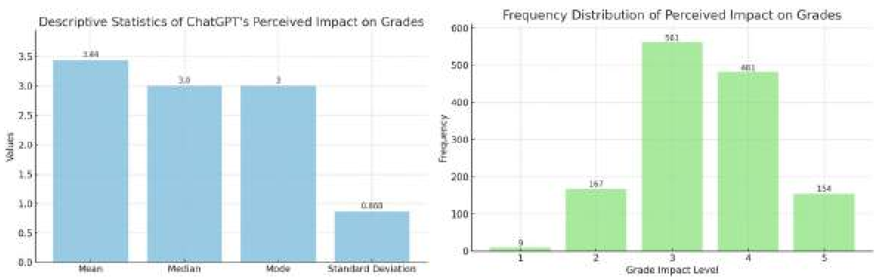

Fig. 11 In the graph on the left, the statistical values (mean, median, mode, and standard deviation) of the overall values of the sample are presented, that is, considering all the data from the sample, regardless of the field of study. In the graph on the right, the frequency of each option for the question is shown

the coursework, the extent to which AI tools can assist in those areas, and students' personal preferences in using such technology for academic purposes. It can be seen in Fig. 12 that the mean scores vary, with some disciplines showing a higher reliance on ChatGPT for academic performance. For instance, Computer Science and Medicine students report a higher mean score suggesting a more significant perceived impact of ChatGPT on their grades. Conversely, fields like Biotechnology and Audiovisual Communication show lower mean scores indicating less perceived influence of ChatGPT on their academic outcomes.

In brief, the survey findings indicate a general perception among students of a moderate to positive impact of GPT or AI tools on their academic performance, particularly in terms of grades. While the most common view is of a neutral impact, a considerable proportion of students perceive a positive influence on their grades. The variation in perceived impact across different fields of study may reflect the diverse applications of AI tools in various academic contexts and the varying degrees of reliance on these technologies. In the next section, the focus will shift to exploring students' views on the ethical dimensions of using AI tools like ChatGPT in their academic work, an area of growing importance in the current educational landscape.

Perceptions of Academic Integrity in the Age of AI

In an era where artificial intelligence (AI) tools like ChatGPT are increasingly accessible, a pivotal question emerges: How do students perceive the impact of these tools on academic honesty? This subsection delves into the perceptions across various academic disciplines, exploring whether students believe the use of AI could potentially encourage academic dishonesty or cheating. The analysis of these answers offers insights into the ethical considerations that AI tools bring to the forefront in educational settings.

The answers reveal a spectrum of perceptions regarding AI's potential to foster academic dishonesty. Fields like Psychology and Food Science exhibit a relatively higher concern (mean scores above 3.5), suggesting a heightened awareness or perhaps a more stringent view of AI's role in academic integrity (see Fig. 13). Contrastingly, areas like Physics and Physiotherapy present lower mean scores, indicating a more moderate concern about AI-induced dishonesty. As before, this perception may be due to the performance of AI in different fields of study since the more fallible it is in that field, the less concern there is about using this tool fraudulently. It also probably has to do with the type of evaluation used in that field of study and whether this method provides clear options for using AI dishonestly.

Interestingly, the means are all above 3, and the median scores are frequently anchored at 3 or 4 (Fig. 13), implying that a significant portion of students, irrespective of their field, hold a balanced or slightly cautious view on this matter. The standard deviation across most fields suggests a diversity of opinions, reflecting the complex and nuanced nature of this issue.

The survey responses seem to indicate a varied spectrum of student perceptions regarding the impact of AI tools on academic integrity. Different academic disciplines exhibit diverse levels of concern, with some fields demonstrating heightened awareness about the potential of AI to foster academic dishonesty. The overall

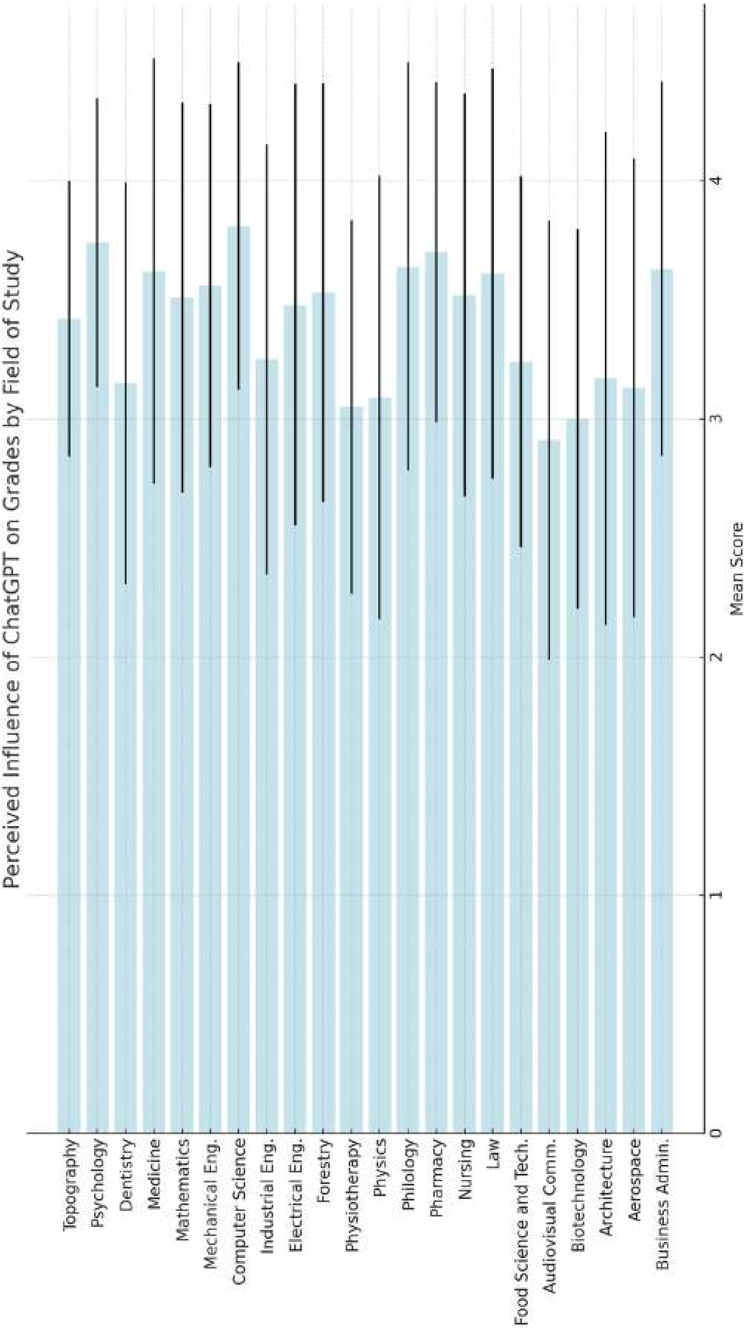

Fig. 12 Perceived influence of ChatGPT and other AI tools on the grades in activities and assignments. The graph includes the mean (in blue) and standard deviation (in black

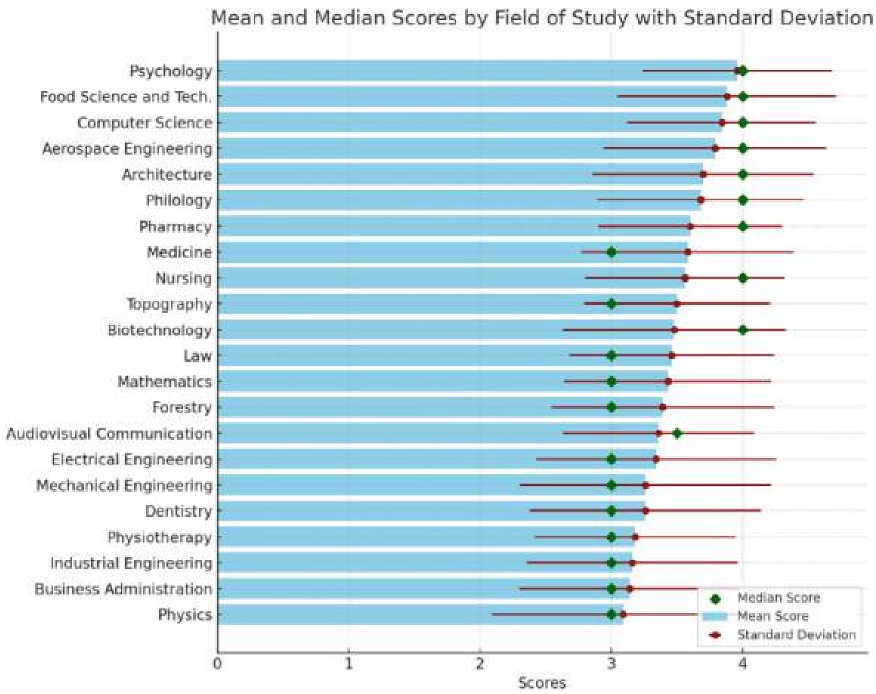

Fig. 13 Mean (blue), median (green), and standard deviation (black) scores by field of study

tendency towards a balanced or slightly cautious view across most fields reflects the complex ethical considerations that AI introduces into educational environments. These diverse opinions highlight the need for ongoing dialogue and policy development concerning AI's use in academia to ensure that it aligns with the principles of academic honesty.

4 Conclusions

The survey results offer a picture of the modern student's digital toolkit, revealing an intricate balance between traditional online resources and emerging AI technologies (Lim et al., 2023). The data depict a stratified landscape of digital reliance, with AI platforms, particularly ChatGPT, being a prominent choice for 43.9% of students (Farrokhnia et al., 2023). This notable inclination towards AI for academic enquiries suggests that students are not only becoming comfortable with but also trusting in the efficacy of AI to assist in their educational endeavours. Traditional resources such as Google still play a critical role, evident from its 24.9% usage, with students valuing its broad searching capabilities.

The high level of self-reported technological proficiency among students, particularly in technology and engineering fields, indicates a growing digital competence in the student population. This proficiency, however, is not uniform across all fields, reflecting varying levels of digital literacy that do not necessarily imply a need for AI integration strategies in all disciplines. Rather, this variation highlights the importance of acknowledging and respecting the unique digital landscapes inherent to different fields of study.

Moreover, trust in AI, as reflected in the survey, extends beyond mere reliance on the accuracy of the information. Only a minority of students displayed extreme trust or distrust, with 4.9% at the lowest trust level and 4.7% at the highest. The majority's trust levels hover around the midpoint, signalling a cautiously optimistic embrace of AI's potential in academia. The mean trust levels vary by discipline, with Aerospace and Architecture averaging around 3, suggesting a pragmatic view of AI's current capabilities. On the other hand, Communication and Psychology report higher trust levels, probably due to a combination of the high effectiveness of AI responses in these fields and an alignment between the capabilities of these technologies and the curriculum of these studies.

The optimistic view of AI's role is further supported by students' perceptions of ChatGPT's positive impact on their learning. A majority (57.2%) believe in the high positive influence of AI on their learning outcomes, with disciplines like Topography reporting a high mean score of 4.08 in this regard. This positive sentiment is reinforced by the perceived influence of ChatGPT on the grades in activities and assignments, where a substantial proportion of students (46.3%) acknowledge its beneficial impact, although the median response remains neutral. Such responses suggest an acknowledgement of AI's supportive role rather than a transformative one.

However, alongside the acknowledgement of AI's benefits, the survey brings to light concerns regarding academic integrity in the age of AI. These concerns are echoed in the literature (Cotton et al., 2023; Alser and Waisberg, 2023), where the challenges and opportunities of using AI tools like ChatGPT in higher education are discussed, particularly for academic honesty and plagiarism. Additionally, the need for ethical leadership in managing AI tools like ChatGPT in educational settings has been highlighted (Crawford, Cowling & Allen, 2023), recognising the potential of these technologies to support deeper learning and better outcomes when used responsibly and ethically. This adds a layer of complexity to the debate on AI's role in education, emphasising the need for stringent academic standards and ethical guidelines in AI usage. The mean scores across fields like Business Administration (3.14) and Aerospace Engineering (3.79) reflect a spectrum of attitudes toward the implications of AI on academic honesty. Students seem to be grappling with the ethical boundaries of AI use, indicating the need for clear guidelines and educational policies that delineate responsible AI usage.

The discussion thus pivots around the dual themes of AI's integration into educational practices and the imperative of maintaining academic integrity (Sánchez-Ruiz et al., 2023). The data advocate for a balanced approach where AI is harnessed to enhance the learning experience while upholding the principles of scholarly work.

This balanced approach also calls for the development of critical evaluation competencies among students, enabling them to discern the credibility and relevance of AI-generated content effectively. As AI continues to evolve, its integration into educational settings should be carefully managed to foster a trustworthy and ethically conscious academic environment.

In conclusion, this study contributes to understanding the complex and multi-faceted role of AI in modern education. The findings highlight the importance of considering the unique needs and characteristics of different academic disciplines when integrating AI technologies into educational practices. As the landscape of AI in education continues to evolve, a balanced and nuanced approach is required to harness the potential of these technologies while addressing the ethical, educational, and practical challenges they present.

Acknowledging the existing integration of AI tools in educational settings, future research should focus on effectively managing and optimising the use of these technologies. This includes further studying the impact of AI on different aspects of education such as student engagement, learning outcomes, and academic integrity. Investigating the long-term effects of AI on student performance and its role in shaping educational experiences can provide deeper insights. Additionally, research could explore the ethical dimensions of AI use in academia, particularly in maintaining academic honesty and addressing data privacy concerns. Evaluating the effectiveness of different strategies for promoting responsible AI use among students and understanding the varying impacts of AI across different academic disciplines are also critical areas.

Building on the aforementioned research directions, it is crucial to align these enquiries with comprehensive policy considerations. Future studies should inform the development of ethical guidelines for AI use in education, emphasising the maintenance of academic integrity and the prevention of dishonest practices. Policies centred on safeguarding student data privacy are imperative, given the extensive data processing capabilities of AI tools. Additionally, research findings can guide the creation of policy frameworks that assist educators and institutions in effectively integrating AI into teaching methodologies, ensuring that AI complements rather than replaces essential cognitive skills.

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Leveraging International Platforms and Projects for Industry x.0 Skills in Higher Education

Roxana Voicu-Dorobanţu and Cătălin Ploae

Abstract Merging internationalization with digitalization in higher education is almost a natural process. The international exposure brought on by the university's digital life is, apart from a marketing tool for the institution, an essential tool to provide international, intercultural, and specific technical skills. Transnational projects, such as Erasmus+-funded strategic partnerships, leverage the potential of this exposure by allowing for blended mobilities and the creation of transdisciplinary collaboration communities. This article highlights the transformational role of Industry x.0 in higher education focusing on the unification of digital technologies such as AI, IoT, and big data in production and education. It is a brief on the transition from Industry 1.0 to Industry 4.0 and to x.0 and, therefore, why educational institutions need to transform into fourth-generation universities offering digital literacy and data analysis competencies. The article covers the role of Erasmus+Strategic Partnerships and European University Alliances in promoting international integration and innovation in education. Using a comparative case study of the BLOCKS and FOReSiGHT projects, it argues that digital platforms are central in addressing the dictionary gap and transdisciplinary collaboration and resilience, essential in navigating the challenges of Industry x.0.

Keywords Artificial Intelligence · Big data · Blockchain · Digital platforms · Digital transformation · Industry x.0

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1 Introduction

Industry x.0–the successor to Industry 4.0–is an age of transformation in which digital technologies such as artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things, robotics, and big data analysis are integrated into manufacturing processes. That represents an evolution from conventional manufacturing to smart factories in which the emphasis is on efficiency, customization, and automation. Industry x.0 (Dev, 2023) refers to the evolution of different industrial revolutions (Simon, 2023) and is a milestone in the history of manufacturing and production. Industry 1.0 (Technical Laboratory Systems, Inc., 2023), which started at the end of the eighteenth century, involved mechanization through water and steam power, transforming textile production and altering other industries. However, it was only in the nineteenth century, with electrification, assembly lines, and mass production, that Industry 2.0 appeared, raising efficiency and cutting costs significantly. The third revolution, or Industry 3.0, started in the twentieth century using computers and programmable logic controllers, establishing the foundations of modern-day manufacturing processes. Now, we are in the age of Industry 4.0 (McKinsey & Company, 2022), which adds digital technologies such as the Internet of Things (IoT), artificial intelligence (AI), and cloud computing to production processes to create smart factories and continued automation (Yasemin, 2021). Industry x.0 goes beyond 4.0 while incorporating all the latter's basic principles: automation, IoT, cloud computing, data exchange, cyber-physical systems, and cognitive computing. In addition to these, x.0 brings about the integrated approach of combining flexibly and sustainably these core principles in a holistic manner to deliver value.

Concerning higher education, Industry x.0 plays an important role as well. However, it first requires an overhaul of the educational scheme. Educational institutions must respond by teaching skills for this era's new industrial age, including data analyses, cybersecurity, and digital literacy, thus moving from "third-generation universities" to "fourth-generation universities" to meet the needs and demands of a knowledge-based society (Zuti & Lukovics, 2015). It also ensures that graduates will have the skills requested by a digital workplace.

In addition, Industry x.0 promotes more significant interaction between academia and industry, with successful cases such as an event-driven integrative framework for manufacturing (Modoni et al., 2019) or a Professional practice program (Ashruf et al., 2021). Industrial partners are instrumental in helping universities offer internships, co-op programs, and research projects that can provide practical, hands-on experience. Such partnerships also broaden learning and enhance appreciation of the relationship between academic theory and real-world industrial applications. Moreover, industry x.0 compels higher institutions to rethink their modes of instruction. Making digital tools and platforms central to education and adopting problem-based and experiential learning methods has become critical. Examples such as using virtual reality (Rojas-Sánchez et al., 2023) or virtual learning factory toolkits (Mahmood et al., 2021) are expected to become mainstream rather than anecdotic in the following years (Castro, 2019). Industries are rapidly changing, unpredictable, and constantly transforming under the Industry x.0 concept. Lastly, Industry x.0 emphasizes the importance of lifetime education. In the age of constantly evolving technology, upskilling and reskilling are both critical for development and growth. This is achieved through the innovative courses, certifications, and online learning offered by each higher education institution to keep up with the shifting demands of professionals and industry.

The value of the Erasmus+approach, which introduces new methods and methodologies to Higher Education in experimental programs and includes educational work and training to develop these essential strengths, becomes thus evident. Students and professionals can only learn the skills necessary to compete in the information age through international cooperation and exchange between educational institutions. Nevertheless, upgrading Industry 4.0 skill sets makes Erasmus+part and parcel of the foundation for training the workforce needed to meet the challenges ahead. Industry x.0 is not only a technological revolution, but it also has enormous potential for educational reform. Higher education institutions will have no choice but to actively respond and meet demand from industry in the digital transformation era.

2 Background—The Context of Erasmus+Strategic Partnerships and European University Alliances

Erasmus+Strategic Partnerships and European University Alliances (European Education Area (n.d.)) are changing the future face of higher education throughout Europe (Souto-Otero et al., 2019, EURAXESS, n.d.). The European strategy for establishing universities strives to build up 60 alliances of European Universities, calling together more than 500 higher education schools, expected by mid-2024. They are transnational alliances of higher education institutions forging a new frontier toward internationally integrated universities. Funding is essential, mainly from the Erasmus+program for these alliances (European Education Area (n.d.)). The program encourages establishing and running alliances among European universities, with applications for funding on Education and the connection between Education, research, and innovation to meet societal needs. The large budget allocation for the Erasmus+program is to be dispersed until 2027 on calls focusing on using current deep institutional transnational cooperation alliances.

All the various alliances between European universities make several advantages possible, such as quality and comprehensive education as well as research and innovation (European Education Area (n.d.)). These are in harmony with current trends in digitalization and sustainability and are designed to help solve critical social problems. University alliances in Europe play a crucial role in shaping the higher education landscape, driving innovation (Fedak et al., 2022) and fostering international cooperation while acting as new relevant players in the multi-level governance of higher education policies (Vukasovic & Stensaker, 2018).

European inter-university campuses are a particular type of alliance providing mobility for students, doctoral candidates, and staff. This can be both physical or online attendance or blended learning. Upholding the principles of interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral cooperation, they encourage flexible, creative curricula that are attentive to student needs. Furthermore, these alliances promote practical work opportunities and apprenticeships. All of this serves to strengthen civic participation, entrepreneurship, and inter-sectoral learning. European University alliances also strive to form teams to produce knowledge within Europe. The challenge-based approach these teams adopt means that all the problems are related to real-life issues, and their solutions can be implemented. In addition, Horizon 2020 (European Commission, 2020) gives these alliances extra assistance for their research and innovation objectives. This support has helped the universities integrate and transform research and innovation to increase international competitiveness. Funding from Erasmus and Horizon 2020 is an essential factor that helps create ever closer relationships between the European Education Area and the European Research Area.

The Erasmus+Strategic Partnerships also helps facilitate the development of programs connected with Industry 4.0. Within the framework of the Erasmus+projects, the objectives related to Industry x.0 are a core development line: fostering competencies and skills for digitalization in line with transnational cooperation and integration of innovative teaching methods and methodologies. Assante et al. (2021), Gleich et al. (2019), Poszytek and Fila (2022) present various examples of best practices in connecting Erasmus + with Industry x.0 elements, from open educational resources to collaborative learning platforms and their challenges during uncertain times.

Erasmus + Strategic Partnerships are collaborative projects aimed at fostering innovation and exchange of practices in education, training, and youth sectors across Europe. These partnerships involve various stakeholders, including schools, universities, and NGOs, to develop, share, and transfer best practices and innovative educational approaches. These partnerships aim to promote using technologies such as the Internet of Things, artificial intelligence, robotics, and data analysis in schools and industries. This integration is essential for upgrading industrial processes, raising productivity, implementing predictive maintenance, and driving entrepreneurial innovation. Industry x.0 projects, such as the ones mentioned in Rojas-Sánchez et al. (2023), Mahmood et al. (2021), or Castro (2019), can only succeed with close cooperation between Education and Industry. This includes interaction with industrial players, such as companies, research institutes, and business associations, to enrich projects with experience and support resources. Such partnerships encourage knowledge sharing, skills development, and the co-creation of new solutions. The acquisition of digital skills to adapt to the Industry x.0 environment is a common theme of Erasmus+projects in this context. Such skills include programming, data analysis, cybersecurity, and problem-solving.

3 Digital Transformation and the Evolution of Industry x.0: A Literature Review on Bridging the Skills Gap

The role of European citizens as transnational creators of value is highly facilitated by digital technology, as this allows for problem-based and interactive learning and thus enables personalization of the learning experience by skills and objectives. The evolution of digitization and mitigating risks related to global supply chains has highlighted the lack of skills and resilience worldwide (Durach et al., 2021). It has also shown a remarkable capacity for flexibility and agility at the micro level. The three phases of automation (from the rigid implementation of the 70s to the flexible version of the 2000s and the current "intelligent automation") raise new challenges for the capacity of the citizens and companies to align to a new reality in which the correct and streamlined blend of work done by people and machines brings in more resilient competitiveness. Intelligent automation may bring increased resilience and higher flexibility in a VUCA world. Still, skills are needed for these objectives, while the apparent mismatch between technological evolution and human capital may lead to unemployment (at least in the short term). There are figures to support this statement:

350,000 EU vacancies in highly skilled technical expert jobs and a highly uneven level of businesses' digitization, with about 77% of EU workplaces reporting a digital skills gap lacking in undertaking any actions (SWD (2018) 305 final). By tackling this noticeable digital skills gap within the EU, our project also focuses on addressing and contributing to the European Higher Education Area's commitment to exploiting the potential benefits of digital technologies. It does so by strengthening the European efforts to address the challenges that higher education systems currently face: graduates whose skills are irrelevant in the labor market, fewer opportunities in research, or significant back-log in innovation within higher education institutions and the economy.

Blockchain has become the buzzword for disruptive innovation in the past few years, potentially impacting all services and products. In its technical name, DLT (distributed ledger technology) is the sharing and recording of information, secured by cryptography, updated and maintained by a network (of computers) instead of a central node. Governed by decentralization, blockchain is perceived as exciting but potentially disrupting policies, financial services, inclusion, intellectual property, manufacturing, energy, supply chain, loT, social impact issues, and policies. Blockchain is projected as an internet of value (as opposed to the internet of information) by the World Economic Forum (June 2017) and is immutable, public, historical, and inclusive. All these characteristics are suitable for a direct connection to entrepreneurship. The disruption to the traditional way of doing business by the digital transformation (DX) is enhanced by the redesign of the value chain, the reshaping of the workforce skills, and the retooling of the value proposition from the entrepreneurs. The new entrepreneur needs knowledge about the components of this DX: design thinking, robotics, big data, analytics, IoT, additive manufacturing, cryptocurrencies, and blockchain to foster all the benefits of DX and enhance the value proposition sustainably and resiliently.

Following the remarks of the EC within the proposal of "A New Skills Agenda for Europe" (COM (2016) 381 final), we are acknowledging the fact that new ways of working emerging from the Digital transformation process are affecting the types of skills needed, including innovation and entrepreneurship, as EC acknowledges in the working document accompanying its proposal for the Digital Education Action Plan ({COM (2018) 22 final}). However, all sectors of Education are increasingly making use of digital technologies to stimulate educational innovation; "there is a long way to go before the full potential as a tool for learning and teaching is reached" as "the impact of technology in changing educational practices is currently less evident than it was hoped for." From another perspective, research and innovation are economic growth engines; cultivating an inclusive environment where science and entrepreneurship meet helps us ensure an innovation pipeline that views today's challenges as tomorrow's opportunities. Technology and knowledge transfer play a decisive role in driving this process by bringing academic and institutional research to the market and society as innovative products and services with an economic and social value attached, generating economic growth and value for society. Unlocking the potential of technology transfer is critical to improving European innovation, particularly in the CEE countries.

As internationalization becomes a reality in higher education, digital collaboration platforms are becoming more and more useful for cultural interchanges and skills related to employability (Standley, 2015; Starcic et al., 2017). The trend is strengthened by the appearance and further acceleration of use due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Che Ahmat et al., 2021; McGreal et al., 2022) of micro-credentials like digital badges which provide flexible and accessible learning (Lemoine and Richardson, 2015). Nevertheless, the success of such efforts hinges on the responsiveness of each institution to global trends and its effectiveness in safeguarding the quality of cross-border Education (Olcott, 2009; Serpa et al., 2020; Teichler, 2009).

The aspects related to the Industry x.0 skills in higher education hinge on two aspects:

- the Problem aspect–Industry x.0 (and all aspects related to skills) and
- the Solution aspects (internationalization, digital collaboration platforms, micro-credentialing), to be further explored in the following sub-chapters.

3.1 The "Industry 4.0" Angle or the Problem

The development of Industry 4.0 brought new challenges to Higher Education, a sector known for its rather un-agile approach to change. Baygin et al. (2016) and Menezes and Pinto (2016) emphasize the need for conformity to local demand, and in particular, **a need for university-industry liaison**, as the level of knowledge of concepts, mechanisms, and theories is reduced (Mokhtar and Noordin (2019), AlMaadeed & Ponnamma (2020)). While authors like Beke (2020) note that **Industry 4.0 is demanding a whole new model for the economy**, Gaol et al. (2018), Vetiska et al. (2021), and Fahim et al. (2021) all look at **new learning models and modes of instruction**, such as Interactive technologies and Smart Education that involve Industry 4.0 technologies and digital ideas.

On the road to Industry 4.0 Skills Integration, synthesizing major educational theories in a genuinely comprehensive fashion means adopting **a multi-dimensional approach** that syncs with industrial sector demands that are changing at a growing rate. Industry 4.0 technologies, including augmented reality, simulation, Internet of Things, and virtual reality, were mainly used in higher education, as described in Moraes et al. (2023). All these technologies help students learn by increasing engagement, encouraging interpersonal communication, giving the students a feel for real-world conditions, and cultivating soft skills that Industry 4.0 will require.

Also, reviews of international literature (Chakraborty et al., 2023) stress that **educational models ought to be designed around combinations of the various competency and capability function domains that best meet the demands of Industry 4.0**. Based on survey results, Chakraborty et al (2023) determine that essential elements of Education 4.0 are decision making, entrepreneurial thinking, efficiency orientation, problem-solving, conflict resolution, and analytical skills. In addition, another "integrated alignment model" was advocated, in which educational activities are aligned with the needs of industries within the framework of Industry 4.0, and the relationship between connectivity, automation, operation, and intelligence can be brought together. Singapore sets an excellent example with its Smart Industry Readiness Index (SIRI), which road-mapped and planned the architecture for successive phases (Singapore International Centre for Industrial Transformation, 2024). It shows the urgency of a comprehensive and proactive inventory of diverse competencies in education to match the substantial and constantly changing needs of the Industry 4.0 era.

A fundamental part of Industry x.0, **digital platforms** bring opportunities and leverage challenges for higher education, enhancing teaching, learning, research, and governance (Bygstad et al., 2022). Although particularly relevant to the transition to digital universities, the use of platforms in transfer and research is still underrepresented (Reiche, 2022), while the adoption of digital technologies (cloud, mobile, virtual) is seen as essential to a more efficient and effective educational process (Uimanova & Bilalova, 2021).

Starting from the linguistics term "language gap" (Johnson, 2015), we define the dictionary gap as part of The Problem and a discrepancy in terms and concepts between tech and non-tech professionals, stemming from either a superficial understanding of common concepts or homonymic terms. For instance, this dictionary gap became evident during the implementation of a current Erasmus+project, BLOCKS, as basic concepts such as 'value,' 'currency,' and 'trust' were found to be understood fundamentally differently by economists and IT specialists from various organizations. This misunderstanding represents a critical vulnerability in a society transitioning to digitally based. In a nutshell, no platform allows for foresight, resilience, risk management (RM), digital transformation (DT), and algorithmic governance (AG) to be put together in an easily accessible way for all stakeholders.

The dictionary gap is also supported by literature, as it has been a conversation topic for decades. For instance, Trower and Straub (1992) and Murphy et al. (2019) emphasize the importance of differentiating between tech and non-tech, with Trower proposing an instrument to do so and Murphy et al. advocating for a new lexicon. Medlin et al. (2001) and Canada and Brusca (1991) discuss the importance of nontechnical skills in the tech industry and the technological gender gap.

As a conclusion that aligns with the cases used in this paper further on, Christensen (2012) argues that bridging the dictionary gap between tech and non-tech can be achieved through cross-cultural collaboration and enhanced training and support systems. The technological aspects related to Industry x.0 are making these two paths achievable.

3.2 The "Internationalization of Higher Education" Angle—or The First Part of the Solution

Merging internationalization with digitalization in higher Education is almost a natural process. Although the internationalization process of higher Education began several decades before the latter, worldwide exposure in all its components has frequently coincided with technological advancement. Over the last 50 years, the process of internationalization of higher education has been marked by significant trends (from massification to the Global Knowledge Economy) evolving at the level of higher education. Experiencing a shift in perspective from a narrow range of marginal and often ad hoc activities to more comprehensive processes and central policies, in the context of a gradual shift from mobility of individuals to mobility of study programs, internationalization has become a critical strategic agenda for both universities and local and national governments across the globe. Today, this process involves an extensive range of players inside and outside the educational system. It is motivated by a vast and diverse range of organizational, programmatic, and reasoning techniques.

There are various perspectives linking internationalization with digitalization in higher education, such as:

– Virtual Internationalization Framework: as proposed by Bruhn (2017), it includes virtual mobility, Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), and virtual transnational education (TNE). These are practical means of depicting the natural process of merging international and digital efforts.
– Digital Learning Platforms and Internationalization: digital learning platforms have significantly contributed to the diversification of the higher education landscape, focusing on the increase of competitiveness and improvement of skills (De Lima et al., 2020)
– Digital Inclusion and Equity (Wimpenny et al., 2022)
– Digital Transformation in Higher Education: limited use of digital technology for predominantly assimilative tasks, with Learning Management Systems perceived

as the most helpful tool, indicating a need for strategies to support broader educational technology use (Bond et al., 2018).

– Facilitating Learning through International Virtual Collaborative Practice: the potential of digital platforms to facilitate 'internationalization-at-home' paradigms, promoting inclusivity and global engagement (Wihlborg et al., 2018)

From a typological perspective, we are dealing with two major components that define the same concept which enhances learners' access to global learning: internationalization at home (campus and curriculum internationalization, teaching and learning, joint programs, intercultural and international competencies, and learning outcomes) and internationalization abroad (student degree and credit mobility, short-term student and staff mobility, and study program mobility) (Harrison, 2015; Mittelmeier et al., 2020; Soria & Troisi, 2014; Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2020).

The various critical approaches of the last 20 years that have aimed at correcting the relatively narrow perspective of the concept should be discussed here. Thus, to counter the exclusive focus on mobility, movements such as "Internationalisation at home" (Beelen & Jones, 2018), "Internationalisation of the Curriculum" (Leask, 2015) and "Comprehensive Internationalisation" (Hudzik, 2015) have tried to shift the perspective towards an internationalization process that addresses all students not only the highly mobile ones. As a result of the observation that mainstream approaches exclusively addressed one of the university's three missions—Education—movements centered on research and society have also arisen. These include the "Internationalization of Research" (Woldegiyorgis et al., 2018) and the "Internationalization of Higher Education for Society" (Jones et al., 2021). As it becomes clear that the concept of internationalization of higher education is complex and ever-evolving, we must now redefine it in light of factors like study abroad, international students, internationalization at home, transnational and cross-border education, digitization, and the use of particular terminology like "global citizenship."

Internationalization is not a one-size-fits-all model, as its diversity is found at institutional, local, national, and regional levels, and is, in fact, a concept that has evolved and changed over time in response to changing challenges and contexts: moving from the "international education" fragmented and ad-hoc perspective to that of the process of internationalization–with emphasis on the process approach (Knight's 1993 and 2003 update definition of internationalization) and beyond, leading to new and more insightful perspectives on the concept. De Wit et al. (2015) give a fresh and more inclusive definition of the process in their Study to the European Parliament: "the international process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions, and delivery of post-secondary education in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff and to make a meaningful contribution to society." (De Wit et al., 2015).

Global involvement, which focuses more on the concept's collaboration, networking, and partnership aspects, is a word used interchangeably with internationalization within the same conceptual framework, and the European Universities Initiative previously discussed in the paper is also based on this approach. As internationalization efforts involve promoting diverse learning pathways and experiences, the evolving landscape of education in this globalized world brought to the fore a tool adapted both to the new paradigm of internationalization and to the new perspective determined by Industry x.0: micro-credentials. Micro-credentials and internationalization in higher education are related because they both aim to provide flexible learning paths, foster cooperation and lifelong learning, and prepare students for a globalized environment. Both ideas adapt to the changing needs of education and the dynamic demands of the contemporary workforce.

Micro-credentials are multipurpose, creative 'just-in-time' upskilling and reskilling solutions that seek to close the skills gap in education, research, and the job market (OECD, 2023). Micro-credentials are recognized short-term learning experiences, such as short courses or training on cutting-edge information to get the necessary skills, know-how, and competencies, which can take place in a real classroom, online platform, or virtual space. Micro-credentials are intended for many learners, including students, graduates, lecturers, researchers, and other stakeholders, such as industry representatives and public groups. They provide a flexible and focused approach to assisting learners in developing the information, skills, and competencies required for their educational, personal, and professional growth. (Council of the European Union (EU), 2022).

4 The Methodological Approach

This research adopts a comparative case study methodology examining two initiatives that have developed one digital platform for international learning and collaboration. The "central hypothesis" of our investigation is that these digital (and internationally available) platforms can mitigate the systemic vulnerability associated with a "dictionary gap"–the lack of shared lexicon, terminology, and understanding, a weakness frequently exacerbated by cultural differences.

For this purpose, we have chosen two Erasmus+Strategic partnerships projects spearheaded by the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania. The projects, implemented in a 5-year timeframe between 2018 and 2023, reflect different environments and methods of building digital partnerships to produce cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural collaboration. The two projects chosen are:

- BLOCKS–Blockchain for Entrepreneurs–a non-traditional Industry 4.0 curriculum for Higher Education (2018-1-RO01-KA203-049,510)–Further details may be found at https://projectblocks.ro/ and
- FOReSiGHT–Flexibility and Resilience in Digital Transformation and Intelligent Automation–Advanced Skills and Tools for Academia and Entrepreneurs (2020-1-RO01-KA203-080,368)–Further details may be found at https://www.erasmusforesight.ro/.

The case analysis focuses on the description of the projects and the link between them through the digital platform (the BLOCKS Platform–https://platform.blocks.ase.ro/).

FOReSiGHT scaled the platform developed under BLOCKS (from 1000 to 4500+users) by adding courses and webinars focused on DT, IA, AG, RM, and resilience and allowing for a more systemic approach as well as a larger view of skills to be developed for the future—a practical example of lessons learned on curriculum development.

The analysis relies on project documentation, digital platform and content analysis, and usage statistics and analytics as methodological instruments to assess how the collaboration platform deals with language and culture issues, promotes knowledge exchanges, and encourages endurance in cross-disciplinary cooperation. We contrast approaches and results in dictionary bridgebuilding and identify best practices in bridging interdisciplinary and intercultural gaps, informing resilient platform design for Industry x.0 environments.

The findings contribute to the discourse on creating digital platforms to bridge inter-disciplinary and inter-cultural spaces, thus making Industry x.0 spaces even more resilient.

5 Platform.Blocks.Ase.Ro—A Case Study in International Digitally Leveraged Collaboration Platforms

5.1 Summaries of Projects BLOCKS and FOReSiGHT

5.1.1 Project BLOCKS

The BLOCKS project created a networked platform of collaboration on curriculum development for universities and companies to develop non-traditional, blended-learning courses tailored for an Industry 4.0 world and focused on providing teachers, students, and entrepreneurs with knowledge and skills on blockchain technology. The approach was non-technologically intensive, as the purpose was to provide a business-oriented type of knowledge applicable to all types of students and entrepreneurs.

The project identified critical skills and knowledge packs needed in a blockchain-powered economy. It implemented them in the university curriculum in a gamified, user-design-oriented manner tailored for various users.

The specific objectives of the project were:

1. Identification of skills shortages and knowledge gaps in blockchain in target groups
2. Creation of an online multidisciplinary transnational teacher training center on blockchain
   a. Design and development of a curriculum on blockchain for teachers and trainers
   b. Design and creation of digital, online-delivered, gamified study materials on blockchain for teachers and trainers

3. Design and development of blended learning curricula on blockchain for students, entrepreneurs, and other types of users
4. Design and creation of digital, online-delivered, gamified study materials on blockchain for students, entrepreneurs, and other types of users
5. Design and development of a BLOCKS game–a preparatory online learning tool designed to provide users with learning opportunities in preparation for using a platform such as Microsoft Azure–Blockchain as a service.

BLOCKS was implemented by a consortium of 7 universities, large enterprises, and SMEs from Romania, Estonia, Greece, Latvia, and Italy. It instructed more than 400 trained professionals in blockchain-related issues: students in the partner universities, teachers, trainers, entrepreneurs, and professionals in other ecosystem actors (financial, regulatory, etc.).

The project's transnationality derives from the blockchain's very essence: decentralization. The project benefits from each country's experiences, educational policies, and specific knowledge and tech transfer practices. The interaction between diverse, experienced partners led to a unique clustering of resources and attitudes, creating the proper environment for approaching a disruptive topic suitable for Industry x.0.

5.1.2 Project FOReSiGHT

Like the dictionary gap in the blockchain discourse, the lack of trans-disciplinary conversation, particularly in higher education at the nexus of resilience, foresight, risk management, digital transformation, and algorithmic governance, was the key driver for the FOReSiGHT project. The project was created in response to a specific need for the link between theory and practice in an international collaborative platform, facilitating the interaction and understanding between specialists in various fields, particularly those related to digital transformation, in general, and shifts in business models caused by Industry x.0. The increasingly rapid pace of technology, which causes new risks and opportunities for businesses and societies, the lack of horizontal skills and knowledge of basic concepts, the demand for a broader view on resilience and the acute requisite for foresight skills were all vulnerabilities identified in both literature and previous projects and mitigated by FOReSiGHT. In 2023, as the discussion of artificial intelligence intensified, these have become even more critical needs related to an urge for the right kind of know-how to keep up with a surge of activity not previously seen in the history of Industry x.0.

The FOReSiGHT project's main goal was to build a digital platform for collaboration between universities and companies, aiming to prepare future skills in areas like intelligent automation (IA), digital transformation (DT), and algorithmic governance (AG). Partners in Romania, Italy, Germany, Croatia, and Belgium delivered it. The result is impactful not just throughout the partners but also via the delivery of the Open Education Resources (OER) via the existing online learning platform to the other platform users at European and international levels.

The project had four specific objectives linked to creating and delivering a kit for each of the three areas: DT, IA, and AG, and one Foresight Kit for Teachers, Students, and Entrepreneurs. These kits were designed for teachers, trainers, and users to develop specific skills in specific areas via blended learning methods. The activities to reach these goals included joint staff training sessions, blended mobility programs, and intensive study programs for students and stakeholders.

Transnationality was vital in this project for three reasons: first, to lessen foresight bias by integrating diverse disciplines and viewpoints; secondly, to address the biases existing between countries having different cultural and economic backgrounds; lastly, to leverage unique educational practices, knowledge transfer, and technology from different countries.

5.2 *Impact of Projects BLOCKS and FOReSiGHT*

The main impact of both projects is the creation of the BLOCKS Platform, with more than 4,000 unique users worldwide by the end of 2023.

The platform allows for a **virtual manifestation** of international collaboration, providing the framework for shared knowledge between a diverse group of professionals, teachers, and trainers from Romania, Germany, Belgium, Croatia, Greece, Estonia, Latvia, and Italy.

Whether locally or nationally, the BLOCKS project has reached more than 1700 individuals, building up a scalable network of knowledge that matches the decentralized spirit of blockchain and raising competencies in DX and blockchain.

Key achievements include:

- Personalized education on blockchain via modular access to educational content and the promotion of individualized learning paths.
- New learning tools and techniques, e.g., the BLOCKS game for real-world blockchain implementation.
- Improved curricula in partner institutions while addressing market needs in blockchain education.
- Increased resilience in various stakeholders (businesses and public administration)
- Increased knowledge on blockchain, fostering entrepreneurial initiative and reducing the risk of misinformation.

Project BLOCKS has, therefore, transformed educational methods, business routines, and popular attitudes, enabling people to acquire the knowledge they need to tackle the digital age.

More than 12,000 stakeholders around Europe have benefited from the work done by the FOReSiGHT project. Resilience and forward-looking capabilities were bolstered for Digital Transformation (DT), Intelligent Automation (IA), and Algorithmic Governance (AG). With its easily curriculized modules and online content, it has provided personalized education and improved students DT, IA, and AG abilities. This strategic initiative has led to:

- Students and instructors acquiring specialized knowledge that may assist in entrepreneurial endeavors and risk management in high tech.
- Higher education institutions also improving curricula, revealing how this project has become part of coursework.
- Cultivating digital resilience, particularly in businesses and public authorities, that must change their operational strategies to survive in the wake of digital disruption.
- Widespread influence on members of the public, heavy use of webinars, and online access.

These core values of competitiveness, resilience, and adaptability stem from the nature of the project–a core European strength–and the ecosystem in which it is implemented–the FOReSIGHT consortium. The empowering force behind the consortium is the ecosystem of major European universities and tech companies working together to develop humanized technologies. The project has helped build a community whose members are poised to address 21st-century challenges. Thus, more students are doing theses related to DT, IA, and AG, and some participants have developed new business lines. As a result of this engagement, we have seen enhanced innovation ability, a closer relationship between academia and industry, and cultivating a workforce with an eye to the future.

Overall, at the end of 2023, the BLOCKS platform lists more than 7,000 registered users, accessing 93 courses in 5 different categories in English, Romanian, Greek, German, Italian, Estonian, Latvian, and Croatian:

- Technically oriented–23 Courses
- Business oriented–31 Courses
- Macroeconomic oriented–9 Courses
- Industry based–13 Courses
- Miscellaneous–17 Courses

Based on student participation (number of views), courses in Greek had the most impact. In relation to the number of enrolments, the courses in English had the highest reach.

In a weighted assessment, the courses in Estonian had the greatest impact (most views for the longest time for the largest number of enrolled students).

The BLOCKS platform responds to aspects of the impact of digital learning platforms in at least seven ways:

A. Fosters Competitiveness: The platform uses a competitive advantage from a cluster of top universities and technology companies based on core European strengths. This synergy is likely to provide state-of-the-art content and practical applications that make the platform's offerings quite competitive.
B. Promotes Resilience and Adaptability: The platform promotes the creation of humanized technologies that are flexible to the changing market requirements and capable of withstanding future challenges. This is because it meets the requirements for digital platforms to be resilient and adaptable, characteristics required of platforms in an Industry x.0 environment.

C. Encourages Innovation and Industry-Academia Collaboration: The platform provides advanced innovation capabilities by connecting academia and industry. This type of cooperation is essential for creating an employee body knowledgeable in present-day technologies and approaches.
D. Supports Workforce Development with a Future Orientation: The community of the platform is actively involved in solving modern challenges through theses and projects related to Digital Transformation (DT), Intelligent Automation (IA), and Algorithmic Governance (AG).
E. Community and Network Building: The platform has 7,000 users and 93 courses, which shows a strong reach, which means a large community of learners, teachers, and professionals has been formed.
F. Measurable Impact and Success: The fact that students finalize theses and participants create new business lines implies that the platform has a real effect on the academic and professional life of its users.
G. Resource Diversity: 93 courses represent diversity of subjects and learning possibilities, attracting a wide audience with different interests and requirements and making the platform more relevant and inclusive.

6 Analysis and Discussion. Best Practices and Strategic Recommendations

The projects successfully provided answers and solutions to several core questions related to digitalization, higher education, and Industry x.0:

Why do we need Flexibility and Resilience Skills? This focus on digital transformation and developing new technologies is not surprising. A company's ability to not only keep up with changing technology but also **innovate** is essential for remaining competitive. This need, however, can cause issues. Resilience and catastrophe (or disaster) recovery are commonly seen as an operational cost of operation rather than a source of profit or driver of value. By definition, resilience and risk management imply redundancy, which is in direct contradiction to efficiency and nimble competitiveness. Digital innovations are often seen as value generators, while RM and resilience are seen as a cost rather than an investment. However, reaching KPIs and avoiding technical changes and tech disruptions are very closely related.

This emphasis on DT (digital transformation) and the advancement of emerging technology is not unexpected. The willingness of an organization not only to keep pace with changing technologies but also to evolve is necessary if it wants to stay competitive. However, this need will create problems, considering that the organization must balance tackling these challenges, as well as mitigating systemic risks and achieving systemic resilience. Definitions of resilience (Hosseini et al, 2016) abound in literature, as well as insights into systemic resilience (Helfgott, 2018; Lundberg & Johansson, 2015). This is necessary to remember how many areas, such as resilience and flexibility, would still need to be changed while undertaking a digital transition. Poor resilience means that all the gains in competitiveness brought by tech may be lost due to implementation costs, disruption to reputation, loss of sales and loss of consumers, or infringement of public rights (as is the case with algorithmic governance). Organizations now need the latest technologies to distinguish themselves, but they also need to be robust enough to sustain such levels of operations. When it comes to DT, flexibility is key to realizing the advantages of revenue-driving practices. Therefore, the issues related to which skills may be developed and at which level in order to resolve such a conundrum are at the forefront of organizational decision-makers globally.

Usecase on Flexibility and Resilience: Project BLOCKS: The digital platform created by BLOCKS was central in promoting flexibility through the provision of a gamified, user-design-oriented curriculum, which was adaptable to the diverse requirements of user groups. It is this adaptability that is a core feature of flexibility. The resilience aspect was integrated into the curriculum's concentration on blockchain technology that is, in itself, decentralized and resilient in nature. The project helped professionals to be trained in blockchain-related issues, thereby creating a workforce that is immune to misinformation and adaptive to technological changes.

Usecase on Flexibility and Resilience: Project FOReSiGHT: The digital platform of FOReSiGHT was created to foresee and get ready for future skills in areas like intelligent automation and algorithmic governance. Through the delivery of Open Education Resources (OER) and blended learning opportunities, the platform proved to be the backbone of education that allows students and professionals to continue learning and adapt in the face of swift technological changes and any potential disruptions.

Why do we need Foresight Skills? Foresight skills are transversal skills critical in any form of strategic and long-term planning. They are particularly relevant in the context of emerging socio-technological domains, which are marked by high degrees of uncertainty and complexity. The EU already has a history of using foresight as a tool in preparing policies in various fields, and some member states have dedicated bodies at the government level tasked with deploying foresight activities. The domain of digital transformation and intelligent automation is a very dynamic field, both in terms of technology push and the behavioral changes associated with the adoption of these technologies. Navigating this complexity requires a future-oriented framework (with clear time horizons and system boundaries) in which the drivers of change are analyzed systematically in terms of likelihood and impact; they are combined into probable scenarios of evolution, from which visions of proper action can be deduced.

Beyond nurturing individual skills, the foresight framework creates the premises for intelligence gathering, structured dialogue, and consensus building regarding the likelihood of future events and eventually, the elaboration of shared visions inspiring various stakeholders for action. An example in action, linking the two projects is this report by JRC (2019) on how Foresight and anticipatory governance can enable better policymaking on blockchain.

Usecase on Foresight Skills: Project FOReSiGHT: By dealing with the lack of trans-disciplinary dialogue, FOReSiGHT introduced a digital platform which enabled professionals from different areas to talk and share their thoughts, thereby advancing foresight skills. The tool provided a prospective approach for the users to analyze change drivers systematically and develop plausible action scenarios. Such a proactive approach is very important in the current complex and changing socio-technological domains.

The BLOCKS and FOReSiGHT initiatives are early cases of integrating new digital technologies into educational and professional development contexts. Despite focusing on blockchain technology, BLOCKS successfully filled the blockchain talent shortage in the European blockchain ecosystem through gamified, user-oriented curricula in university courses and professional training programs. BLOCKS has upgraded the talents of students, teachers, and professionals interested in blockchain applications, implementing the blockchain spirit of decentralization in practice.

In contrast, however, to address specific trends, the scope of FOReSiGHT includes the broader topics of digital transformation, intelligent automation, and algorithmic governance. Its influence is even broader, providing digital materials and individually tailored learning modules to more than 12,000 European stakeholders.

The two projects simultaneously had to overcome the problem of bringing technical skills in harmony with practical applications in a multifarious cultural and educational environment. With its relatively low technological bar, BLOCKS needed to figure out how to demystify blockchain technology so that nontechnicals could interact. In contrast, the task before FOReSiGHT was to bring these multidisciplinary perspectives into the foresight and resilience modules.

These difficulties also presented opportunities, including encouraging interdisciplinary research and upgrading digital knowledge nationwide. Instructive comparisons clearly show that while BLOCKS was more specialized in understanding blockchain technology, FOReSiGHT took a more comprehensive perspective on future thinking and digital transformation.

The best practices taken from these case studies include gamification of educational materials to make them user-centered, thereby significantly improving information retention. Also effective are the blended learning models that mix online and offline instruction. These two projects served as tangible examples of the value of transnational cooperation.

The constantly changing needs of Industry x.0 require higher education institutions to have a hybrid approach that combines dynamic digital materials on the Internet with the development of cross-disciplinary courses to keep pace. Working hand in hand with industry, developing international collaboration platforms, and fostering a culture of lifelong learning and creativity are essential aspects of this effort and are crucial to maintaining the practicability of course content.

7 Conclusion and Implications for Stakeholders

In sum, applying Industry 4.0 skills to education must take an all-round, flexible approach, focus on both hard and soft skills, and use new technologies and industries to create simulated real-world experiences. How closely industry needs can arrange educational theory is vital to enable students to confront the challenge of the constantly changing industrial environment.

In conclusion, the only resilient path to mitigate the dictionary gap between tech and non-tech is to create authentically international digitally leveraged collaboration platforms. These platforms allow for a genuinely transnational approach (beyond the internationalization scope) by reducing bias and providing a continuous conversation between teachers, students, and researchers. Moreover, the collaboration process stems from each country's perspectives and activities, with their unique knowledge transfer and technology interaction. These international digital skills platforms provide a diverse ecosystem with various actors. The presence of these actors in countries with different policy approaches to education, knowledge transfer, and technology as a business opportunity, as well as the uniqueness of each actor, enables a unique pooling of knowledge capital, cultivating the proper ground for an inventive approach to a transdisciplinary topic.

The BLOCKS and FOReSiGHT projects offer key strategic insights and recommendations for integrating digital platforms within the higher education and professional development sectors. The BLOCKS and FOReSiGHT projects offer key strategic insights and recommendations for integrating digital platforms within the higher education and professional development sectors:

Developing Flexibility and Resilience Skills: Initiatives such as BLOCKS and FOReSiGHT demonstrate the value of adaptability and sustainability in education and professional development. They demonstrate that in a fast-changing technological environment, people and companies have to be able to adjust to new instruments and conditions rapidly. The gamified, user-oriented curriculum on blockchain and the focused skilling in DT, IA, and AG develop an agility to pivot and adjust to market changes. Flexibility is embodied by the platforms themselves that enable modular and customized learning.

Embracing Gamification and Blended Learning: Both projects have demonstrated the efficiency of gamified content and blended learning approaches in engaging learners and improving the learning process.

Supporting Humanized Technology Development: Humanized technology development attention to digital platforms that not only address technical issues but also take into consideration the human side of technology adoption and integration.

Cultivating a Future-Oriented Workforce: The projects with theses and projects related to DT, IA and AG emphasize the need for an educated workforce that is not only competent with existing technologies but also the one that can anticipate and shape future development.

The Erasmus+projects BLOCKS and FOReSiGHT provide evidence that genuinely international, digitally-centered collaboration platforms can bridge the "dictionary gap" between people specializing in different fields. These platforms allow for a transnational outlook, going beyond internationalization by reducing bias and ensuring constant communication between teachers, students, and researchers. Simultaneously, these platforms offer an appropriate setting for the design and development of micro-credential certification programs. Since these programs are primarily intended to be delivered in a hybrid context, we presume that the platform's functionality and curriculum design complement each other well. It is possible to meet the requirements and expectations of academics, stakeholders, and learners in this way.

The implications for stakeholders are significant: Only by accepting such digital platforms can teachers, industry workers, and policymakers come together to realize transdisciplinary learning and cooperation. This is essential for building a skilled workforce that understands and participates in the new world of industry x.0.

Disclaimer: This article uses the project description elements (such as goal, objectives, and activities) from the Erasmus+applications of the two projects, as the authors wrote them in the precontracting stage. These were maintained in this article as such.

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Why Digitalize? An Investigation of Virtual Internationalization Governance in German Higher Education

Jana Berg and Luzia Ferreira Santos

Abstract Based on a multimodal understanding of governance in German higher education, we aim to investigate the multiple objectives and factors that shape the digitalization of international higher education. We triangulate the findings of an analysis of 16 expert interviews with heads of international offices at German higher education institutions (HEIs) with the result of a document analysis of 133 internationalization strategies of German HEIs in order to address the following questions: Which are the main objectives of virtual internationalization in HE? Which factors shape the implementation of digital solutions in international higher education? How can we conceptualize the governance of virtual internationalization? We find that values-based and competition-related approaches often motivate HEIs to embrace digitalization. They include the aim to respond to societal challenges, such as the climate crisis or overcoming social inequalities, but also the objective to acquire funding, build and maintain fruitful cooperations, or attract high-performance students and staff. The implementation is rather shaped by hierarchy and collegial governance factors. This includes the surrounding rules and regulatory frameworks, the establishment of structures such as specialized positions, the existence or lack of an institution-wide strategy, or the independence and relevance of individual departments, faculties, and individual members of staff. We suggest understanding digitalization as a comprehensive approach that is intertwined with all levels and modes of governance in higher education.

Keywords Digitalization · Virtual internationalization · Internationalization of higher education · Higher education governance · ICT

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1 Introduction

As a result of the COVID-19 response, higher education institutions (HEIs) saw an unprecedented rise of digital tools and platforms to support teaching and learning processes, collaboration, administration, and decision making in higher education (HE). The impact of digitalization extends to various facets of HE, with internationalization being no exception to its influence. It can open new possibilities for international student mobility, university collaborations, present new options to internationalize the curriculum, and provide students with an international experience on campus, while virtual course formats can make classes available with relative independence of time and physical location (Bruhn-Zass, 2021; Buchmüller et al., 2021; Caniglia et al., 2018; Chang & Gomes, 2022; Clauss et al., 2019; Cordova et al., 2021; O'Dowd, 2022; Yang et al., 2022). The creation of funding schemes such as the Erasmus+Blended Intensive Programs are illustrative of such developments (Bedenlier & Stöter, 2022). Evidence from a global pilot study (IAU, 2023) reveals there has been a steady increase in the use of ICT in HE administration services compared to pre-pandemic times, despite a decline in their use after the pandemic. This suggests that universities continue to reap the benefits of the digitalization boost and the enhanced digital competencies developed during the emergency response. In this paper, we explore some of the factors that supported the continuation of virtual internationalization in German HE beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Our research adds to the state of research by providing a synopsis of the perceived and intended benefits of virtual internationalization and exploring a conceptualization of digitalization within a framework of HE governance. We understand virtual internationalization as using information and communication technologies (ICT) in order to support cooperation and partnership, leadership and decision making, teaching and learning, and administration in international higher education (Bruhn-Zass, 2021).

We triangulate the findings of an analysis of 16 expert interviews with heads of international offices at German HEIs with the result of a document analysis of 133 internationalization strategies of 118 German HEIs. Our analysis follows three main questions:

- Which are the main objectives of virtual internationalization in HE?
- Which factors shape the implementation of digital solutions in HE?
- How can the governance of virtual internationalization be conceptualized?

First, we will provide an overview of factors that motivate and facilitate virtual internationalization identified in international research and introduce our conceptual framework and methods. Further, we will present our findings and contextualize them with the state of research. Finally, the conclusion provides a brief overview of our key findings.

2 State of Research: Why Digitalize Internationalization of Higher Education?

Koop explains that digital transformation encompasses "all digital processes necessary to achieve a change process that enables HEIs to successfully leverage the use of digital technologies" (Kopp et al., 2019, p. 1449). Discussions surrounding the impact of digital transformation on HE are not a new development (Bayne, 2015; Kergel et al., 2018; Selwyn, 2014), but they have gained significant momentum in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Previous studies have pointed out a number of interrelated objectives and factors shaping HEIs' engagement in digital internationalization.

2.1 Service to Society

HEIs are increasingly expected to engage with societal issues, responding to demands for greater social responsibility (Huang et al., 2022; Liu & Gao, 2022; Wimpenny et al., 2022). In this context, digitalization plays a key role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (Abad-Segura et al., 2020; Ahel & Lingenau, 2020; Jack & Glover, 2021; Josefsson et al., 2022; Liu & Gao, 2022; Pedersen et al., 2020; Woicolesco et al., 2021) and fostering internationalization models that can benefit society at large (Brandenburg, 2020; Jack & Glover, 2021; Liu & Gao, 2022).

Moreover, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) demonstrated their potential to foster inclusiveness of individuals and institutions, such as those from the Global South, and the infusion of diverse ways of knowing in internationalization practices (Buchmüller et al., 2021; Guimarães & Finardi, 2021; Wimpenny et al., 2022). In this vein, digital delivery can arguably widen participation and scale up access to educational opportunities by allowing non-traditional students and staff access to international experiences regardless of financial endowments, time availability, geographical location, disabilities (Bruhn-Zass, 2021; Ciurea, 2020; Josefsson et al., 2022), and administrative or political constraints (Bruhn-Zass, 2021; Ciubancan et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2022; Josefsson et al., 2022; Kobzhev et al., 2020; Liu & Gao, 2022).

2.2 Collaboration and Competition

Whether digitalization will foster more collaboration or competition remains subject of debate (Ciubancan et al., 2021; Huisman & van der Wende, 2022; Lee et al., 2021; Wit & Jones, 2022). Digitalization fosters greater opportunities for teaching and research collaborations, not only within academia but also with the industry, government, and civil society (Hines & Dockiao, 2021; Kanwar & Carr, 2020; Stolze et al., 2021). It has arguably favored stronger regional partnerships (e.g. European

University Alliance) and advanced HE internationalization beyond the usual internationalization suspects (Guimarães & Finardi, 2021; Kanwar & Carr, 2020; Liu & Gao, 2022).

At the same time, **embracing ICT constitutes a matter of c**ompetitive advantage for HEIs. Presence in the virtual space grants universities visibility in the international arena and enhances the attractiveness of scarce human resources (Kanwar & Carr, 2020).

Touted as a cost-effective alternative, it is contended that digital solutions can significantly reduce the impact of limited funding availability (Hurria, 2021; Rizvi, 2020) and support innovative 'business models' of international education that can secure the resilience of HE systems, particularly in times of crisis (Kanwar & Carr, 2020). Conversely, some point out to the substantial investments needed to put forward the digital transformation (Bruhn-Zass, 2021; Caniglia et al., 2017; Djakona et al., 2021) and argue that its perceived affordability risks overshadowing the need for appropriate funding measures (O'Dowd, 2021).

Furthermore, digital spaces are deemed as conducive to developing a multitude of competencies, from intercultural and global skills, collaborative and professional skills to media and digital literacy. These competencies are deemed as key to navigating the intricacies of the digital age (Buchmüller et al., 2021; Ndubuisi & Slotta, 2021; J. Yang & Al-Sayed, 2022) and the demands of an evolving work market that increasingly requires individuals to work in remote, decentralized, culturally diverse, and interdisciplinary virtual teams (Clauss et al., 2019).

2.3 COVID-19 Emergency Response

Contrary to the perception of universities as slow-moving organizations adapting to changes (Sherwood, 2021), the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic compelled HEIs into a rapid and massive adoption of digital technologies. Spatial mobility restrictions demanded a quick embrace of ICT, leading to significant shifts in internationalization discourses (Buschkamp & Seidenschnur, 2023) and practices (Sziegat, 2022; Zawacki-Richter, 2021). HEIs had to rethink long-standing practices and purposes in order to continue their operations in a virtual environment (Chang & Gomes, 2022; IAU, 2023; Mussina et al., 2022; Rizvi, 2020).

2.4 Efficient Support Services

Among recognized benefits, ICT have the potential to optimize administrative services by enhancing efficiency, scalability, data security, transparency, and system interoperability (Bedenlier & Stöter, 2022; Brienza, 2022; Clauss et al., 2019) and guiding data-driven decision making (Alshammari, 2023; Kopp et al., 2019; Sherwood, 2021).

3 Higher Education Governance

The governance of German HEIs is shaped by various stakeholders on multiple levels (Fumasoli, 2015). This includes their internal governance, as German universities are characterized by a high degree of division of labor and relative independence of their subunits (Schimank, 2015). Wolter identifies "five instances of coordination and the relationships between them: the state regulation of HE, the influence of external stakeholders (e.g., agencies), academic staff, and self-organization of universities, university management and administration, and the role of competition and market mechanisms" (Wolter, 2007, p. 1). In decision making, all levels and stakeholders are involved, making it challenging to label the process strictly as either top-down or bottom-up. Instead, it takes place in both directions (Wilkesmann, 2019). In addition to the traditional "combination of political regulation by the state authority and professional self-regulation by an academic oligarchy" (Clark, 1983, p. 140), there has been a push towards *New Public Management* in German HE, which is "characterized by marketization, privatization, managerialism, performance measurement, and accountability" (Sziegat, 2022, p. 476) and facilitates a market- and competition-based *modus operandi*. Newer perspectives have also taken HEIs' responses to their social responsibility into account (Bauer et al., 2024; Broucker et al., 2017; Jungbauer-Gans et al., 2023; Tauginienė & Pučėtaitė, 2021).

In orientation on the German Science and Humanities Council (Wissenschaftsrat, 2018), Jungbauer-Gans et al. (2023) conceptualize HE governance as an interplay of four different modes of governance, each of which covers different fields and logics of action at HEIs. First, competition between HEIs but also between organizational units of the same HEI (for example, for funding, reputation, or high-performing students) is seen as a central motivator of HE governance. Second, leadership positions within universities as well as the influence of university policy and framework conditions shape hierarchical HE governance. Third, academic self-administration is a key part of the German HE landscape. In this context, leaders are elected from the faculty, and committees are made up of representatives from various employee groups. These decision-making structures, which give academics and academic units a great deal of freedom, reflect profession-based collegial governance. Finally, Jungbauer-Gans et al. (2023) suggest adding values-based governance to the model of HE governance, as social values are becoming important drivers of HE innovation and policy. This might include widening participation but also research and teaching for sustainable development.

Considering the motivators of each governance mode, Jungbauer-Gans et al. (2023) suggest a model that connects (a) collegial self-regulation, or profession, with the norms and standards of academic research and quest for knowledge, (b) hierarchical governance through legitimized management levels, as well as legal frameworks and political bodies with political and/or bureaucratic legitimacy, (c) competition with efficiency, effectiveness and accountability, and (d) values-based governance with addressing societal challenges and expectations (Fig. 1).

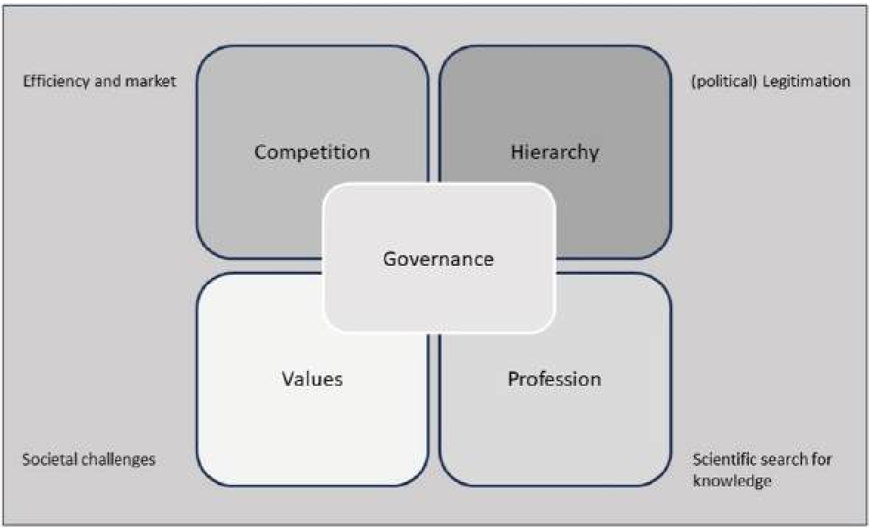

Fig. 1 Modes of HE governance. *Source* Jungbauer-Gans et al. (2023), translated by the authors

Informed by their model, we understand the governance of German HE as multimodal, multi-level, multi-stakeholder, and multi-directional. Thus, instead of focusing on one mode of governance or decision making, we are investigating the multiple objectives and factors that shape virtual internationalization across different modes of governance.

4 Methods

This study is based on the analysis of 16 interviews with heads of international offices and 133 internationalization strategies of public German HEIs. Rather than contrasting both data sets with each other, our aim was to analyze them as complementary insights into the strategic considerations regarding the digital turn in HE internationalization.

4.1 Sample

The document analysis was based on internationalization strategies as well as paragraphs on internationalization in HEI development plans. Searches for available strategies were conducted in late 2022 and summer 2023. We could access internationalization strategies and paragraphs on internationalization in the HEI development plans of 67% of public German HEIs (118 out of 176). In case we could access two internationalization strategies (e.g., an older and a newer one or both a strategy paper and a HEI development plan paragraph), we included both in the analysis. In total, we analyzed 133 documents. As the working language of our research project is English, all documents that were available only in German were translated into English using the digital translation service DeepL. The translations were proofread by two project members who speak German as their first language.

To gain more nuanced insights into the strategic considerations and practical experiences around virtual internationalization, semi-structured expert interviews were conducted at 16 German HEIs (eight universities and eight technical universities). Those were selected based on their size and state of digitalization, as well as internationalization. Size was based on the number of enrolled students (above and below 20.000 enrolled students). The state of digitalization (advanced and newcomer) was based on participation in networks, trainings, and programs, and the existence of digitalization strategies. The state of internationalization (advanced and newcomer) was based on the number of international students and staff, the existence of an internationalization strategy, as well as participation in networks, trainings, and programs. Finally, we aimed at diverse regional distribution. The 16 HEIs included in this analysis are based in 10 different German states. At each HEI, a virtual semi-structured interview was conducted with the head of the international office. The interview guidelines covered topics such as the influence of the COVID 19-pandemic, the digitalization of administration, leadership, teaching and learning, international cooperations, and hopes and risks associated with virtual internationalization. One interview was conducted and analyzed in German; all other interviews were conducted in English. An informed consent form was signed by the interview partners. We used the F4X tool for automated transcription. The transcripts were then proofread and compared to the recordings to ensure quality and accuracy.

4.2 Data Analysis

Both interviews and documents were analyzed using the Coding Software MAXQDA. Based on our research questions, we developed a Coding Scheme as an outline for structural coding. In orientation on the topics "Actors and Networks (Who)", "Relevance and Risks (Why)","Implementation (How)", and "Future Development: Plans, Wishes, Risks (What's next)", we expanded the Coding Scheme with ad hoc Codes. This provided an overview of topics and relevant segments (Mey & Mruck, 2009; Saldaña, 2021, 84ff.). Next, we used Axial Coding to sort and categorize the existing codes. For this analysis, we focused on all codes related to the topics "Relevance and Risks (Why)" and "Implementation (How)". We grouped the codes to create categories such as "student service", "efficiency", etc., and comparatively discussed the categories to enhance inter-coder reliability. Each category was described in a memo. Next, we mapped out links and relationships between different categories across both data sets and differentiated motivations to digitalize from factors shaping the practical implementation of virtual internationalization. We proceeded to connect the resulting categories with Jungbauer-Gans et al.'s framework of HE governance. Finally, we contextualized our findings by referring to the state of literature.

4.3 Limitations

It is important to note that this paper is part of an ongoing project, and due to time constraints, additional interview data beyond the 16 interviews included in this analysis is yet to be analyzed and, therefore, was not addressed at this point. Furthermore, both Internationalization and Digitalization are broad and complex processes, encompassing a network of organizations and organizational sub-units in HE. Our analysis focuses on the strategic orientation of German HEIs, specifically their international offices. Given the importance of individual departments, faculties, and even individual staff members for both comprehensive internationalization and digitalization, multi-perspective case studies could provide a better understanding of multi-level and multi-stakeholder dynamics. Further, we only conducted interviews at universities (universities and technical universities). It could be beneficial to compare various types of public and private HEIs to further our understanding of HE governance in various types of HEIs.

5 Results and Discussion

The digital transformation has produced all-encompassing repercussions for HE governance, including HE internationalization. With this in consideration, the aim of this paper was to identify (a) the multiple objectives and (b) practical factors shaping the implementation of virtual internationalization in the German HE and across different modes of governance. For this purpose, we triangulated the analysis of 133 documents (internationalization strategies and excerpts of HEI development plans dealing with the internationalization of German HEIs) with 16 semi-structured interviews conducted with international office managers at German HEIs.

The analysis of both data sets produced similar categories, with a stronger emphasis on values and objectives in the strategy papers and far more detailed insights into challenges and aspects shaping practical implementations in the expert interviews. In this section, we will provide an overview of the values and objectives, as well as practical factors that we identified, and contextualize our findings with international research literature. It should be noted that the selection of quotes from strategy documents is not connected to our interview sample.

5.1 Objectives of Virtual Internationalization

Our analysis showed that virtual internationalization in the German HE is guided by the following objectives: (a) commitment to social responsibility, (b) enhancement of competitiveness and collaboration, and (c) simplifying and increasing the efficiency of information management and communication processes.

5.1.1 Social Responsibility

> Modern challenges in this area include the pressing issues of climate neutrality and sustainability, digitalisation and participation, and responsible co-existence in society and with the natural environment. (Bauhaus Uni Weimar Strategy Document).

HEIs recognize and address the objective of taking on social responsibility. It seems important to note that digitalization did not introduce this objective to international HE but is understood to facilitate further inclusive solutions.

> So inclusion is a big topic, and I think digitization helps us to also include these people who are not able to go abroad and have the experience by themselves to really but allow them to have access to international expertise and to this kind of, you know, academics that has always been international. (TU-1–3).

This shows how digital offers are used to compliment traditional internationalization formats, either by facilitating internationalization at home (Beelen & Jones, 2015) or by acting as a teaser or pipeline for actual mobility (Lazarou & Trifan, 2018; J. Lee et al., 2022). This resonates with O'Dowd (2022), who argues that digital offers should be discussed in relation to their potential to complement traditional formats not as a replacement or in opposition to each other.

First, in response to the expectations of HE to tackle the climate crisis, interviewees and strategies emphasize a 'green' development and the integration of more environmentally friendly internationalization practices, such as reducing business travel.

> And (.) and I think with regard to international cooperation, (.) we haven't really acted sustainable in the years before the pandemic. You know, having (.) especially when you when you're talking about professional traveling, going for six hours to a meeting and having a talk for 50 minutes and then leaving it after three hours and things like that, and perhaps even taken a flight for that or something. (TU-1–4).

Second, digital offers are expected to widen participation in internationalization. They can help provide students who cannot go abroad with international experience and might motivate so far underrepresented groups, such as refugee students, to participate in international HE (Castaño Muñoz et al., 2018; Drolia et al., 2022).

> And with regards to the internationalization strategy, one of our key goals at the moment is (…) creating international experience for all students. And digitalization plays a role in that because that's only possible if we're using digital formats in addition to, you know, the traditional (.) semester abroad. (U-1–2).

This commitment is consistent with a broader trend observed in the literature, particularly post- COVID-19, that highlights a surge in the stakeholders' expectations of HEIs to engage with social and cultural mandates beyond the academic realm (Brennan et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2022; Liu & Gao, 2022; Wimpenny et al., 2022). In the same vein, Brandenburg's concept of Internationalization in Higher Education for Society (IHES) puts forward that HEIs must reestablish their 'social contract with society and bear responsibility for it.' Brandenburg (2020, p. 12).

Together, strategies and interviews underscore initiatives aimed at fostering diversity, and inclusivity (Bruhn-Zass, 2021; Huang et al., 2022; Josefsson et al., 2022; Kobzhev et al., 2020; Liu & Gao, 2022; Woicolesco et al., 2022) along with environmentally sustainable approaches to virtual internationalization (Ahel & Lingenau, 2020). Notwithstanding these optimistic perceptions, interview partners are not oblivious to the social boundaries and exclusionary factors pertaining to the sudden widespread of online learning and virtual mobility (Buchmüller et al., 2021; Buschkamp & Seidenschnur, 2023; Laufer et al., 2021; Wimpenny et al., 2022).

5.1.2 Competition and Collaboration

While competition is rather implicitly mentioned in the analyzed interviews, HEIs' internationalization strategies directly address the "*increasing competition for the best minds and ideas and attract top researchers as well as talent, promising and competent students*" (Paderborn University Strategy Document) for prestigious collaborations, and resources (Chan, 2004, p. 35). The pursuit of competitive advantage is closely related to marketing strategies aimed at strengthening the online presence and visibility of HEIs "*as an attractive science location*" (Paderborn University Strategy Document).

> Successful research needs international partners - for transnational research topics, for the regular exchange of current results, for cooperation based on the division of labor, for the generation of synergies, and for the acquisition of third-party funding for joint research projects. The UK wants to be permanently perceived as a globally leading research university and uses adequate analog and digital measures for this purpose. (Köln University Strategy Document).

By and large, interviewees emphasize the centrality of engaging in international teaching and research collaborations. Throughout the interviews and strategies, eased communication and standardized information exchange with strategic partners are discussed as a main benefit of ICT. Even though the digital potential for automated and standardized processes and the convenience of connecting digitally was emphasized, there was also concern that stronger partnerships might require closer attention via in-person interactions.

> I don't. I'm trying to think if we have. (..) Completely started new partnerships (.) via digital tools. (…) I think at least a strategic partnership. I think at some point we probably at least either they have visited us or we have visited them (.) in the sense that, you know, okay, this is […] a real place. (..) I think I think you do need. (.) Some personal contact (.) at some point (U-1–2).

Our analysis shows that virtual internationalization is perceived to encompass both cooperation and competition as objectives, and the interplays between these seemingly opposing dynamics are evident. This convergence is also evident in the terminology found in contemporary scholarship, such as coopetition (Nyemba et al., 2021), competitive advantage (Chan, 2004), and collaborative advantage (Gunn, 2020), which, in simple terms, encapsulate the idea that HEIs collaborate to compete (Chan, 2004). Yet, there has been ongoing concern regarding the 'global industry' and the persistent risks associated with market-driven approaches to internationalization, posing threats to collaboration as a fundamental value for internationalization (IAU, 2012).

HEIs' focus on competitiveness extends to their aims for their students, which is reflected in the objective to enhance their competitive advantage in the labor market. By taking a "glocal" (global + local) approach to internationalization (Caniglia et al., 2018; Jacobs et al., 2021) HEIS aim to enhance student employability prospects and insertion in a global work market (Ciurea, 2020; Dehtjare et al., 2022) without losing sight of their potential to contribute to the regional development.

> TH Köln's international activities will enable students and PhD candidates from Germany or abroad to successfully position themselves in the regional, national and international labor market and to make a lasting contribution to internationalization in Cologne and the metropolitan area. (TH Köln Strategy Document).

5.1.3 Knowledge and Process Management

A key objective of virtual internationalization is "*making processes more effective*." (U-1–3).

Another objective guiding virtual internationalization has to do with the optimization of administrative processes (IAU, 2023). The interviewees emphasize the ability to make information available. This can be relevant for students but also for process documentation in staff onboarding or absence. However, an additional challenge described in this context is to continuously produce and update relevant content.

Easier digital communication can impact decision-making processes and increase transparency by making information and good practices available and establishing relationships with stakeholders (Esteve-Mon et al., 2023). It can also support *data-driven decision making* concerning data management and exchange, resource allocation (Sherwood, 2021), staff training and development, student support services and recruitment (Bruhn-Zass, 2021; Djakona et al., 2021; Korotkova et al., 2021), and pedagogical processes (Alshammari, 2023). Overall, information exchange, decision making, and administration can become much more time-saving provided that the necessary infrastructure and digital competencies are well maintained, which in turn needs personnel, resources, and time.

Further, ICT are understood to improve service delivery for students by offering various formats to communicate with them. This includes information for incoming and outgoing students, such as virtual pre-arrival sessions, pre-mobility networking sessions, and better access to course schedule and acknowledgment procedure information. Finally, as mentioned above, they are meant to allow for international experiences for all students, including those who cannot take part in physical mobility.

5.2 Factors Shaping Virtual Internationalization

Delving into the practical factors influencing the implementation of virtual internationalization, we point out the following aspects: (a) the COVID-19 pandemic; (b) stakeholders' influence; (c) regulatory frameworks; and (d) comprehensive digitalization.

5.2.1 The COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic gave substantial impetus to the adoption of digital offerings regardless of the existence of previous structures. Both strategies and interviews recognized the Covid crisis as a moment of opportunity (Buschkamp & Seidenschnur, 2023), allowing to find improvised workarounds for challenges, such as flexibility in dealing with rules and regulations around the students' status on virtual mobility.

However, concerns were voiced over the need to learn on site, e.g., in a laboratory, in certain disciplines, and also the need to have lecturers available for students' queries:

> Of course the students complained because they were not here in presence and so they, they could not (.) talk to them or have questions directly. So they were not in their offices. (U1-4).

While some interviewees emphasized that their universities had already started to establish digital infrastructures, for others, digitalization was mostly part of an emergency response to the pandemic (Bosse et al., 2023, p. 66).

In the post-pandemic context, interview partners noticed a pushback, such as declining readiness to engage in digital processes and a wish to participate in face-to-face meetings. Also, structural support, such as funding for additional virtual teaching, has been discontinued. In international literature, there are competing views in this regard as some have argued that the German HEIs fell short of taking full advantage of the digital structures and process changes enabled by the Covid-19 pandemic (Bedenlier & Stöter, 2022) and question whether it will result in the systematic integration of education technologies by HEIs (Zawacki-Richter, 2021). On the other hand, a 2023 global pilot study (IAU, 2023) concluded that, despite the partial slowdown in the use of ICT in the aftermath of the pandemic, HEIs continue to reap the benefits of the digitalization boost and the enhanced digital competencies developed during the emergency response.

5.2.2 Stakeholder Expectations, Resources, and Inefficient Digital Infrastructures

Another practical factor refers to the influence of stakeholders. This aspect touches upon expectations, regulations, the provision of external funding, as well as the overall quality of IT infrastructures. "There is an expectation from network partners, funders, political bodies (EU), students, and academics to digitalize processes such as cooperation agreements and information exchange, but also assessment and acknowledgement of students' credits". However, it is a continuous, time-consuming, and resource-intensive process,perceived as a burden when stakeholder expectations are connected to inefficient or incompatible systems.

> A number of processes (.) have been digitalized because the EU wanted the Online Learning Agreement. […] However, the tools that the EU has developed are very faulty. (.) And so there's a lot of frustration amongst (.) students, but also any staff who work with the Erasmus program because. (..) They have to do these things digitally, but the tools don't work. And so we have to invest a lot of resources in (.) to dealing with these these tools and (.) troubleshooting (.) that could probably be put elsewhere. (U-1–2).

The interviews and strategies emphasize the importance of ample funding to maintain digital offers. On the other hand, digital offers can provide cost-effective solutions, e.g., by avoiding travel expenses. Further, digitalization can generate substantial workload, requiring skilled personnel and demanding time from all actors involved. Given their freedom of choosing the teaching formats, HEIs have emphasized the need to incentivize academics' engagement in virtual teaching.

> TH Köln will support its faculties in their endeavors to internationalize their lectures, classes, courses, programs, and extracurricular activities in both analog and digital formats. It will establish the infrastructure required to undertake this successfully, particularly with regard to information technology, and maintain its compatibility with international standards and practices (TH Köln Strategy Document).

This is supported by the scientific literature, which suggests that the introduction of ICT could cause a work overload for academics, reducing the time devoted to research activities, or affecting the quality of digital teaching. (Esteve-Mon et al., 2023). On the other hand, staff can also push digitalization processes. Some staff members value flexible working arrangements, and motivated staff push digitalization processes. e.g., by creating virtual classes or initiating their own collaborations.

5.2.3 Rules, Regulations, Legal Frameworks

The practical implementation of virtual internationalization is significantly influenced by regulatory frameworks. A main challenge to digitalizing internationalization is the lack of clear standards or the existence of contradictory rules and regulations which require case-to-case decisions and workarounds. This also relates to various interpretations of rules or best practices to approach certain issues. For example, there are a multitude of organizational approaches to what video-conference tool is to be used for calls and teaching.

> And then, of course, in Germany because of federalism. Each state has its own regulations, (.) which complicates things. (..) But I think that. (…) It's a challenge. It's a challenge at the moment. And I think it will continue to be a challenge. (U-1–2).

Further, rules and regulations do not keep up with digital developments.

> Legal things that if you're if you're enrolled at at our institution, then you have to you have to show proof of health insurance and you have to pay the semester contribution and all that. And, of course, then there's the question. Okay, but what if you (.) are enrolled, but you're not here? (U-1–2).

Contrary to common assumptions about digital learning, Knight (2015, p. 2) explains that "there is growing importance attached to borders when the focus turns to regulatory responsibility, especially related to quality assurance, funding, and accreditation". This observation aligns with the experiences shared by participants on the variety of rules and regulations, often diverse, contradictory, and subject to different interpretations. In this respect, data protection has been a recurring topic among interviewees.

5.2.4 Comprehensive Digitalization

Finally, a positive influence of the strategic orientation of digitalization as a comprehensive project of the entire institution is evident. At some HEIs, digitalization is facilitated as a comprehensive endeavor, affecting all aspects of administration and partly also science communication and teaching. This is manifested in references to the availability and allocation of resources, the potential for internal collaboration and synergies, as well as a shared framework and the coordinated use of tools and platforms. In those cases, internationalization activities are digitalized as part of an institution-wide change, often guided by a digitalization strategy (Andrews et al., 2019; Bosse et al., 2023, p. 66). Available infrastructure, trained staff, and incentives to increase readiness to engage in digital offers can positively impact efficient and successful digitalization. This aspect emphasizes the importance of collaboration between academic and administrative staff (Taylor, 2013).

In other cases, the lack of a comprehensive approach can create inconsistent solutions:

> So you do it […] because there's a time pressure […] which leads to this very funny and weird kind of landscapes of digitalization at the universities where some stuff is working great, but as a stand-alone solution (TU-1–1).
>
> And that's a big issue. There's lots of different platforms at the university that are used for lots of different things, but not all of the platforms can talk to one another. (U-1–2).

Faulty or inefficient digital infrastructures can provide a large setback for virtual internationalization. A lack of interoperability causes frustration and "*island solutions*" (TU-1–1), which are perceived as inefficient (Brienza, 2022). Similar to the notion of Comprehensive Internationalization (Brajković & Helms, 2017; Hudzik, 2011), our findings point to comprehensive digitalization as a sustainable approach to digitalizing HE, including virtual internationalization (Bruhn-Zass, 2021).

5.3 Modes of Virtual Internationalization Governance

Our findings align with the model proposed by Jungbauer-Gans et al. (2023). We can find all modes of governance in the analyzed material. With regard to the objectives that motivate virtual internationalization, there is a clear focus on competitive and values-based governance in the strategies and interviews. On the one hand, objectives relating to collaboration and competition are clearly linked to institutional prestige, competition for resources, as well as for highly qualified students and excellent researchers. On the other hand, digitalization is recognized as an opportunity to support fulfilling social expectations and addressing of social challenges. Thus, striking a balance between multiple objectives while safeguarding institutional core values remains both a challenge and an opportunity for HEIs (IAU, 2012) (Fig. 2).

With regard to the factors that shape the implementation of virtual internationalization, there is a prevalence of references to collegial and hierarchical governance. The digital turn is accompanied by the establishment of specific positions of responsibility and communication and decision-making structures that support digitalization with bureaucratic legitimacy. At the same time, the hierarchical influence of democratically legitimized actors, such as legal requirements from the federal and state governments, as well as EU programs and objectives, is observable. This reflects the hierarchical governance. The independence of teaching staff and researchers in their choice

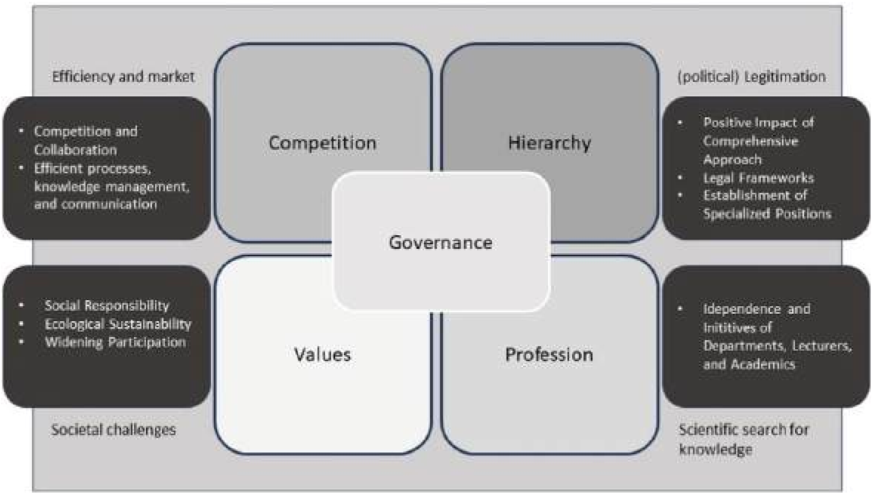

Fig. 2 Objectives and practical factors shaping international HE governance

of teaching and cooperation formats is emphasized several times, and the importance of individual professorships and faculties to foster virtual internationalization is pointed out. This reflects collegial governance.

While a focus on hierarchical decision-making structures is certainly described in the crisis mode of the pandemic (Bosse et al., 2023), our interviews reveal a very diverse readiness to engage in digital solutions, regardless of hierarchical positions. This resonates with the view that embracing digital transformation requires "digital maturity" (Brienza, 2022; Kopp et al, 2019), that is, organizational openness towards a culture of data-driven decision making (Sherwood, 2021). It remains a question for further analysis to determine the extent to which bottom-up initiatives will shape the further process.

Sziget states that.

"[t]he transformation of university governance involves digital transformation and digital governance including digital infrastructures and digital service systems. Digital governance in HE encompasses main dimensions different from traditional university governance and concerns the standardization of education, transparency, and digitalization […] [D]igital governance may drive the governance model to move toward the state control model based on rational planning and control rather than the state supervising model based on self-regulation" (Sziegat, 2022).

Our analysis suggests that the governance of virtual internationalization is indeed linked to the introduction and maintenance of infrastructure and the allocation of resources. However, following the modes of governance proposed by Jungbauer-Gans et al., we understand the governance of virtual internationalization as a comprehensive process interwoven in values-based, hierarchical, collegial, and competitive governance.

Our analysis showed the prevalence of competition and values-based governance as key drivers of the digital turn in HE internationalization. Both aspects highlight expectations in international HE, HEIs perception of their role in society, as well as different applications of digitalization to HE governance.

6 Conclusion

Our analysis showed competition and values-based governance as key objectives of the digital turn in HE internationalization. First, HE is, in many forms and variations, competitive. On a strategic level, HEIs compete, for example, for funding, prestigious collaborations, highly achieving students, and recognition. Second, interviewees and internationalization strategies address social values, such as inclusiveness, sustainability, but also brain-gain and the training of experts and problem-solvers, and the way such values are embedded in the governance of virtual internationalization. Both aspects highlight expectations in higher education internationalization, HEIs' perception of their role in society, as well as different applications of HE governance.

Considering factors that shape the practical implementation of digital solutions, we find that hierarchical and collegial modes of governance are becoming increasingly relevant. In this context, key factors include the expectations of stakeholders and the development of digitalization as an overall institutional strategy, as well as the availability of functional and coordinated digital infrastructures and trained personnel, and finally, the readiness to engage in digital solutions play central roles. The diverse and sometimes contradictory regulatory frameworks were perceived as particularly challenging.

Although we have unpacked facets that might be distinctive of the German HE, the insights we presented can contribute to a broader understanding of digitalization and its implications for the governance of virtual internationalization in Germany and beyond. We hope that providing strategic and practical perspectives resonates with the concerns of practitioners, researchers, and policymakers engaged in advancing HE internationalization in the digital environment. Relevant from a policy perspective is to consider the balance between the different modes of governance in the implementation of digital solutions in support of the HE internationalization, the importance of addressing stakeholders' expectations, and the continuity of appropriate funding measures to secure robust digital infrastructures. Of particular concern is what we have identified as dwindling investments in manpower, arguably rooted in high expectations associated with the use of digital technologies, together with conflicting or different legal frameworks, that present major challenges for practical implementation.

A key question for further research will be how the governance of university networks, transnational campuses, and joint study programs develop. So far, it has become clear that it is a challenge for individual institutions to use ICT in a uniform and coordinated manner. It remains to be seen to what extent trans-institutional governance can be shaped in ever-closer digital collaborations.

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Exploring Degrees of Connection: Challenges and Acceptance of the European Degree Label Towards Shaping the Future of Higher Education

Romiţă Iucu, Simona Iftimescu, George Gunnesch-Luca, Alexandru-Mihai Carţiş, Nadia Fernández de Pinedo, Sophia Papaioannou, Angela Melley, and Mattea Capelli

Abstract This paper investigates the adoption and implementation of the European Degree Label (EDL) within joint degree programmes, using Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) as a predictive framework. Specifically, the study examines how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control

The data analysed in this paper has also been presented in previous reports issued throughout the project, but has not been otherwise published. All data and reports are publicly accessible at: https://civis.eu/en/discover-civis/civis-alliance-projects/smartt/outputs-and-results.

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influence key stakeholders' intentions and actual behaviours towards EDL adoption. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) framework is extended to the context of organisational transformation, highlighting its applicability in navigating resistance to change within educational institutions. Administered to academic stakeholders across Europe, the questionnaire focuses on three TPB dimensions: attitudes towards the EDL, academic community norms, and stakeholders' self-efficacy and perceived control over EDL implementation. Utilising a mixed-method approach, the study aims to produce nuanced insights into these behavioural predictors. Anticipated results are expected to identify practical strategies for fostering EDL acceptance, including aligning organisational norms with policy objectives and enhancing stakeholders' perceived behavioural control (PBC) through leadership support and training, thus fostering cooperation throughout the European Higher Education Area and furthering its fundamental values. The results presented in this paper are part of a broader project: SMARTT–Screening, Mapping, Analysing, Recommending, Transferring and Transforming Higher Education international programmes. SMARTT aimed to analyse, test, and pilot the new European Degree label criteria, with the goal of improving the quality and increasing the transferability of future developments of European Degrees across Europe and beyond (SMARTT, 2023).

Keywords European Degree label · Higher education · Joint degree programmes · EHEA

1 Introduction

In the past decades, European higher education has experienced significant changes, aiming for greater compatibility of educational structures throughout the continent. At the centre of these changes is the Bologna Process, a crucial series of reforms and policies, which culminated in 2010 by establishing a unified European Higher Education Area (EHEA). EHEA is characterised by its recognition of academic qualifications across national borders, facilitating the free movement of students and academics. The EHEA signifies a commitment among European nations to pursue a more cohesive approach to higher education. This approach not only aims at strengthening social bonds and reducing inequalities but also at enhancing economic and cultural collaboration. It is built on shared values and internationalisation, encompassing social aspects as well as the teaching and learning dynamics.

Globalisation and internationalisation are considered to be the basis from which the process of higher education reform started (Vögtle, 2014). On the one hand, this context exacerbated competitiveness among higher education institutions, both nationally and internationally, driven by international reputation, outcomes and success rates of students and graduates, financial resources, increased mobility (and implicitly the options of students and faculty) (Heinze & Knill, 2008), which contributed to the increase of external pressures that higher education institutions were forced to respond to. On the other hand, it led to increased cooperation, allowing for more mobility, for the development of double, multiple or joint degrees and, more recently, to the creation of University Alliances and a potential future legal status for European Universities. There has been a growing incentive for representatives of higher education systems at the European and even international level to collaborate towards a convergence objective, which helps higher education institutions remain relevant to the needs of beneficiaries in a globalised educational system, to which the Bologna Process tried to respond (Vögtle, 2014).

In the context of these transformations of the educational landscape, the European Degree Label (EDL) recently emerged as a pivotal initiative or as a 'European policy experimentation in higher education' initiative (European Commission, 2022a). The EDL proposes a *seal of quality* for joint degree programmes, symbolising a commitment to excellence in transnational education and enhancing the visibility and attractiveness of European higher education globally, building further on the success of the Bologna Process and the growing potential of the EHEA (SMARTT, 2023). However, building on the success of these initiatives also requires an increased awareness of their flaws.

These past 25 years witnessed not only policy changes but also a shift in national, institutional, and individual behaviour in relation to these changes. While competition and cooperation could both be seen as adaptive processes in the implementation of the Bologna Process and the development of EHEA, a high level of resistance to change was felt throughout due to either lack of awareness, trust, clarity, or resources, perceived threats to traditional practices, un-alignment or conflicting priorities among other factors.

The potential introduction of the European Degree Label (EDL) represents a continuation of the core tenets first laid down by the Bologna Process. This advancement seeks to capitalise on and broaden the scope of the Bologna Process by introducing several crucial enhancements aimed at fostering the quality, mobility, and acknowledgement of higher education credentials across Europe. The Bologna Process itself marked a significant step towards a unified approach to higher education, establishing a suite of tools and procedures to navigate the diverse landscape of national education systems. Despite these efforts, variations in the pace of implementation, alignment, and resistance at the national level have emerged, underlining the complexity of harmonising education across borders. Nonetheless, the Bologna Process stands as proof of the transformative power of international cooperation, guided by shared principles. Building upon this foundation, the EDL and the Joint European Degree propose to refine and simplify the procedures and tools layered over decades of educational reforms instigated by the Bologna Process. The EDL, for instance, extends the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) by promoting the adoption of a transparent and comparable credit system in joint programmes, thereby enhancing student mobility and ensuring that educational outcomes align with European standards. The adoption of the Diploma Supplement concept further aids in promoting transparency in qualifications, ensuring that the accomplishments of graduates are clearly and uniformly recognised across Europe, which, in turn, supports employability and further educational pursuits. Quality assurance also receives a boost under the EDL, drawing upon the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESGs) to set forth criteria that joint programmes must satisfy to be awarded the label. This emphasis on programme delivery quality, assessment, and student support services encourages continuous improvement and adherence to quality best practices. Moreover, the EDL embraces the fundamental commitments of the Bologna Process, including the mutual recognition of degrees, student-centred learning, and ensuring the social dimension of higher education, urging institutions to develop programmes that are academically sound, inclusive, and accessible (SMARTT, 2023). The EDL also aims to build on the Bologna Process by enhancing mobility by recognising and rewarding programmes that excel in providing comprehensive mobility opportunities. It fosters deeper international collaboration and sets a common framework of excellence, pushing institutions towards more collaborative efforts in programme development and delivery. This, in turn, is expected to boost the global competitiveness of the European education sector. Additionally, the EDL encourages innovation in teaching and learning practices, aligning with the Bologna Process's focus on educational quality enhancement. Finally, by offering a label of excellence, the EDL aims to increase the visibility and appeal of European higher education on a global scale, attracting international talent and ensuring the worldwide value and recognition of European qualifications, thus extending the Bologna Process's impact.

While not attempting to alter the inherently stochastic nature of change in higher education, the rationale for this study arises from the need to better understand and address the multifaceted challenges and opportunities presented by the EDL and to provide a predictive framework that could help guide its adoption and implementation. Therefore, the objectives of this paper are examining the adoption and implementation of the EDL within joint degree programmes, using Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour to better understand stakeholders' behaviours (O1), reflecting on the influence of attitudes, the pressure of subjective norms, and the impact of perceived behavioural control on stakeholders' intentions towards the EDL (O2), as well as identifying actionable strategies, key to overcoming resistance and fostering a wider acceptance of the EDL (O3).

2 The European Degree Label: A Brief Overview

To address the scope of this paper, this section provides a brief overview of the European Degree Label (EDL), delving into the importance of the EDL in the context of global education and highlighting the critical role of understanding stakeholder perspectives for its effective implementation. As the EDL was rather recently outlined in the European Strategy for Universities (European Commission, 2022b), there are only a few relevant sources and no specific research on the topic. Thus, references will be made to official documents and the pilot initiative.

Overall, the EDL is regarded as an essential milestone in achieving the European Education Area, as it aims to foster and enhance transnational cooperation between higher education institutions (HEIs) across Europe and to encourage student mobility. Through a call for proposals funded by the European Commission within the Erasmus+ Programme framework (2022), the European Union engaged six alliances of 'higher education institutions and national authorities to examine, test, and facilitate the delivery of a joint European Degree Label' (European Commission, 2022a).

The Label, issued on a voluntary basis, 'would reflect the skills and learning outcomes acquired by students' (idem) who participated in joint programmes across multiple institutions and countries. Whilst there is no official definition of the EDL, other than being a *complementary certificate* to the qualifications students receive upon graduating from joint programmes (European Commission, 2023), the Label was described through 20 proposed criteria (eleven mandatory and nine optional), which would facilitate the issuing of joint diplomas, degrees, and certificates across EHEA (idem). The criteria are based on a common set of European standards. For clarity, we organised these criteria into clusters[1] as follows:

1. Structural: transnational cooperation (higher education institutions involved, joint policies for the joint programme, transnational joint degree delivery, transnational campus–access to services, visibility, and awareness).
2. Functional: labour market and employability (graduate outcomes, cooperation with the labour market, internships/work-based learning, career development plan).
3. Qualitative: student-centred teaching and learning (transparency of learning outcomes, quality assurance arrangements, flexible and embedded student mobility, innovative learning approaches, alternative learning formats, digital skills).
4. European values: inclusion and sustainability (multilingualism, inclusiveness and sustainability, language classes, environmental care, democratic values) (SMARTT 2023).

The EDL could represent a strategic tool in fostering European identity and cooperation in higher education. By endorsing joint programmes that encourage collaboration between institutions across different countries, the EDL would further facilitate sharing knowledge and best practices, thereby strengthening the European education space. Additionally, the Label could play a crucial role in enhancing the employability of graduates by providing a recognisable and respected qualification, which is of significant value in an ever-increasingly globalised job market. As the EHEA continues to evolve, the EDL brings another layer of complexity to the process, with its aim to enhance the quality of European higher education systems and to ensure they are adaptable, collaborative, and responsive to the ongoing transformation of the educational system and society as a whole.

[1] As part of the SMARTT project, indicators were also developed for each criterion in order to allow for more clarity and measurability. The final list of proposed indicators was finalised and published at the end of the project (April 2024).

Understanding the challenges and opportunities this transformation presents is crucial for comprehending the broader context of this study. The intended added value of the EDL within the EHEA context is reflected at:

- Individual level, as it aims to enhance academic and professional mobility for students and academics, enabling individuals to pursue opportunities abroad and build international careers and ensuring their European degrees are recognised and valued globally.
- Institutional level, by acting as a catalyst for adopting a globally oriented curricula and teaching methods and improving the quality of education offered; similarly, collaboration among HEIs can lead to innovative educational practices and research partnerships.
- National level, contributing to maintaining and increasing the standard of education by providing a unified benchmark, as it bridges the variations in educational standards and qualifications that exist across different countries.
- European level, by strengthening the attractiveness and trustworthiness of European degrees, making them more appealing to both international students and employers.
- International level, by fostering international collaboration and cultural exchange, facilitating the international recognition of degrees, and playing a crucial role in economic development.

The adoption and implementation of the EDL also face several challenges, starting from resource allocation–both in terms of finance and human capital, to the highly diverse higher education system, which brings up the issue of standardisation in quality assurance and recognition mechanisms as well as in relation to HEIs' autonomy. While attempting to further contribute to the harmonising educational standards, the EDL's stated purpose is to provide a complementary solution that could enhance transnational cooperation while respecting institutional autonomy (European Commission, 2023). This represents perhaps the biggest challenge, as the implementation of the EDL must also reconcile a number of different perspectives. The successful adoption and implementation of the EDL is therefore dependent on the acceptance of various stakeholders, including educational institutions, policymakers, students, and employers. Acceptance is dependent on the willingness and ability of educational institutions to align their programmes with the EDL criteria and the policymakers' better understanding of how it aligns with national objectives. Moreover, as primary beneficiaries, students need to be convinced of its added value to their educational and professional future, while employers' recognition is crucial for the employability of graduates.

Given all these different perspectives, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and factors influencing the adoption and acceptance of the EDL.

3 Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour and Organisational Change

To provide this understanding, the study uses Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) as a theoretical framework. The TPB provides the context for understanding the relationship between attitudes, norms, and control and their influence on stakeholders' acceptance and intent to utilise the EDL.

The TPB has been used to predict and explain human behaviour, and it asserts that the likelihood of someone engaging in a behaviour is determined by their intention, and it is influenced by factors such as attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991).

In this context, attitudes (AT) refer to a favourable or unfavourable evaluation of a behaviour (idem), as positive attitudes towards change are associated with higher acceptance and commitment (Armenakis et al., 1993). Kotter (1995) indicates that effective change management requires changing attitudes, which can be influenced by several factors, including perceived benefits, trust in leadership, and an individual's tolerance for change (Oreg, 2003).

A second factor, subjective norms (SN), refers to the perceived social pressure to perform or not a behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). This can be understood, for example, as the influence of peer opinions, institutional culture, or the broader academic community, connecting it to the social learning theory, which reinforces the impact of modelling and observational learning in organisational settings (Bandura, 1986).

Finally, the perceived behavioural control (PBC) reflects the perception of the easiness or difficulty of performing the behaviour, a concept similar to self-efficacy (Ajzen, 1991). If stakeholders perceive that they have the resources, skills, and autonomy needed, they are more likely to engage positively with the initiative. Thus, the PBC has a determining role in the success of change (Ajzen, 1991; Bandura, 1977).

In more recent years, TPB's applications range from public health and political science to communication (Buhmann & Brønn, 2018), social media in education (Ursavağ, 2022), energy consumption (Canova & Manganelli, 2020), risky behaviour (Caputo, 2020), or theoretical developments of the model (Ajzen, 2012; La Barbera & Ajzen, 2020a, b; Willis et al., 2020), among others. According to a systematic review, the TPB has been mentioned in more than 4,200 papers in the Web of Science database (Bosnjak et al., 2020). Research indicates that TBP can be used in addressing organisational change, examples ranging from implementing IT changes in organisations (Taylor & Todd, 1995) to investigating the linkage between professional development and mathematics instructors' use of teaching practices (Archie et al., 2022). The TPB framework has been previously employed in a variety of organisational settings, including research with a focus on attitudes, perceived behavioural control and social norms in the context of organisational change (i.e., utilisation intent of new technology, new procedures, or structures). Therefore, this paper looks at higher education institutions from an organisational perspective and to the deployment of the EDL as a process of organisational change, as it triggers strategic, structural, process, and cultural changes at an organisational level (namely the higher education institutions involved).

When it comes to organisational change in higher education, based on the experience of implementing the Bologna Process, which could be regarded in itself as a process of organisational and systemic change, and on the complexity of the higher education system, resistance to change appears to be particularly challenging. Some factors influencing this resistance to change might be connected to cultural inertia (Kezar & Eckel 2002). Another factor could be the fear of the unknown (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979), as change brings uncertainty. Apart from these, there might also be a lack of involvement (Coburn, 2005), as resistance can also arise when stakeholders feel excluded from the decision-making process. Perceived threats (Piderit, 2000) could also contribute to resistance, as change may be perceived as threatening to the status quo, particularly in terms of job security, power dynamics, and institutional identity. Last but not least, resistance could come from resource constraints (Fullan, 2007).

Mitigation measures could be adopted, particularly when it comes to leadership and policy. Such measures include but are not limited to resource allocation, as leaders need to ensure that adequate resources are allocated for the successful implementation of new initiatives, including financial resources, training, and support systems (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). This should also be doubled by vision and leaders who articulate a clear and compelling direction for the future and are able to inspire and motivate stakeholders to embrace new initiatives (Kotter, 1996). The decision-making process should also be inclusive (i.e., open communication, collaborative planning, and considering the concerns and suggestions of all parties), as involving a broad range of stakeholders in the change process can enhance buy-in and reduce resistance (Kezar, 2001). Along with leadership, policies should align with institutional goals and values to be effective, which helps gain support from stakeholders who see the change as beneficial and in line with the institution's mission (Gornitzka et al., 2005).

Understanding organisational change is vital for comprehending the complexities involved in implementing and sustaining initiatives such as the EDL. It also offers a compelling argument for investigating how attitudes (AT), subjective norms (SN), and perceived behavioural control (PBC) influence key stakeholders' intentions and actual behaviours towards EDL adoption.

4 Methodology

The methodology of this study aims to explore the challenges and acceptance of the European Degree Label (EDL). To achieve this, a mixed-method approach is employed, combining qualitative and quantitative research methods. This section outlines the rationale for this approach.

The study is based on the research conducted through the SMARTT project: 'Screening, Mapping, Analysing, Recommending, Transferring and Transforming

Higher Education international programmes‘, funded by the European Commission through the Erasmus+ Programme. The overall objective of the project is to analyse the EDL and provide recommendations on its development and implementation. This specific project was chosen as the basis for our research as it is one of the six pilot projects selected and funded by the European Commission to test and validate the European Degree Label, offering the context for a specific methodology to be employed. The project was carried out from April 2023 to April 2024, and it consisted of two main stages: a pre-testing phase, validating the EDL criteria against EUROSUD–an international master programme in South European Studies, and a second phase, which entailed replicating the pre-test at CIVIS level (a European Alliance comprising eleven European HEIs and six partner HEIs in Africa), including the project partner Alliances: EUTOPIA, NeurotechEU and UNITA. The overall study used a mixed methodology, comprising of documents analysis, workshops, interviews, and focus groups with relevant stakeholders, as well as two surveys–one mapping the EDL criteria against the double, multiple and joint degree programmes participating in the project and the second one investigating the EDL from the programmes' perspective.

For the purpose of this paper, the methodological approach involves one quantitative survey to gauge the attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control of programme coordinators towards the EDL.

While acknowledging the limitations of a non-representative sample, statistical methodology was employed to identify potential correlations and explore inferential possibilities within the dataset. In addition to quantitative analysis, open-ended questions were also examined to provide qualitative context and depth, enriching the understanding of the numerical data. The open-ended answers were analysed separately and coded based on the four components of the TPB, which were then further labelled in accordance with the definitions provided above for each TPB component. For example, we coded the answers as follows: Attitudes (AT), Perceived Behavioural Control (PBC), Subjective Norms (SN) and Utilisation Intention (UI). For AT, we included labels such as ‘perceived benefits‘ and ‘perceived challenges‘(positive/negative); for PBC, we used labels based on reported ‘resources', ‘support' and ‘obstacles', while SN were further described through reported/perceived social and organisational incentives and pressure (positive/negative).

In an effort to understand the factors influencing the intention to use the European Degree Label (EDL), we employed a linear regression model, operationalising the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) by examining the roles of attitudes (AT), perceived behavioural control (PBC), and subjective norms (SN). The model was estimated using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression, with the intention to use the EDL as the dependent variable and attitudes, control, and norms as independent variables. The specified model is intention ~ attitudes + control + norms (SMARTT, 2023).

4.1 Survey Structure

The survey, in its entirety, consists of 54 questions that offer multiple answers on a scale of five points, along with ten questions that are open-ended. The first twelve questions, as well as the last two, cover general topics. Meanwhile, 25 questions are specifically designed to evaluate the participants' opinions about the EDL, based on seven pre-established meta-criteria: clarity, relevance, specificity, measurability, flexibility, readiness, and consistency. Within the survey, there are 26 multiple-answer questions that relate to the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) framework, distributed as follows (SMARTT, 2023): six items on Attitude (AT), covering aspects such as: perceived value, contribution, importance, alignment, benefits of implementing the EDL; six items on Subjective Norms (SN), more specifically: perceived stakeholders' support, expectations, recommendations, or external influence in relation to implementing the EDL; nine items on Perceived Behavioural Control (PBC): familiarity with the EDL, perceived capacity to manage the implementation, self-reported confidence, perceived challenges, estimation of required resources, motivation and commitment, as well as perceived alignment of the programme with the EDL criteria; and five items on the Utilisation Intention (UI), namely: plans to implement the EDL, commitment, priorities, and advocacy. The TPB-specific questions were constructed following examples of validated questionnaires utilising the TPB framework (specifically based on the work of Reichardt et al., 2009). The questionnaire, including the TPB-specific items, was piloted by the EUROSUD coordinators, which allowed for an initial item analysis, revision, and validation of the questionnaire, as well as ensuring the TPB constructs are measured in accordance with the conceptual framework. This paper will exclusively analyse these 26 TPB-related questions as the focus is on the AT, SN and PBC and their relationship with UI, underpinned by statistical analysis. Additionally, relevant insights from other survey questions are selectively incorporated based on their pertinence to the topic.

4.2 Sample

The survey was administered from December 2023 to February 2024 to the coordinators of 95 double, multiple, and joint programmes from 14 HEIs part of CIVIS and from the project's partner alliances, selected through an initial mapping of the CIVIS and partners' programmes based on the EDL criteria (SMARTT, 2023). The initial mapping was carried out based on the EDL criteria, and it was addressed to all double, multiple, and joint programmes within the CIVIS Alliance and its partners. Indicators were constructed for each criterion, and scores were attached to each indicator (reflecting a mandatory or optional criterion). The initial aim was to select the first 50 programmes (a hierarchy based on the final scores in relation to the EDL criteria) in order to apply the survey. However, given the project' scope, the survey targeted all mapped programmes in order to provide a better understanding of how the EDL could be implemented for a wider variety of programmes.

The questionnaire yielded 64 responses. Of these, 52 were deemed complete and subsequently incorporated into the final dataset for analysis. The results are based on responses from ten European countries (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and the UK), reflecting the perspective of 26 coordinating universities and 50 programmes, comprising more than 100 partner universities from all across the world (SMARTT, 2023).

The survey was distributed electronically using SoSci Survey,[2] a platform that ensures data privacy and ease of access for respondents. In conducting this research, ethical considerations were addressed, such as informed consent, confidentiality, data protection, and voluntary participation (idem). Several follow-up meetings were also set, allowing for a debriefing to be provided to inform participants about the findings and contributions.

In terms of **limitations**, the sample used for this study might not be representative for the whole EHEA, thus limiting the generalizability of the findings, which could affect its applicability to different contexts. Moreover, the study's cross-sectional design captures the investigated dimensions at a single point in time, which limits its ability to infer causality or provide a better understanding of how these factors may change over time as more information on EDL becomes available. Also, the study relies on self-reported measures of the investigated dimensions leading to a certain level of bias, as respondents might overestimate their positive attitudes due to the perceived social value of the EDL. Nevertheless, by using the TPB framework, the study might leave aside other relevant factors or variables not included in the model but that could have a significant influence on the adoption and implementation of the EDL.

5 Results

This section will first present the descriptive analysis of the survey results, followed by an analysis of the TPB model and the correlation between the variables. Finally, the analysis will also tackle some of the open-ended questions in order to provide more nuance to the statistical analysis.

Attitudes

Overall, the EDL is widely regarded as instrumental in enhancing and acknowledging the quality of collaborative degree programmes, valuable in promoting and recognising high-quality joint/multiple degree programmes. Most respondents either agree or strongly agree that stakeholders support aligning with the European Degree Label (EDL). They view the EDL favourably and consider alignment with it important (Fig. 1).

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[2] https://www.soscisurvey.de/.

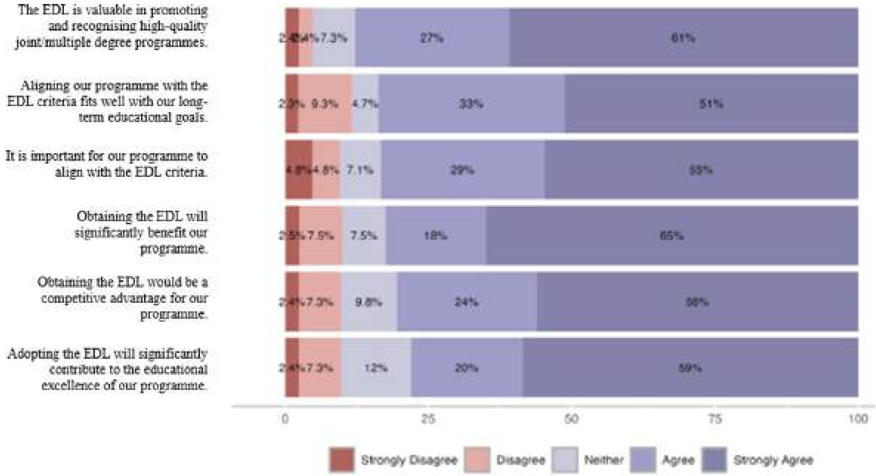

Fig. 1 Attitudes regarding the European Degree Label. *Source* SMARTT (2023)

Perceived Behavioural Control

The survey results indicate that the EDL resonates well with the current practices and policies of existing programmes, and confidence in the ability to meet the EDL requirements is also high, driven by a general sense of motivation and commitment. The self-belief in respondents' capability to overcome challenges and the manageability of implementing EDL criteria indicates a positive perception of behavioural control. However, responses indicate some level of concern about the sufficiency of resources and guidance for aligning with the EDL, which could have a negative influence on the EDL implementation (Fig. 2).

Subjective Norms

Respondents appear to be largely supportive of their programme's alignment with the EDL, as most view it in a positive light and acknowledge its benefits. However, the analysis indicates some disparity in perception, particularly in relation to the influence of similar programmes' decision to pursue the EDL (Fig. 3).

Utilisation Intent

The collective responses indicate a forward-looking stance toward aligning with the EDL criteria in the future, as well as a proactive approach towards the EDL implementation, focused on actionable steps. The intention is generally strong, as seen in the responses indicating plans to align with or apply for the EDL. According to TPB, this intention is the most immediate predictor of behaviour, suggesting a high likelihood that the programmes will follow through with the alignment (Fig. 4).

The analysis revealed that the model significantly predicts the intention to use the European Degree Label, explaining a substantial proportion of variance in intentions ($R^2 = 0.72$, $F (3, 35) = 30.27$, $p < 0.001$) (Table 1).

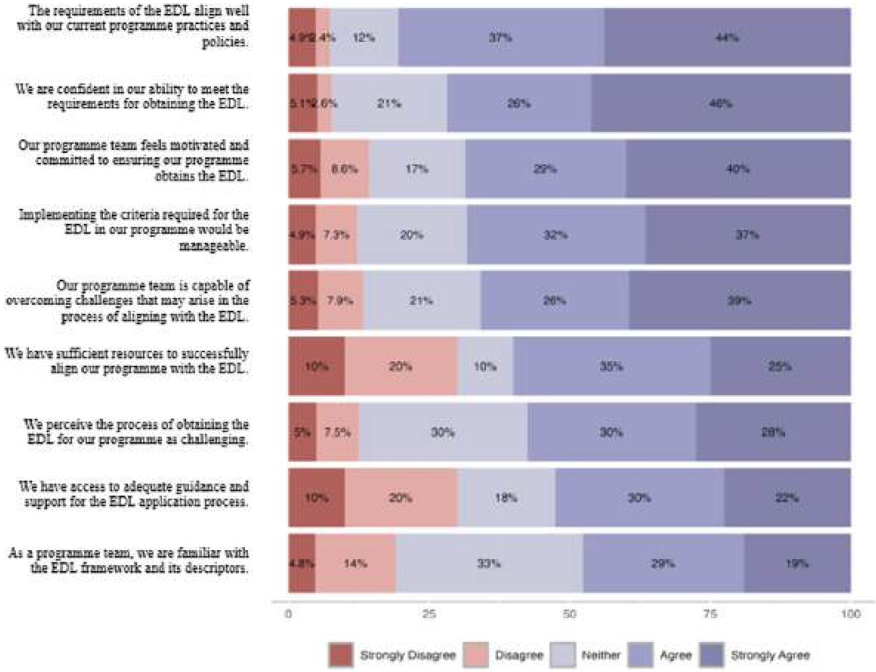

Fig. 2 Perceived behavioural control in relation to the European Degree Label. *Source* SMARTT (2023)

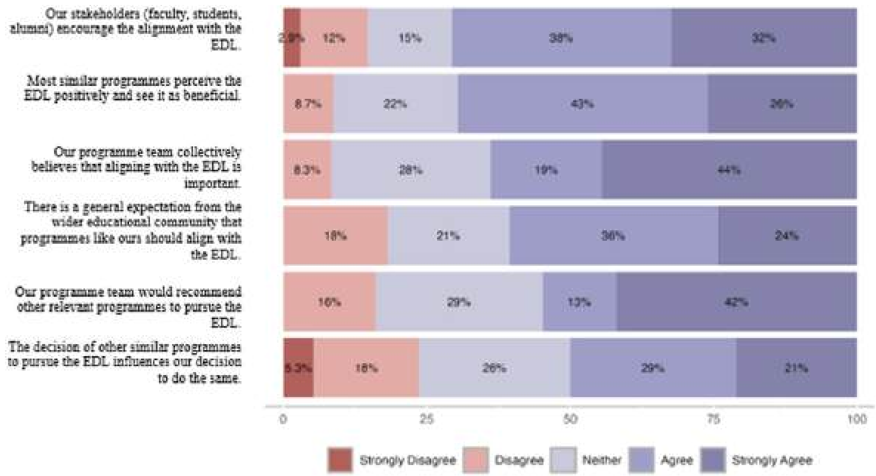

Fig. 3 Subjective Norms in relation to the European Degree Label. *Source* SMARTT (2023)

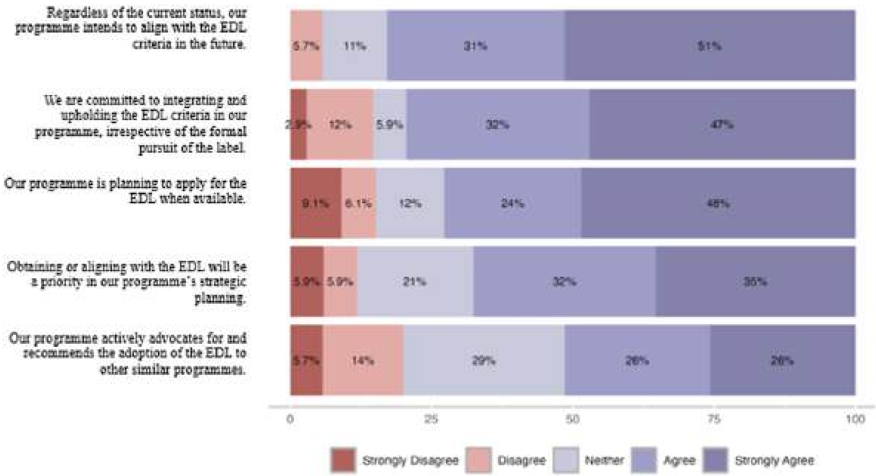

Fig. 4 Utilisation Intent in relation to the European Degree Label. *Source* SMARTT (2023)

Table 1 Means, standard deviations, and correlations with confidence intervals for the TPB variables (in EDL context)

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3
1. Attitudes Toward Adoption	4.26	0.99			
2. Perceived Behavioural Control	3.63	0.96	0.68**		
			[0.47, 0.81]		
3. Subjective Norms	3.75	0.94	0.63**	0.66**	
			[0.40, 0.78]	[0.44, 0.80]	
4. Intention of Use	3.90	1.12	0.74**	0.71**	0.67**
			[0.56, 0.86]	[0.51, 0.84]	[0.45, 0.81]

Source SMARTT (2023)
Note M and SD are used to represent mean and standard deviation, respectively. The response range is: 1 – 5. Values in square brackets indicate the 95% confidence interval for each correlation. The confidence interval is a plausible range of population correlations that could have caused the sample correlation (Cumming, 2014). *indicates p < 0.05. ** indicates p < 0.01

The effects of the TPB components on intention were as follows:

Attitudes: There is a significant and positive relationship between attitudes towards the European Degree Label and the intention to use it (beta = 0.34, 95% CI [0.08, 0.60], t (35) = 2.65, p = 0.012). The standardised beta coefficient (Std. beta = 0.34) confirms the strength of this relationship, indicating that more favourable attitudes are associated with stronger intentions to use the Label.

Perceived Behavioural Control: Similarly, perceived control over using the European Degree Label shows a significant and positive effect on intention (beta = 0.52, 95% CI [0.22, 0.83], t (35) = 3.51, p = 0.001). The standardised beta (Std.

beta = 0.46) underscores the importance of perceived control, suggesting that individuals who feel more capable of using the label are more likely to intend to do so.

Subjective Norms: The influence of subjective norms on intention, while positive, did not reach statistical significance (beta = 0.17, 95% CI [-0.10, 0.44], t (35) = 1.30, p = 0.204). The standardised beta (Std. beta = 0.16) suggests a modest, non-significant trend. The effect of subjective norms may be more nuanced and could also be influenced by other variables (Table 2).

To sum up, the correlation coefficients for AT and PBC underline strong positive relationships, reinforcing the idea that both favourable attitudes and higher perceived control are intricately linked to a higher intention or actual adoption of the behaviour (namely, intention to use the EDL), both being consistent with the TPB. The implications of these results could suggest that these are the two components which should be particularly addressed in relation to the EDL implementation. On the other hand, while it seems that social influence is relevant, it may not be as strong a predictor in this context, as the measure of subjective norms may not fully capture the construct, or its effect could be moderated by other variables not included in the model. This is a point of interest and could be explored further in subsequent research. In terms of limitations, while the high R^2 value indicates the model is robust in this context, the components of TPB may have different weights and interactions, which have not been accounted for in this current paper.

Table 2 Prediction of the intention of EDL use with the TPB components

Predictor	*b*	*b* 95% CI [LL, UL]	*beta*	*beta* 95% CI [LL, UL]	sr^2	sr^2 95% CI [LL, UL]	*r*	Fit
(Intercept)	−0.04	[−0.92, 0.84]						
Attitudes	0.34*	[0.08, 0.60]	0.34	[0.08, 0.59]	0.06	[-0.03, 0.14]	0.74**	
Control	0.52**	[0.22, 0.83]	0.46	[0.19, 0.73]	0.10	[-0.01, 0.21]	0.79**	
Subjective Norms	0.17	[−0.10, 0.44]	0.16	[-0.09, 0.41]	0.01	[-0.03, 0.05]	0.67**	
								$R^2 = 0.722$**
								95% CI[0.51,0.80]

Source SMARTT (2023)

Note. A significant *b*-weight indicates the beta-weight and semi-partial correlation are also significant. *b* represents unstandardised regression weights. *beta* indicates the standardised regression weights. sr^2 represents the semi-partial correlation squared. *r* represents the zero-order correlation. *LL* and *UL* indicate the lower and upper limits of a confidence interval, respectively

* indicates $p < 0.05$. ** indicates $p < 0.01$

The open-ended questions included in the questionnaire also help bring some nuance to the results presented above. The survey contains responses to open-ended questions related to various aspects of the educational or organisational context, specifically focusing on the need for adaptation, impact assessment, best practices, feedback, relevance, and alignment of the EDL criteria with the existing programmes. By analysing these open-ended questions through the lens of TPB, we aimed to better understand the factors influencing individual or organisational behaviour in adapting or implementing new practices, such as the EDL. Hence, we have coded responses to the open-ended questions as follows: attitudes towards change (AT), subjective norms (SN), and perceived behavioural control (PBC), in order to reflect the TBP components previously analysed.

When it comes to **attitudes towards change** (including perceived benefits and challenges), positive attitudes are reflected in responses that highlight the need for adaptation or suggest the recognition of the benefits associated with change. Different themes have been highlighted in positive terms, such as increased international recognition and quality assurance, increased student mobility and collaborative opportunities, as well as an overall better alignment with global trends. For example, there are mentions of "internationality, recognition at European level" and "obtaining different degrees on a joint program", which can be seen as positive attitudes towards enhancing the educational offer and its appeal. Moreover, there are several responses providing descriptions of key strengths, like "democratic values, multilingualism, student mobility," which reflect a positive evaluation of current practices and the potential benefits of further promoting these values. Some responses point to perceived challenges or **negative aspects** related to change, such as the need for "financial support to coordinate the program" and concerns about "resources at our Faculty." The primary challenges identified include bureaucratic hurdles, procedural complexity, limited resources, cultural and structural resistance, diversity and inclusivity issues, and concerns regarding autonomy. These highlight apprehensions about the feasibility and potential drawbacks of implementing changes related to the EDL.

In terms of **subjective norms,** we have considered feedback on the EDL and potential indicators of social/organisational pressure. There is a rather high rate of non-response (or negative answers) for the open-ended questions, which indicates a relatively low engagement with the topic of the EDL. One of the suggested best practices for the implementation of the EDL was the existence of "administrative support teams", which indicates some level of social support for managing adaptations, implying that where such support is present, there may be a normative push towards adaptation.

In relation to the **perceived behavioural control**, we focused on labelling *resources, support,* and *obstacles.* The main facilitating factors appear to be related to the existence of "clear guidance" and examples of effective practices. Obstacles directly related to this dimension are identified as "resources (economic and personal), administrative workload", while recommendations for improvement focus on "financial support and hiring personnel", underscoring the necessity of external resources for perceived behavioural control.

Overall, most respondents do not perceive any conflict between the EDL criteria and existing quality assurance frameworks or standards in their programme. Some respondents highlight financial and managerial needs, point out specific conflicts with local regulations, the need for multilingual criteria, or the challenges of harmonising across different academic cultures, while others stress out potential risks: "there might be a risk of micro-management and disregard of local structures for organisation and quality assurance".

Overall, the analysis of the open-ended questions reflects a mix of attitudes, ranging from positive outlooks on the benefits of implementing the EDL to concerns about the anticipated obstacles and the actual feasibility of this process.

6 Discussion

In summary, the study found that positive attitudes towards the EDL and perceived behavioural control are significant predictors of the intention to use the EDL, with perceived behavioural control being a stronger predictor of the two. Subjective norms showed a positive but not significant relationship with intention, indicating that social pressures or expectations might not play as crucial a role in this context, or their effect could be more complex and influenced by other variables not examined in this study. When it comes to the significant predictors (attitudes and perceived behavioural control), we could refer to a potential impact on behaviour. As attitudes have a strong influence on the intention to engage in a certain behaviour, they reflect personal evaluations of the outcomes of that behaviour. In other words, positive attitudes towards implementing the EDL could be driven by beliefs that it will enhance the institutions' prestige, improve educational quality, or increase student satisfaction. The qualitative analysis also highlights both positive attitudes towards the EDL, such as recognising its benefits for international recognition and enhancing the educational offer, and concerns about challenges, particularly regarding financial and resource constraints. However, results indicate that organisational support could play a role in encouraging the adoption of the EDL. Facilitators and barriers reflect concerns about resources and administrative support as critical to implementing the EDL. As the Perceived Behavioural Control reflects the individual's ability to perform a specific behaviour, influenced by resources, skills and opportunities, high Perceived Behavioural Control could facilitate action in relation to implementing the EDL. On the other hand, analysing Subjective Norms as the non-significant predictor, their influence may vary due to different organisational cultures, the autonomy degree of the academic and administrative staff, as well as to the perceived relevance of peer opinions on individual decision making. Overall, a strong culture of individualism or a strong sense of independence in individuals in higher education, prioritising their personal and professional values over social norms and peer pressure, could lead to a reduced impact of subjective norms in the implementation of the EDL. These could suggest some implications for intervention, further explored in the recommendations section.

For **individuals**, specific measures could be taken to support their increased awareness of the EDL and develop a more positive attitude, through participation in formal and informal presentation sessions, participation in training to develop skills for the effective use of the EDL, engagement in peer discussions, and fostering a community of practice supporting the EDL implementation while avoiding additional administrative burdens.

At the **organisational level**, it could be recommended that support structures are put in place by establishing dedicated administrative support teams to assist with the EDL processes and allocating resources (both financial and human resources) to address the obstacles identified by the respondents. Nevertheless, results indicate it is important to promote an organisational culture aligned with EDL, thus reinforcing positive attitudes towards it.

Another set of recommendations could refer to **policies** at national and European level that would provide financial support or incentives for institutions seeking to implement the EDL, reducing the barrier of financial constraints. Simplifying the application process to lower perceived behavioural control barriers would make it more accessible to a wider range of institutions. Facilitating knowledge exchange platforms where institutions can share best practices and lessons learned regarding the EDL would also benefit the process.

In **practice**, building on the findings of this paper, the focus should mainly be on developing attitudes (AT) and perceived behavioural control (PBC), as results indicate these components as positive predictors of the intention to use the EDL. Attitudes could be addressed through clear and persuasive communication, focusing on the benefits and successful outcomes of the EDL implementation. This could be done by piloting the EDL for joint programmes that already meet the EDL criteria (i.e., Erasmus Mundus programmes) and sharing them as case studies, together with testimonials and data on the positive impact correlated with the EDL implementation. In relation to the Perceived Behavioural Control, this predictor could be addressed by strategies aimed at developing skills, providing resources, and addressing specific institutional barriers to implementing the EDL. This could be done by providing comprehensive training sessions, clear guidelines for implementation, and ongoing support throughout the process.

While subjective norms (SN) were not a significant predictor in this context, efforts to build a stronger community of practice around the EDL could indirectly influence intentions by creating a normative expectation of participation and excellence in international education standards. The norms can manifest in various dimensions, including attitudes towards internationalisation, the balance between tradition and innovation, the interplay of collaboration and competition, peer influence, and addressing the role of leadership. Normative pressures within the academic community could also be tackled by focusing on the Attitudes and Perceived Behavioural Control dimensions, addressing the compliance with perceived standards, the desire to enhance institutional image and prestige, potential funding and resource allocation, responding to stakeholder expectations, and the level of internal consensus and alignment. Overall, in relation to the Subjective Norms dimension, a more individualised communication strategy and individual/institutional empowerment could be more effective, particularly when compared to strategies such as peer influence or top-down mandates, which are less likely to be successful.

Future research could explore a broader geographical scope, comparative studies or an impact analysis (following the EDL adoption), employ longitudinal designs, broaden the scope of investigated factors, use more diverse samples, or develop more nuanced measures of subjective norms to overcome the limitations and enhance our understanding of the factors influencing the adoption of initiatives such as the European Degree Label.

The European Degree Label (EDL) is seen as a pivotal initiative to enhance the quality, mobility, and recognition of higher education credentials across Europe, capitalising on and broadening the scope of the Bologna Process by fostering quality, mobility, and acknowledgement of higher education credentials across Europe. In this paper, we used Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour, which provided the framework to better understand the relationship between stakeholders' attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control, and their intentions towards adopting the EDL. Our findings indicate that positive attitudes towards the EDL and perceived behavioural control appear to be significant predictors of the intention to adopt and implement the EDL. However, they also point out challenges such as resource allocation, diversity in higher education systems, or maintaining institutional autonomy, among others. The paper also focuses on potential strategies to help the deployment of the EDL, stemming from piloting the EDL and providing clear communication on case studies and data supporting EDL's positive impact to offering comprehensive training and clear guidelines for implementation. Moreover, given the results in relation to social norms, our findings indicate the focus should be on more personalised communication and empowerment, addressing a potentially more individualistic organisational culture of higher education institutions.

Therefore, the recommendations are addressed at both practice and policy, as well as individual and organisational levels. While not intending to generalise the findings, these recommendations could serve as initial guidance for policymakers, educators, and institutions as they continue to reshape the future of higher education in Europe and beyond.

Sub-theme: 4. Digitalisation and the Future of European Higher Education: Implications for Public Policies.

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Innovative Teaching and Learning Towards a Sustainable and Effective Student-Centered Learning (Coordinated by Maria Kelo and Romiţă Iucu)

Learning and Teaching and the Student-Centred Approach. New Perspectives on the Oldest Bologna Process Priority

Maria Kelo and Romiţă Iucu

Abstract The Bologna Process has made, among other impactful and meaningful changes, a Copernican revolution in academic learning, placing the students at the academic teaching universe's centre. This paper examines the influence of the Bologna Process on promoting student-centred learning (SCL) in European higher education. The Bologna Process, established in 1999, aimed to standardise qualifications and create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA). While achieving these goals, it also spurred a shift towards learning outcomes, paving the way for a more student-centred approach. The paper explores the gradual integration of SCL into the Bologna Process framework, starting with a focus on learning outcomes and culminating in ministerial communiqués promoting student-centred teaching methods and inclusive learning environments. Challenges remain, particularly in measuring the effectiveness of SCL and ensuring faculty development for its successful implementation. Yet, the paper concludes that the Bologna Process has significantly impacted learning and teaching practices by promoting a cultural shift towards a student-centred approach in European universities, showcasing the active participation of higher education institutions in enhancing student engagement, learning outcomes transparency and relevance, as well as overall satisfaction and well-being.

Keywords Bologna process · Student-centred learning · Bologna tools · Learning and teaching

1 Learning and Teaching in the Bologna Process

Learning and teaching are amongst the strongest ideas of educational philosophy which strategically accompany the ministerial communiqués of the Bologna Process

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and its related tools. Great investment in higher education, which occurred through the design and application of the Bologna Process in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) member countries and beyond, has reached a global dimension and the reverberations of this intergovernmental process, including learning and teaching as a strategical initiative, further transforming the history of the city. The need for harmonisation and compatibility, ultimately and strategically, could be described as a redesigning political process, dynamically attached to deeper educational changes and reforms (including transforming learning and teaching).

Learning and teaching are a foundational element of the entire Bologna Process. They permeate all reform areas—and, in some sense—all reform areas are in the service of better learning and teaching in the EHEA. The degree structure, qualifications frameworks, quality assurance, and recognition practices are all in place to ensure high-quality higher education for all students and to facilitate mobility with the EHEA in the pursuit of enhanced learning experiences. Teaching and learning permeate and justify the EHEA 2030 vision, expressed in the Rome ministerial communiqué (2020) through "three I's": inclusive, innovative, and interconnected EHEA. Inclusive, because "every learner will have equitable access to higher education and will be fully supported in completing their studies and training"; innovative, because it will "introduce new and better aligned learning teaching and assessment methods and practices, closely linked to research" (Bologna Process, 2020); interconnected, because the "shared frameworks and tools will continue to facilitate and enhance international cooperation and reform, exchange of knowledge and mobility of staff and students" (Bologna Process, 2020). The role and relevance of learning and teaching are particularly clear for an inclusive and innovative EHEA, and it could be argued that, indeed, it provides the link between the two: only through innovative and well-designed learning, teaching, and assessment will the objective of an inclusive EHEA be reached. Interconnectedness will allow to reap the benefits of international cooperation and mobility, such as different forms of internationalisation at home (or "virtual mobility"), collaborative education provision such as joint programmes or micro-credentials to ensure mutual learning and exposure to different ways of learning and teaching.

Demonstrating the strength of its political message, twenty-five years after its inception, the Bologna Process has become an authoritative reference and component of internationalisation in higher education institutions, including mobility and recognition of credits and degrees, but also a strong and reliable promoter of high-quality teaching and learning in Europe. In the end, what has been achieved through this process has been the synchronisation and transparency of institutional development, with a focus on both structural and curricular dimensions.

Indeed, from a pedagogical point of view, we can argue that the Bologna Process has brought about a reinvigoration and restructuring of learning, not through advanced tools and techniques but through an appropriate curricular redefinition, although the entire legal and regulatory referential of the Bologna Process (deeply structurally and quantitatively oriented) has been enriched with this new initiative (New Strategy for the European Universities) focused on a deepening of academic learning. Nevertheless, the new pedagogical idea that can be drawn from the whole dynamic of integrated actions is that an academic curriculum focused on learning outcomes, competences, attitudes, and skills, adapted to a teaching strategy, is likely to boost student motivation, student commitments to learning and to recognise mobility as an instrument for global promotion.

Learning and teaching are not directly connected to structural reform processes, so the discussion of learning and teaching in the Bologna Process, although important, is less tangible and harder to quantify in terms of procedures, implementing measures, or specific instruments (conformity). Indeed, a successful shift in learning and teaching towards a more student-centred approach while requiring support from different levels, including national authorities, policies, and funding, happens in the classroom. It is thus more difficult to monitor, regularise, and implement comprehensively across all systems within the EHEA.

2 Student-Centred Learning in the Bologna Process's Historical Context

Perhaps because of this, the BFUG working group on learning and teaching is proposing that the next work period in the Bologna Process should include a thematic peer group (TPG) on student-centred learning. Student-centred learning, together with the development of academic staff and fostering of innovation in learning and teaching, were among the key elements addressed in the work of the working group in the period of 2020–2024.

Student-centred learning was not a specific thematic area in the Bologna Process from the onset. However, as stated above, most Bologna Process tools have been set up to address and enable high-quality student-centred learning. Also, many of the ministerial conference communiqués over the years have reaffirmed the importance of the educational mission of universities.

Student-centred learning was fully integrated into the process in the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué, in 2009, which reasserted the importance of the teaching mission of higher education institutions and the need for reforming curricula to integrate the concept of learning outcomes in order to achieve high-quality, flexible and more individually tailored education paths. The communique stated that:

> [The ministers] ask the higher education institutions to pay particular attention to improving the teaching quality of their study programmes at all levels. This should be a priority in the further implementation of the European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance (Bologna Process, 2009).

With the Bucharest Communiqué (2012), the Ministers reiterated their commitment to "Establish conditions that foster student-centred learning, innovative teaching methods and a supportive and inspiring working and learning environment, while continuing to involve students and staff in governance structures at all levels" (Bologna Process, 2012).

In the *Yerevan Communiqué (2015),* the Ministers promised to "encourage and support higher education institutions and staff in promoting pedagogical innovation in student-centred learning environments and in fully exploiting the potential benefits of digital technologies for learning and teaching" (Bologna Process, 2015). The integration of a new standard (1_3) in the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (the "ESG") gave a further boost to discussions on and implementation of student-centred learning across the EHEA. The inclusion of SCL into quality assurance processes led to the need to further define the concept of SCL, as well as how it can best be taken up in policies at different levels. Its monitoring and the use of meaningful indicators have created debate, which has not yet come to a definite conclusion. While a minimum of common understanding of the concept is necessary, it could be argued that, if student-centred learning needs to be highly context sensitive, attuned to the different needs of an ever more diverse student body, and addressed through innovative teaching and assessment methods, standardising the details of SCL beyond the basic concepts may be counterproductive.

The key to a successful adoption of a student-centred approach needs sufficiently flexible regulatory frameworks that allow for innovative approaches, from the use of technology to interdisciplinarity, new and perhaps unconventional forms of assessment, and learning in a flexible manner, including through projects, micro-credentials, and other forms of flexible learning. This will need to be supported by national policies, a European framework that supports sharing good practice and mutual learning, and by institutional policies and support to teachers.

3 Student-Centred Learning: A Multi-dimensional and Policy-Oriented Approach

In this topical framework of recognising learning and teaching focused on student-centred approach, new directions in the redesign of educational provision are pointing towards increasingly inclusive components which meet the needs of a broad category of beneficiaries through key concepts such as integrated physical, digital and mixed mobility (Iucu et al., 2022; Ubachs & Henderikx, 2018), innovative pedagogies (Ciolan et al., 2021; Averill & Major, 2020; Walder, 2014), modularisation (Sood et al., 2020), micro-learning (Iucu et al., 2021; Cari et al., 2023; McGreal & Olcott, 2022).

In a reformulation of the well-known statement by John Dewey, an American educationalist, education should give a chance to achieve the students' maximum potential, make them oriented towards something more profound, but also more generous in spirit academic institutions should offer students equal opportunities for unequal development, precisely in the sense that each student is able to reach the maximum potential of his or her own performance and aspirations (Dewey, 1916).

The policy focus in the Bologna Process on a student-centred approach has given a boost to educational reform and change. An inclusive classroom, in which students with different learning readiness and motivation are integrated, would not have been conceivable to this degree 20 or 30 years ago. This change, albeit slowly implemented in practice, demonstrates the important impact of the Bologna Process. It has supported the evolution of the student-centred learning paradigm from philosophy to principles, regulations and recommendations, and then to concrete objectives of teaching and learning practices that enable each student to achieve their highest potential: *from equal chances to access in higher education to unequal chances to success in higher education*. It is important to support deep learning by giving real feedback, centre learning on evidence, and work on the interactive area of learning through responsible and inclusive classroom and well-designed group and classroom management. These elements will produce motivation, well-being, and long-term commitment.

The main challenges and particularities linked to the student-centred approach in the new academic context could be listed as follows:

- The student profile is strongly marked by digitisation. "Digital natives" require adapted educational assistance. This does not mean that the educational institution will allow imbalances to be created, but it will rather be prepared to offer varied learning situations which are also focused on interaction, communication, participation, and mutual understanding. Today's young people have, in accordance with our observation in the classroom, a low level of empathy and understanding of each other's feelings. It is thus necessary to build special learning situations that will reinsert them into the dynamics of the real-life environment.
- The management of educational crisis situations in the classroom requires a new type of management of the group of learners based on interactive educational contexts instead of algorithmic tasks and evaluation. Student interactions, participation, task management, and academic and research responsibility need to be stimulated through specific approaches.
- Students' motivation is an important indicator of academic success and real-life success (according to our intensive interpersonal relations and learning experiences shared with different categories of students). Motivation monitoring should start from pre-university level: "demotivated" pupils in the pre-university education will become tomorrow's students at universities who will require remedial and assistance programs.
- There is a need to diversify the educational offer and create appealing learning environments so that formal dimensions of learning and teaching are gradually left aside and replaced by non-formal and informal methods. The "outdoor education" must become a normality for both students and teachers.

A second way to tackle this topic is to identify how the change in the academic staff/educators' role, attitude, and educational style could lead to a new approach of "visible learning" at the university, based on thoughtfulness. Changing the role of university teachers to teaching facilitators able to create learning circumstances adapted to the students' needs will become a vital requirement for the educational interactions of the future. Students' deep motivation is based on the teachers' freedom to create learning situations, investigate real-life situations, ask students to share their opinions and views, and stimulate the students' capacity for critical reflection.

The Paris Communiqué (2018) underlines that "as high-quality teaching is essential in fostering high-quality education, academic career progression should be built on successful research and quality teaching. It should also take due account of the broader contribution to society. We will promote and support institutional, national, and European initiatives for pedagogical training, continuous professional development of higher education teachers and explore ways for better recognition of high quality and innovative teaching in their career" (Bologna Process, 2018).

Naturally, the process of training and professionalisation of academic staff is an increasing priority for all higher education institutions. The future of the professionalisation in the teaching career will depend on their capacity to work in large teams (rather than small teams or through individual skill). The important question is thus how the continuing professional development of teachers is organised and whether those activities have an impact on the teachers' ability to ensure a strongly student-centred approach in higher education.

Organising impactful continuing professional development is not a very easy task at the institutional level due to the strong orientation of the academic culture to research credentials. In addition, research-related credentials are more operationalised, easier to evaluate, and—based often on numerical data—more accurate from the scientometrical perspective. Despite that, Professor Sir Roderick Floud, SCSS Chair, emphasised that "There is no contradiction between the imperative of good teaching and the imperative of research which critiques, refines, discards and advances human knowledge and understanding. Good teaching, in many subject areas, is only good to the extent that it is informed by the latest research. A good teacher, like a good graduate, is also an active learner, questioner and critical thinker." (Pleschová et al., 2012)

However, the strong orientation towards research in academic careers is not universal. It is rather concentrated among the most research-intensive institutions that compete for a significant share of national and international research funding, higher positions in global university rankings, and to attract top researchers and students. Institutions and staff working in such institutions are drawn to invest heavily in research, which is then reflected in career appraisals (Kwiek, 2019). This idea has been emphasised in the latest report released by the OCED on the state of academic careers in OECD countries (OECD, 2024).

4 EUA Learning and Teaching Forum—Some Outcomes

Starting from 2017, EUA has organised a large event dedicated to learning and teaching every year. The Paris Communiqué (2018) acknowledged this by stating that: "The success of the European Learning and Teaching Forum launched by the European University Association last year demonstrates the value and potential of collaboration in learning and teaching, with tangible benefits for higher education institutions, staff and students. Therefore, in addition to measures at national level, we will develop joint European initiatives to support and stimulate a wide range of innovative learning and teaching practices, building on existing good practice in our countries and beyond" (Bologna Process, 2018).

EUA, the promoter of this initiative, believes that universities must drive developments in learning and teaching, and this requires close collaboration with all major stakeholder groups, including national and European policymakers. To support the endeavour, EUA conducts several initiatives aimed at establishing a European dimension of higher education learning and teaching. The initiatives include knowledge-building activities and studies, institutional development and peer learning, as well as related policy statements and recommendations.

And in this context, the conclusion comes naturally: *when a competition about L&T is starting, the final winner will definitely be the student!* even if we prefer collaboration and cooperation as constitutive values of the learning environment in nowadays university.

In this context, some rhetorical questions could be raised: *Can learning (the only element, according to the experts, that has not been the same since the Covid crisis, being dramatically changed) remain a strong resistance factor for the continuity of educational processes?* Can unlearning and relearning be the best predictors, mediators, and facilitators for creating a state of readiness/preparedness to manage future turbulent situations in formal and non-formal learning spaces? Are higher education institutions and academic staff aware of these developments and prepared to face the challenges derived from them: reconsidering formal aspects of curriculum and educational interactions, opening alternative academic routes based on micro-learning for both traditional and non-traditional students, implementing innovative pedagogies that are more agile and flexible for complementary learning and relearning processes?

We believe that the future of academic education should provide transformative learning components for students, building a multifaceted, structural, and modular educational offer focused on students' needs and based on the micro-credential philosophies. All these priorities will embrace a huge variety of new ways of learning and teaching through different activities: participative learning, challenged based learning, civic engagement and learning, global awareness, and critical thinking, strongly oriented to practicalities required according to the students' needs.

5 Student-Centred Approach—Following the Authors' Different Perspectives

The papers in this section address specific topics related to SCL, from training of teachers to innovative learning and teaching methods and their effectiveness in achieving the learning outcomes. The conference papers on student-centred learning (SCL) in higher education offer valuable insights into the current state and future directions of this pedagogical approach. This analysis delves into the key themes that emerged, focusing on the growing momentum for SCL, the crucial role of faculty development, the challenges of measuring effectiveness, and the potential of innovative approaches.

One of the most striking takeaways from the papers is the growing recognition of the importance of SCL within higher education institutions. The work by Mladenovici et al. on the Center for Academic Development (CAD) at the West University of Timişoara serves as a leading example. CAD's comprehensive suite of programs—workshops, long-term training, and international collaborations—exemplifies a proactive approach to equipping faculty members with the knowledge and skills to implement SCL practices. Their success story, as highlighted in the paper, underscores the critical role that faculty development plays in driving the adoption of SCL across universities.

However, the papers also highlight the challenges associated with implementing SCL effectively. A major hurdle identified, particularly in the work by Glava et al. 2024, is the difficulty of measuring its effectiveness. Traditional assessment methods, often reliant on exams and standardised testing, may not adequately capture the complex learning outcomes associated with student-centred approaches. These approaches often prioritise critical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving skills, which are not easily measured through a single test. The research emphasises the need for innovative quality assurance strategies. Moving beyond metrics like exam scores, these strategies should explore aspects like student engagement, ownership of learning, and the development of critical thinking skills. Determining these factors requires a more holistic approach that might involve qualitative assessments like student surveys, peer evaluations, and self-reflection exercises.

Intriguingly, the research by Ilie et al. 2024 explores the potential of instructional models (IMs) to enhance student engagement within SCL environments. IMs provide frameworks for structuring lessons, ensuring that key elements are covered and creating a more organised learning experience. Their research suggests that workshops teaching these models to faculty can lead to improvements in student perceptions of teaching effectiveness. This finding suggests a potential pathway for enhancing student engagement. By providing structure and clear learning objectives, IMs can empower students to navigate the learning process more actively and contribute meaningfully to classroom discussions.

The narrative that emerges from the papers extends beyond just implementing SCL practices. It highlights the importance of fostering a culture that embraces these approaches. This includes creating inclusive learning environments that cater to diverse student backgrounds and learning styles. The research by Marin and Katsampoxaki-Hodgetts emphasises the importance of well-planned pedagogical approaches, equal access to learning resources, and a safe learning environment. Furthermore, valuing diverse backgrounds and allowing for student discussions can promote engagement and a sense of ownership. By prioritising inclusivity, institutions can ensure that all students have the opportunity to thrive in an SCL environment.

In conclusion, the reviewed research on student-centred learning paints a picture of a dynamic and evolving landscape within higher education. Institutions are actively exploring ways to implement SCL practices, recognising the potential to enhance student engagement, learning outcomes, and overall satisfaction. While challenges remain, particularly in developing robust assessment methods, the potential benefits are undeniable. Faculty development programs like those offered by CAD, coupled with innovative approaches such as instructional models, offer valuable tools for faculty members as they navigate the transition towards student-centred classrooms. The future of higher education appears to be moving towards a more collaborative and engaging learning experience, where students are active participants in the construction of knowledge. Continued exploration and collaboration between researchers, faculty members, and institutions will be crucial in making this vision a reality.

6 Student-Centred Approach—Following a Critical Thinking Perspective

A list of reflective questions could also be added to the previous ones, following the deep and broad overall picture of the Bologna Process message concerning student centricity in higher education.

- How do academic staff at all levels, including researchers who provide pedagogical activities, perceive the student-centred approach, and what impact does it have on academic content, teaching strategies, teaching style, learning readiness of students, and quality of learning through evaluation?
- What are the main challenges faced by universities in the development and implementation of a student-centred approach, and how can these challenges be addressed?
- How can universities effectively engage students in the process of promoting a student-centred perspective to ensure the continuous improvement and relevance of new ways of learning and teaching?
- What challenges do universities and their academic staff face in developing learning experiences which are stressing the students' role and involvement? and What strategies, good practices, and policy recommendations can be identified to enhance collaboration with students, ensuring alignment with students' needs, benefits, and advantages?
- What policy recommendations can be formulated to enhance the role of universities, academic staff, and students in the development of an institutional environment that promotes a student-centred approach? and How can these recommendations be effectively communicated to relevant stakeholders and policymakers?

The rise of student-centred learning in higher education has sparked a lively exchange among faculty, researchers, and policymakers. This approach, emphasising active student participation, presents both challenges and opportunities for universities. Let's explore faculty perceptions, the impact on learning, and strategies for navigating this pedagogical shift. Faculty members, including researcher-teachers, hold diverse views on SCL. Some embrace its potential to boost student engagement and learning, while others express concerns about workload, faculty development needs, or suitability for specific disciplines.

SCL can significantly impact academic content, teaching strategies, and styles. Content delivery often transitions from knowledge transmission to nurturing skills like critical thinking and communication. Teaching strategies evolve to include active learning techniques like discussions and projects. Teaching styles become more interactive and facilitative, encouraging student participation and fostering collaboration. This shift can affect students' learning readiness. Students accustomed to passive learning might initially struggle. However, with proper guidance and support, SCL can improve student motivation, ownership of learning, and ultimately, the quality of learning assessed through a wider range of evaluations beyond traditional exams.

7 Challenges and Solutions for Moving Forward

Several challenges exist in developing and implementing SCL:

- **Faculty Development**: Equipping faculty with the skills to design and deliver effective SCA experiences is crucial. Programs focusing on active learning techniques and assessment are needed.
- **Assessment and Evaluation**: Traditional exams may not capture the complex learning outcomes of SCL. Developing a balanced assessment system that includes formative assessments, self-reflection exercises, and peer evaluations is essential.
- **Resources**: Implementing SCL effectively may require a smaller class size and access to appropriate resources like collaborative learning spaces and technology.

8 Strategies for Collaboration and Student Engagement

Universities can effectively engage students by:

- **Curriculum Design Involvement**: Student feedback can shape course content and ensure alignment with their needs.
- **Student-Led Initiatives**: Encouraging student-led workshops and research projects fosters ownership and collaboration.
- **Feedback Culture**: Creating opportunities for student feedback on the learning experience is key to the continuous improvement of SCL practices.

9 Collaboration for a Student-Centred Future

Effective collaboration is essential to ensure alignment with student needs. Here are some strategies:

- **Joint Committees**: Establish committees where students, faculty, and administrators discuss SCL implementation and development.
- **Peer Mentoring Programs**: Empower senior students to mentor new students, facilitating their transition to a student-centred learning environment.
- **Student Surveys**: Conduct regular surveys to gather student feedback and suggestions for improving teaching and learning practices.

10 Policy Recommendations for a Student-Centred Future

To create an institutional environment promoting SCL, consider these policy recommendations:

- **Invest in Faculty Development**: Allocate resources for ongoing training programs in SCL practices.
- **Review and Revise Assessment**: Develop a more balanced assessment system that incorporates diverse methods.
- **Promote Student Engagement**: Encourage and incentivise student participation in curriculum development, provide resources for student-led initiatives, and create open communication channels for feedback exchange.
- **Allocate Resources**: Invest in technology tools and collaborative learning spaces that support interactive and active learning experiences.

By implementing these recommendations and fostering collaboration, universities can create a vibrant, student-centred learning environment that equips graduates with the skills and knowledge necessary to thrive in an ever-changing world.

11 Conclusions and Key Messages

The Bologna Process, a cornerstone initiative in European higher education, has significantly impacted learning and teaching practices. Its influence goes beyond harmonising qualifications, fundamentally reshaping how universities approach pedagogy. This paper explores the role of the Bologna Process in promoting a student-centred approach, placing learners at the heart of the academic experience. The Bologna Process, launched in 1999, implemented reforms creating a European Higher Education Area (EHEA). These reforms include a standardised degree structure and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). While these are crucial, the true impact of the EHEA lies in its emphasis on learning outcomes. By shifting the focus from content to demonstrable skills and knowledge acquisition, the process laid the groundwork for a shift in pedagogical approaches.

Student-centred learning was not initially enshrined in the EHEA framework. However, the emphasis on learning outcomes fostered a curriculum redesign that prioritised active learning experiences. Ministerial communiqués progressively acknowledged the importance of SCL, with the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué (2009) emphasising teaching strategies aligned with learning outcomes. Subsequent communiqués reinforced this commitment, encouraging universities to create supportive learning environments and foster innovation in teaching methods. Despite growing recognition, challenges impede full implementation. One key issue is measuring effectiveness. Traditional assessment methods struggle to capture the complex learning outcomes of SCL, which prioritise critical thinking and problem-solving skills. As highlighted by Glava et al. (2024), innovative quality assurance strategies are needed that move beyond metrics and explore aspects like student engagement and critical thinking development. This necessitates a more holistic approach involving qualitative assessments.

Faculty development also plays a critical role. Programs like the Centre for Academic Development (CAD) offer workshops to equip faculty with the skills to design and implement effective student-centred practices. The success of such programs underscores the importance of faculty development in driving the adoption of SCL across universities. A thriving SCL environment must be inclusive, catering to diverse student backgrounds and learning styles. Research by Marin and Katsampoxaki-Hodgetts (2024) emphasises the importance of well-planned pedagogical approaches, equal access to learning resources, and a safe learning environment. Valuing diverse perspectives and fostering student participation in discussions can further promote engagement and a sense of ownership.

The impact of the Bologna Process on student-centred learning extends beyond specific methods. It has fostered a cultural shift within universities, emphasising the importance of creating a learning environment where students are active participants in constructing knowledge. Research by Ilie et al. (2024) suggests that instructional models (IMs) can empower students to navigate the learning process more actively and contribute meaningfully to discussions. The research landscape around student-centred learning paints a picture of a dynamic and evolving landscape within higher education. Institutions are actively exploring ways to implement SCL practices, recognising their potential to enhance student engagement, learning outcomes, and overall satisfaction. Faculty development programs coupled with innovative approaches like instructional models offer valuable tools for faculty members transitioning towards student-centred classrooms. Continued exploration and collaboration will be crucial in realising this vision of a more collaborative and engaging learning experience. The Bologna Process has initiated a dramatic shift in academic learning, similar to the Copernican revolution. By placing students at the centre, the Bologna Process has fundamentally changed the way we view and approach higher education. While challenges remain, the potential benefits of SCL are undeniable. Universities that embrace a student-centred approach are well-positioned to equip their students with the skills and knowledge needed to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

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Academics at the Core of Student-Centered Teaching and Learning: Lessons Learned From the Experience of the Center of Academic Development of the West University of Timisoara

Velibor Mladenovici, Mădălin O. Bunoiu, and Marian D. Ilie

Abstract Implementing the Bologna Process in European universities has faced many challenges, especially in Eastern countries where the academic modus operandi was mainly teacher-centered. Thus, substantial resources have been invested in building academic development units to promote sustainable and effective student-centered learning. This paper presents the work of the Center of Academic Development (CAD) of the West University of Timisoara (WUT), Romania. The activities implemented by the CAD to stimulate effective student-centered teaching and learning and their institutional impact are further detailed. CAD started its activity in July 2016 by employing a need analysis to identify topics of interest, academic availability, and requirements for future pedagogical training activities. Next, the CAD team successfully implemented several projects funded by national entities of around 2 million euros, training around 1364 academics from five Romanian universities. Also, the CAD team developed the Reflexive—Collaborative instructional model, which later was promoted by the Rector of WUT as the university Teaching and Learning Brand and adopted as the main theoretical framework of the CAD training initiatives. Implications for academic developers, researchers, experts, and policymakers are discussed.

Keywords Academic development · Bologna Process · Instructional model · Student-centered teaching and learning

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1 Introduction

Over time, societal challenges have become increasingly complex and have required a paradigm shift in the general modus operandi, including teaching and learning in higher education (HE). As knowledge capacity building became more central concerning policy importance for governments and with many other stringent issues to be tackled (e.g., the massification of HE and underfunding), with a legacy that traces back to the 1960s, academic development emerged as a major element in the work of universities (Grant et al., 2009). Academic development, also called faculty, educational, or instructional development, has the creation of supportive conditions for instruction and learning as its primary aim (Sugrue et al., 2018). Even if the most observable tasks of academic development units relate to the academics' professional development, teaching strategy and quality assurance policy enhancement, stimulation of academic involvement, or implementation of educational technologies are some of the other duties of academic developers (Gosling, 2009).

Complementary to the evolution of academic development approaches, as academics' teaching enhancement received more and more attention, student-centered learning (SCL) emerged as a central teaching and learning paradigm in plenty of HE institutions worldwide (Klemenčič, 2017). In Europe, the SCL started to advance, mainly due to the proliferation of the Bologna Process (Bologna Declaration, 1999). The SCL was first introduced by this title into policy documents in 2007 (London Communiqué, 2007) when it was clearly stated that the transition from a teacher-centered toward a student-centered HE is one of the primary outcomes expected to be achieved via the Bologna Process. As SCL is associated with many positive student outcomes (e.g., student deep learning strategies and engagement, student agency, etc.), it was adopted and promoted in many national and international policy agendas (Klemenčič, 2017).

It is well-known that the efficacy of SCL is impacted by student-centered pedagogical practices of academics (Entwistle, 2009). When teaching staff approach their instruction in a SCL manner, it is more probable that their students will meaningfully engage in their learning process and adopt more critical and reflective study practices (i.e., deep learning approaches, Uiboleht et al., 2018). On the contrary, students tend to adopt unreflective study behaviors such as selective memorization and reproduction (i.e., surface learning approach) when academics adopt content- or teacher-centered approaches, focusing excessively on knowledge transmission (Prosser & Trigwell, 2014).

Academics' student-centered teaching behaviors are essential as they facilitate students' quality learning. In their meta-analysis, Schneider and Preckel (2017) concluded that well-prepared academics (i.e., that invest substantial time and effort in designing their instructional approach) have robust premises to help their students achieve high outcomes. Therefore, as promoted by the SCL paradigm, academics should have an evolved understanding concerning the initiation and management of teaching to promote desirable student learning processes. Consequently, one paramount goal of pedagogical development activities and programs for teaching staff is to stimulate their behaviors toward adopting more student-centered teaching approaches (Hicks et al., 2010).

1.1 Centers for Academic Development as Institutional Change Agents

To reinforce teaching and learning towards SCL, centers for academic development (also known as educational development centers or centers for teaching excellence, teaching, and learning, or instructional development centers) have been created in most universities worldwide (Stes & Van Petegem, 2011). Academic development centers are institutional change agents in many areas (Diamond, 2005). Those centers support academics and promote institutional initiatives by connecting disciplines, resources, and educational components (Wright et al., 2018). Generally, academic development centers know much about working with academic leaders and faculty in many areas, from determining the instructional needs to assisting academics in working collaboratively, stimulating discussions and occasions to enable curricular advancement, and procuring help to sustain follow-up and enactment of transformations (Cook & Kaplan, 2023).

There is a wide range of topics that academic development centers are trying to develop, as well as plenty of change mechanisms such as developing individual teachers (e.g., academics' practice, thinking, motivation), groups of teachers (e.g., communities of practice), learning environments, developing the institutions (e.g., facilities that support teaching, like educational policies, institutional strategy or pedagogy), developing quality assurance systems, undertaking educational research, or supporting the scholarships of teaching across the university (Gibbs, 2013). Nevertheless, given HE institutions' rapidly changing environment and strategic objectives from the 1960s until nowadays, the role of academic developers and the activities of academic development centers are in continual restructuring (Stensaker, 2018). On the one hand, academic development centers' staff (i.e., academic developers) are usually recruited based on their higher pedagogical competencies (Lee et al., 2010). Most often, academic development centers support teaching and learning through (i) short-term and long-term professional development activities for teaching staff related to instruction and learning (e.g., workshops and courses); (ii) initial training of debutant (or novice) academics (e.g., via a post-graduate certificate); (iii) continuous training for academics with teaching responsibilities (Gosling, 2009). On the other hand, some centers (especially the oldest ones) have been created with a strong research focus (Gosling, 2009). This is one of the enduring dilemmas in academic development as some centers consider research a symbol of academic credibility, and academic developers must be good researchers and instructors (Lee et al., 2010). Another dilemma relates to the involvement in the political agenda; some centers mediate between the policymakers (including university administration) and the teaching departments or faculties (Clegg, 2009). In higher education settings where research is valued, a consistent research agenda of an academic development center can significantly increase its visibility and credibility by promoting evidence-based pedagogical programs for university teachers and policies for fostering and assuring high-quality teaching. Also, the involvement of academic developers in research activities can be favorable for disseminating good academic development practices and building collaborations across various other centers at the national and international levels. These dilemmas emphasize the added value academic developers can bring while highlighting the demands associated with their complex roles and the strain they can place on resources. Therefore, academic developers need consistent institutional support, such as recognition of their roles, time and resource allocation, or ethical guidelines to help them make decisions when facing conflicts of interest (e.g., between policy requests and pedagogical principles).

1.2 Current Practices of the Academic Development Centers Across Europe

Nowadays, it is rare for any medium-sized HE institution not to have an academic development center in countries like Australia, Canada, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway, the UK, or the USA. Even in smaller professional HE institutes or colleges, the education development function is present despite requiring additional resources for an independent center (Gosling, 2009). According to Hicks et al. (2010), academics' professional development can be split into four main areas: 1. embedding a student-centered teaching approach; 2. developing and assembling networks and connections; 3. encouraging the scholarship of teaching; and 4. familiarizing teaching staff with institutional procedures and policies. Out of these main areas, research has mainly focused on how formal pedagogical training can enhance the student-centered teaching approaches of academics (Kálmán et al., 2020). Also, under the umbrella of SCL, the development of SCL in HE has followed a few lines of research imposed by some central pedagogical approaches, such as evidence-based or project-based learning (Damşa et al., 2015). Given the substantial diversity within the academic development domain, a one-size-fits-all strategy would be highly unsuitable (Austin & Sorcinelli, 2013). Consequently, we should look at the academic development centers' activities in some of the best universities promoting SCL in Europe. Next, we will detail the activities of three such centers.

At the University of Oslo (UiO), Norway, under the coordination of the university board, there is a cross-faculty and multidisciplinary center named **LINK** (i.e., ***Centre for Learning, Innovation & Academic Development***). LINK ensures knowledge sharing, creates networks across subjects and disciplines, and develops teaching expertise to increase students' learning outcomes. Some of the main areas of activity relate to learning and teaching, digitalization, research and development projects, and content production (i.e., video and media). According to its website, LINK has a staff of 25 members with heterogenous specializations. In the last decades, most of the LINK's members contributed to the evolution of several research domains of SCL (e.g., collaborative learning, agency, and learning ecologies—Damşa et al. 2010 or assessment and feedback in HE–Esterhazy and Dama 2019).

Regarding AD, the LINK's most complex activity is the Program for Basic Competence in University Pedagogy for academic staff with permanent positions at the UiO. This program cumulates 200 h, divided into two semesters, and aims to develop essential academic competence in HE pedagogy (i.e., by combining pedagogical theory and immersive practical activities, peer mentoring, and promoting a collaborative exchange of experiences among the participants). Additionally, LINK creates and disseminates resources that are openly available in Norwegian and English and can be used for inspiration and university pedagogical development.

Centre for University Teaching and Learning (HYPE) of the University of Helsinki, Finland, plays a substantial role in enhancing SCL via a research-based approach by supplying pedagogical support to all academics from all the university's faculties. HYPE collaborates with the faculties to identify the teaching needs, design, and implement pedagogical programs, and assess the impact of all the implemented initiatives. HYPE has around 40 members (e.g., one Director, full professors, planning officers, lecturers, doctoral and post-doctoral researchers) administratively located at the Faculty of Educational Sciences. HYPE also has a clear research agenda, invested in the research of academics' and students' well-being, active learning, learning-centered teaching, and transformations in HE and other educational contexts.

To provide academics from the university with high-quality research-based training in HE pedagogy, HYPE's staff constantly improve their expertise in instruction and AD, creating enduring national and international collaboration in HE. One noteworthy national collaboration is "The Wellbeing Project" (https://wellbeing-project.org/), which examines the interactions between academics' pedagogical competencies (i.e., learning-focused teaching and the quality of teacher-student interaction) and well-being and addresses academics from nine Finnish universities. Throughout the years, the work and innovations carried out by the members of HYPE brought significant empirical and theoretical contributions to different components of the SCL process (e.g., enhancement of pedagogical training and academics' teaching approaches—Postareff et al. (2023); or students' learning approaches—Parpala et al. (2010)).

The Antwerp School of Education (ASoE) is an academic center (i.e., umbrella center) of expertise within the University of Antwerp. The ASoE aims to transfer evidence-based knowledge on subject-specific and general educational research to practitioners. While the *Centre of Expertise for Higher Education* (ECHO) and the *Centre for Teacher Professional Development* are accountable for the valorization of research into practice, two other groups (i.e., *Didactica* and *Edubron*) are responsible for the different areas of educational research.

The accountability for the expansion and modernization of teaching at the University of Antwerp and the other colleges from the Antwerp University Association rests with *The Centre of Expertise for Higher Education* (ECHO). ECHO organizes both training courses (e.g., lecturer and assistant training, tailor-made sessions, introductory course in basics of teaching for debutant academics, assessment and feedback in HE, discussions of the courses' design) and non-Echo courses (i.e., informative sessions regarding other courses provided by Antwerp's University support services like HR department or Antwerp Doctoral School). Like LINK and HYPE, the ASoE, through its members, brings yearly significant empirical evidence about many components of the educational process (i.e., effectiveness of pedagogical programs for academics—e.g., Stes and Van Petegem (2011); student's self-efficacy and decision making, diversity and inclusive education, etc.).

There are many other mention-worthy centers across Europe with practical and innovative academic development initiatives both in terms of educational activities and research on vanguardist topics such as digital education, artificial intelligence in teaching and learning, or curriculum co-development that enrich students' learning outcomes and experiences (e.g., Maastricht University Centre for Teaching & Learning—EDLAB, The Netherlands or Teaching and Learning Center of the Oxford University, UK). Notable credits for developments and innovations in teacher and student learning in SCL environments should also be given to HE units like the Eindhoven School of Education of the Eindhoven University of Technology and their leaders and researchers. One remarkable example of leadership and pedagogical innovation is Professor Jan Vermunt's activity. Professor Vermunt significantly contributed to advancing many topics in the last three decades, including academic learning and professional development (e.g., Vermunt & EndedÄ³k, 2011) and student learning (e.g., Vermunt & Donche, 2017).

Since its origins, implementing the Bologna Process in universities has faced many challenges, especially in Eastern countries where the academic modus operandi was mainly teacher-centered (Ciolan et al., 2015; Iucu & Iftimescu, 2021). While academic development has gradually materialized as a necessary feature of universities in many parts of the world since the 1970s (e.g., Australia, the UK, and New Zealand) (Sutherland, 2018), in Eastern and Central Europe, academic development centers have been relatively recently established (Dorner & Kumar, 2023). Even if, comparatively to the Western countries, there is little information about the situation of academic development in the international literature in the Eastern European countries, there are also some models of good practice (e.g., Hungary–Dorner & Kumar, 2023; Romania—Ilie et al., 2020b; Mladenovici et al., 2022).

A decade ago, in Romania, most academics still used traditional teaching practices (Matei et al., 2015). Several calls were made for a more robust and accountable implementation of SCL in Romanian universities (Ciolan et al., 2015; Matei et al., 2015). Consequently, in the last ten years, to sustain SCL enhancement, a few Romanian universities have built specialized academic development structures (e.g., *Teacher Training and Continuing Education Service*—University of Bucharest, *Center for Innovation in Teaching and Learning*—Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, or *Center of Academic Development*—West University of Timisoara) or have included academic development in the activity of already existing departments like Teacher Training Departments (e.g., "Alexandru Ioan Cuza"—University of Iaşi). In the following paragraphs, we will present *the Center of Academic Development* (CAD) from the West University of Timisoara.

2 The CAD of the West University of Timisoara

In the context of the Bologna Process, WUT's leadership decided to create its center for academic development to sustain the teaching staff to breed an authentic culture of quality by ensuring a sustainable SCL educational process. The CAD was established in December 2015 (WUT Senate 72/18.12.2015 decision) and became operational in July 2016. The credits for the idea and financing of the center's establishment are due to Project UNIVERSITARIA—University Teaching School and Advanced Scientific Research (POSDRU/157/1.3/S/135590), funded by the Romanian Ministry of Education. Hence, CAD indicates the sustainability of the UNIVERSITARIA project. Since 2016, CAD has enhanced SCL practices via a research-based approach, furnishing pedagogical support to academics from the faculties of WUT.

The CAD is subordinate to the WUT's Vice-Rector assigned to academic strategy, collaborating with all WUT faculties and departments as the central task. CAD collaborates with other national HE partners, research institutes and associations, NGOs, and other interested institutes to implement high-quality training programs. The center has a training and research coordinator, four research and training assistants, five research volunteers, and twelve permanent collaborators from various university departments.

At the heart of CAD's mission is the commitment to cultivating academic excellence within the university by promoting SCL educational processes. The center has three areas of activity: professional development of academics, research, and innovation.

2.1 Professional Development

Over time, CAD has implemented several pedagogical training initiatives for academics: long-term instructional development programs, one-time pedagogical events, Didactic Teaching Grants, and informal "Didactic Café" sessions. Usually, these pedagogical initiatives are offered to academics from the WUT, but from time to time, different activities are proposed to academics outside our university. In this paper, we presented only long-term and one-time pedagogical events as our center's primary professional development activities. Details about the Didactic Teaching Grants and the informal Didactic Café sessions can be found in several papers of the CAD team (e.g., Balan et al., 2023; Eraşcu & Mladenovici, 2022) and the annual activity reports available on the center's web page (https://cda.uvt.ro/documents/).

2.1.1 Long-Term Instructional Development Programs (IDPs)

In the training offer of the CAD, there are four IDPs (in Educational Sciences) accredited by the National Agency for Qualifications in Romania, which offer 15 ECTS to their graduates: *Didactics and university psychopedagogy* (DPU), *Problem-Based Learning for Higher Education* (PBL), *Teaching and Learning in HE–an Evidence-Based Teaching Approach* (EBT) and *UVT Teaching & Learning Brand* (UvtT&LB). All four IDPs aim to develop teachers' competencies to design, implement, and assess SCL activities to stimulate students' deep-learning approaches, using a pretty similar curriculum framework (150 h of instructional activities divided into 4 or 5 content-based training modules and one module of peer to peer feedback and didactic counseling, formative assessment based on academics' activity portfolio), but different pedagogical information as training content (i.e., evidence-based, problem-based or the reflexive-collaborative learning).

Except for the UvtT&LB program that addresses novice academics (i.e., newcomers to WUT, Assistant lecturers, and Ph.D. students with teaching duties) and has mandatory attendance, the other three IDPs are delivered to academics both within and outside the WUT on voluntary basis. Before starting the IDPs, participants are requested to select one subject (i.e., reference subject) they teach at that time, or they will teach in the future (i.e., next semester or a subject they want to build from scratch), to which they should connect all their instructional tasks and assignments which form their activity portfolio. Several reports of the center present a detailed description of the EBT, DPU, and PBL (e.g., Ilie et al., 2021; Maricuţoiu et al., 2021). Details regarding the UvtT&LB program can be found in the First Supplemental Material of the paper by Mladenovici and Ilie (2023). Between 2017 and 2023, 449 academics (350 from WUT and 99 outside our university) graduated from one of the four IDPs offered by our center.

2.1.2 One-Time Pedagogical Events

Between 2016 and 2021, the center organized online and/or face-to-face dozens of one-time pedagogical events. Usually, these short pedagogical activities are implemented as workshops in one day or two consecutive days with a maximum of eight hours. These workshops were designed to cover topics proposed by academics, such as how to assess learning in the online environment effectively, how to stimulate students' active learning, how to manage socio-economically and culturally diverse student groups, how to develop students' entrepreneurial skills or to involve them in the co-creation of instruction, etc. Over time, more than 1300 academics from 30 Romanian universities benefited from one or more workshops offered by the CAD team.

Currently, our center limited the offer of workshops to six one-time events which promote implementing the Reflexive-Collaborative (RCL) instructional model adopted as the WUT teaching and learning brand, according to the development strategy proposed by the WUT rector. The RCL instructional model innovatively combines several modern pedagogical concepts, including instructional models, curricular alignment, authentic learning outcomes, and collaborative and reflexive learning. Therefore, within the SCL paradigm, corroborated with participants' feedback, we decided to reorganize the main elements of the RCL instructional model into six specific workshops as follows: (1). Reflexive-collaborative instructional model, (2). Authenticity of learning outcomes, (3). Curricular alignment, (4). Reflexive learning experiences, (5). Collaborative learning experiences, and (6). Stimulating students' interest in study.

Each workshop is delivered according to the RCL instruction events for small groups with a maximum of 15 participants. From the first delivery of these workshops (fall of 2022) until now, 204 academics from our university have chosen to participate in one or several workshops. Each workshop is implemented in two modules, accumulating three hours. The first part is allocated for theoretical input, while in the second, participants are supposed to create individually and/or collaboratively a specific practical task related to their instruction in a specific subject. To complete a workshop, participants must upload the didactic project/task developed throughout the workshop to the CAD E-learning platform. Each participant who completes a workshop receives a CAD certificate of participation and two CAD training points. More details about RCL instructional model workshops and participant feedback can be found in the 10th informative Bulletin of the CAD (2023).

2.2 Research

The primary purpose of our center's research agenda is to conduct research to inform the development, implementation, and evaluation of the pedagogical training initiatives of the center. In this vein, the activity started in July 2016 by employing an exhaustive mixed method needs-analysis endeavor (i.e., focus groups, syllabuses analysis, and questionnaires) to identify the main topics of interest and the academics' availability and requirements regarding future training activities. The needs-analysis was completed by an extensive review of international literature investigating the effects of IDPs, which materialized through the publication of the first meta-analysis of controlled studies in the field of academic development (Ilie et al., 2020a). Since then, all the activities conducted by our team have been evidence-based. CAD systematically and continuously assesses the efficiency of its endeavors (e.g., Ilie et al., 2021; Maricuţoiu et al., 2021; Mladenovici et al., 2022; Mladenovici & Ilie, 2023; Smarandache et al., 2022), looking for changes within teachers (e.g., transformations in knowledge, skills, attitudes towards teaching and learning), teaching behaviors, changes within students (e.g., students' outcomes, evaluations of teaching and their learning approaches) and transformations at the institutional level that can be attributed to the academic development activities carried by the center. Many of the research papers of our team were published by leading international journals in the field of research into higher education, such as *Higher Education* (Mladenovici et al., 2022), *Studies in Higher Education* (Mladenovici & Ilie, 2023), *Higher Education Research & Development* (Smarandache et al., 2022) or *Educational Research Review* (Ilie et al., 2020a).

2.3 Innovation

Over time, the CAD team successfully implemented a series of institutional development projects funded by national entities of around two million euros. These projects sustained the implementation of the professional development initiatives and research activities described above and were the main contributors to the development of the Reflexive-Collaborative instructional model (RCL), further promoted as the WUT teaching and learning brand through the university's strategic development plan proposed by the rector of the university.

The initial form of the RCL instructional model was developed by the CAD team in collaboration with academic developers from the University of Maastricht (Netherlands). The current form of the RCL model integrates innovative pedagogical concepts: instructional models, authentic learning, curricular alignment, reflexive learning, collaborative learning, and information about stimulating students' interest in study (CDA, 2019; Ilie et al., 2020b). The main proposal of the RCL model is a combination of reflective and collaborative learning principles into an instructional model with specific instructional sequences for planning and implementing SCL activities in higher education.

The RCL model is the core of a complex quality assurance system in higher education proposed for promoting SCL across the entire university. This system encompasses six dimensions: the educational process (i.e., SCL vision, competency development, and evidence-based, SCL core values, and five learning principles), instructional design (i.e., reflexive-collaborative design model), instructional approach (i.e., RCL model for large and small group instruction), quality assurance system pedagogical training for academics, and rewarding of the excellent teaching performance study (CDA, 2019; Ilie et al., 2020b).

3 Reflections for Academic Development Practice, Research, and Educational Policies

Academic development is a recent phenomenon comparable to the universities' history over almost a thousand years. Viewing the worldwide practices, academic development has traditionally concentrated on helping academics enhance their instruction via staff capability building. Additionally, academic development is expected to bring theoretical and practical understanding and innovation to influence positive change in HE (Debowski, 2014). For this aim, academic development is fostered by specialized academic development staff or experienced academics (i.e., who frequently carry an academic appointment or periodically volunteer and have additional teaching, leadership, and research responsibilities). Plenty of evidence reinforces that centers of academic development have played a crucial function in providing quality academic education, research, and leadership (Debowski, 2022).

While in countries with a known record of innovation and efficient tertiary educational systems (e.g., Australia, the UK, Finland) academic development centers are undergoing profound change, in Eastern and Central Europe, such centers have been relatively recently established (Dorner & Kumar, 2023). One of the EU Commission's strategic objectives is prioritizing capacity building in HE and transnational partnerships in the subsequent years. For Romania and most of its neighbors from their side of Europe (i.e., struggling with problems like a high percentage of not in education, employment, or training, and massive academic dropout, brain drain, and many others), the EU funding corroborated with the lessons of good practices from worldwide academic development centers represent an excellent opportunity. Therefore, educational specialists and academic developers should all contribute to forming better coordinated and collaborative spaces across the help agents and mechanisms to facilitate responsive, creative, and vibrant approaches to academic development (Debowski, 2022). For example, WUT is part of the UNITA international alliance that brings together twelve HE institutions from seven countries (i.e., Romania, Italy, Portugal, Spain, France, Ukraine, and Switzerland) and can benefit from the know-how and resource sharing by their partners.

A stringent issue that, if addressed appropriately, can reinforce a more sustainable and effective SCL and teaching in HE is represented by the initial training of academics. In Romania, but also Central and Eastern Europe, with few exceptions (e.g., CAD of WUT, the case of Central European University—Budapest, Hungary), no compulsory instructional development programs are customized for those desiring to become teachers in HE (Dorner & Kumar, 2023; Ilie et al., 2020b). Instead, academics must graduate from the same programs as secondary school teachers. To our knowledge, there is no other accredited and mandatory IDP for debutant academics in Romania besides the UvtT&LB IDP implemented yearly since 2019 by our center. Academic development may stimulate collaboration and coherence at the organizational level of HE institutions (Stensaker, 2018). Therefore, the practice of the CAD of WUT regarding the initial training for debutant academics has the potential to create sustainable support and should be considered more thoroughly as a good practice in other universities at the national and international level, at least for Eastern European universities.

Educational development in HE was correlated with the emergence of new professional organizations and academic journals to support academic development growth (e.g., the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia in 1972 or the Professional and Organizational Development Network in 1974 in the USA) (Sutherland, 2018). Universities with similar contexts and strategic objectives from Central and Eastern European countries or inside international alliances can benefit from developing their association of academic development to design and disseminate promising practices and learn from each other.

The future of academic development is located within the broader HE context of this century, being affected by plenty of factors (e.g., calls for accountability, fiscal constraints, expanding students' diversity, possibilities and challenges of technology, requests for interdisciplinarity, transformations in academics' features and shifts in appointment patterns, etc.) (Austin & Sorcinelli, 2013). All those affecting factors bring essential implications for the changing environment, the processes, and the structures of academic development. From managing new roles and responsibilities, integrating technology into teaching, learning, and research to new education development structures, changing modes of instruction delivery, and types of HE institutions, future challenges may be way different than expected. Looking forward to 2030 on the European University Association's vision of "Universities without walls" (EUA, 2021), we should think of academic development centers without walls and do our best to collaborate and learn from each other to create supportive conditions for student-centered teaching and learning. What comes next and how HE institutions will reinforce effective and sustainable SCL and adjust to the new reality of evaluating, instructing, and learning where AI and multiple other technologies are questioning existing educational models remain a terrain for further exploration.

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University Teachers' Willingness to Support Inclusive and Effective Student-Centred Learning

Elena Marin and Kallia Katsampoxaki-Hodgetts

Abstract Teachers' beliefs regarding inclusive pedagogy, as well as sustainable and effective student-centred learning, play a crucial role in fostering a positive attitude towards inclusive education and implementing inclusive teaching practices. Embracing underpinning inclusive student-centred pedagogies (I-ScP) is imperative for teachers so they can consciously employ instructional methods that benefit all learners and cultivate a sense of community to promote inclusive education (Florian, 2014; Erby et al., 2021). This is often expected without an unanimously acknowledged process or shared understanding for teacher praxis to reflect on their knowledge, comprehension, and approaches to developing suggested inclusive strategies (Moriarty, 2007; Glowacki-Dudka et.al., 2012; Loreman, 2017). This study attempts to investigate and evaluate university teachers' readiness to facilitate a student-centred I-ScP learning methodology that prioritises inclusivity and effectiveness, taking into account the perspectives of university educators regarding their praxis repertoire. Employing a mixed-methods approach, we interviewed university educators from both Romanian and Greek institutions after they had completed a questionnaire. The quantitative analysis focused on several key areas: the perceived importance of understanding students' learning needs, strategies for accommodating diverse learning styles, and methods for promoting I-ScP in the classroom through non-judgmental discussions about cultural, social, and other differences. The data revealed critical insights on four specific aspects: the recognition of the significance of understanding students' learning needs, adapting to diverse learning styles, the need for more transparency, cultivating empathy in the classroom and embracing diversity in the educational setting.

Keywords Inclusive student-centred pedagogies (i-ScP) · Identifying student needs · Re-aligning lessons and syllabi · Diversity · Choice

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1 Introduction

Inclusive and effective learning environments include creating a learning environment where all students feel supported and valued and can engage in active and meaningful learning experiences. In order to do so, university teachers can appreciate, embrace, and respect their students' cultures, values, experiences, and perspectives by creating an environment of openness and acceptance for all, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, or power (Guo & Jamal, 2007). Inclusivity in the classroom is related to teachers' willingness to use teaching strategies to account for the different learning styles of their students by offering hands-on, group and individual learning opportunities, matching their curriculum to student's interests and strengths (Avramidis et al., 2019). Also, facilitating communication and collaboration largely serves to contribute towards the development of students' interpersonal skills while gaining new insights and learning from others with different backgrounds and perspectives. This can be easily achieved through group projects, peer coaching, and other interactive activities (Brundiers & Wiek, 2017).

A growing body of literature calls for the need to steer away from the medical model of inclusion, which aims to 'fix' student deficits, disabilities, or learning difficulties (Armstrong & Barton, 1999). Instead, by adopting social models of inclusion for all students (Tinklin et al., 2004), teachers can design their lessons providing inclusive support systems that focus equally on access, engagement, and output opportunities for all students without stigmatising or privileging a particular group or individual. By incorporating active engagement components in the HE syllabus design, teachers can align expected learning outcomes with evidence-based and measurable activities that students in HE are engaged in (Katsampoxaki-Hodgetts, 2022). This is why inclusive support systems should be geared towards empowering students and academics to make appropriate decisions in order to proactively create and sustain inclusive learning environments for all (Katsampoxaki-Hodgetts, 2023). In line with this, teachers can provide timely feedback to students to understand their progress, identify their strengths and weaknesses, and improve their performance. This can be done by providing feedback on multiple aspects of students' work that can encourage them to view mistakes as learning opportunities (Brookhart, 2017). Also, teachers can help students become self-directed learners by empowering them to choose their own learning goals, interests, and strategies, create their own projects, and decide how they want to learn. This can create a sense of freedom, involvement and ownership amongst students (Lapan et al., 2002). A growing amount of literature encourages engaging students as equal partners in instructional choices and provision of feedback (Cook-Sather, 2016; Cliffe et al., 2017). Yet, as this proposal challenges established hierarchies in academia, it may be faced with resistance by academics and students alike. As stated by Cliffe et al. (2017: 3), "too many times, assumptions are made and protected, such as about who has knowledge about teaching and learning... Students as Partners, however, challenges those dynamics and provides insight into what faculty may not always realize".

In order for university teachers to be able to live up to either top-down or bottom-up responsibilities to develop an inclusive learning environment, development and awareness-raising opportunities for Faculty members are essential. Unfortunately, in many European countries, university teachers are not required to possess accredited teaching qualifications (Parsons et al., 2019), and their career advancement and university funding predominantly hinge on research outputs rather than the quality of their teaching or the accreditation of their academic development trajectory (Katsampoxaki-Hodgetts, 2022). Additionally, there is resistance among university teachers to embrace bottom-up, student-centred, or inclusive interventions (Zhidong, 2012; Bovill et al., 2016), and there is a scarcity of time and incentives for university teachers to undergo training in didactics (Jacob et al., 2017). The consequences are apparent, with a substantial number of university teachers in EU countries (and internationally) tending to employ teacher-centred approaches that may not be tailored to the specific needs of their students (Shah et al., 2017; Singh & Phoon, 2021). In such educational environments, university teachers often overlook the development of faculty-inclusive student-centred pedagogies (i-ScP) competences and students' academic competence-building (Dewsbury, 2017; O'Leary et al., 2020).

Herein, Inclusive Student-centred Pedagogies (i-ScP) are defined as the proactive and intentional input (content and presentation modes), teaching and learning activities, course design, transparent curricula, assessment-for-learning and open-access, accessible or multimodal resources, which foster equity during carefully designed learner-centred opportunities for student engagement, self-awareness, self-regulation, and learner autonomy for all stakeholders in higher education (Katsampoxaki-Hodgetts, 2023). There is little doubt about the pressing need for academics to adapt their roles and take on the responsibility of fostering an inclusive educational environment. Thus, the aim of this research is to portray the level of willingness of university teachers to support inclusive and effective student-centred learning.

2 Research Methodology

2.1 Research Aim

The objective of this research is to examine and assess the willingness of university teachers to endorse a student-centred I-ScP learning approach in their teaching praxis that is both inclusive and effective, considering the viewpoints of university teachers.

2.2 Methods and Participants

This study consists of descriptive research with qualitative approaches. A content analysis method was used to identify and interpret patterns of meaning (themes) within qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). The purpose of the content analysis is to summarise a large amount of data in such a way as to achieve well-supported and interpreted results (Bergin, 2018). All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the recordings were sent for feedback to the respective respondents. The data was coded and then categorised under common themes such as willingness to develop awareness about students' learning needs; embracing students' different ways of learning; encouraging perspective-taking in the classroom based on non-judgmental approaches to discussing cultural, social, or other type of differences; and accepting and embracing diversity in the classroom.

Participation in the study was voluntary, research subjects were anonymised, and the research protocol was approved by the coordinating university to ensure the protection of human subjects. Five participants per country (total number of n = 10) were selected and participated in the process. To ensure anonymity of the data, the respondents were coded by numbers (e.g., I1 to I5), using only their country initials, as follows: Greece–GR; Romania–RO.

3 Results and Discussion

Reflecting on teachers' views on inclusive pedagogy is considered a crucial element not only in cultivating a positive stance towards inclusive education but also in implementing inclusive teaching practices. According to Florian (2014), it is important for university teachers to conscientiously adopt teaching methods that benefit all learners and cultivate a sense of community in order to promote inclusive education. For this reason, a framework for university teachers could provide practical insights so that teachers can self-evaluate their pedagogical knowledge, comprehension, and methods for implementing inclusive approaches.

3.1 University Teachers'Understanding of Inclusive Pedagogies

When asked about their understanding of inclusive pedagogies during interviews, the teachers provided a range of responses. These varied from viewing them as a strategy or a mindset aiming at engaging and involving all students, ensuring that no student is left behind, and considering the specific needs of students with special requirements. It also encompassed the idea of having a well-planned pedagogical approach with a set of activities for a course as portrayed by a Greek academic:

> One word (for inclusion): ***no student left behind***...that is, all students should be somehow involved, somehow learning. I'm going to get a student involved who may have a visual difficulty ...a student who has a learning difficulty, […] anxiety disorders [or] other difficulties: to engage, they have different things, so yeah...kind of a little bit to understand them. Within that context, I do something else at the beginning ... of the course. I give a questionnaire anonymously, to understand some of these things and the peculiarities that students have. How much stress they have, what difficulties they might have. (I4_Gr)

It is apparent in this response, that this teacher perceives inclusion as synonymous with taking action to actively engage students with difficulties. The teachers acknowledged the diverse needs of students, including those with learning difficulties, disabilities, different language backgrounds, and varying worldviews. One teacher stressed the distinction between students' learning needs and their diverse backgrounds. For the teachers, inclusivity meant not only providing equal access to a safe learning environment but also offering equal opportunities for growth and development, making education meaningful for all. Some teachers highlighted the value of considering what students can contribute, sharing their own experiences and backgrounds, and allowing wider representation of student identities. Additionally, the teachers highlighted the importance of avoiding any comments that may be deemed racist or sexist.

> I believe that inclusive education is an essential aspect of higher education. Inclusive education means that all students, regardless of their backgrounds, identities, or abilities, have the opportunity to learn and succeed in an environment that values diversity and promotes equity. Inclusive education practices can benefit all students, including those with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, and first-generation college students. I consider that universities have a responsibility to create an inclusive learning environment that welcomes and supports all students. This includes providing accommodations and resources to students with disabilities, promoting cultural awareness and diversity, and addressing systemic barriers that may limit access and opportunities for marginalized students (I4_Ro).

One teacher raised concerns about the competitive nature of higher education, noting that certain programs and courses may predominantly attract students from privileged backgrounds, potentially undermining others with fewer opportunities due to high demand. At the expense of homogeneity and privilege, "students and faculty from underrepresented groups demanded entrance and full acceptance into the academy—as undergraduates and graduate students, as faculty, as scholars, and as institutional leaders […] diversity has then meant a spreading out of, a dilution of, and a threat to those standards." (Maher et al., 2007, pp: 2–3).

Regarding the fit of inclusive teaching in higher education, the teachers expressed a strong belief that it is not a matter of fitting as it is indeed a necessity, as one interviewee pinpointed:

> Yes, I strongly believe so. The educational pathway of students with disabilities should not stop at high school. Universities have enough resources to provide educational adjustments, but should also invest in providing support mechanisms that will target students' academic success. (I1_Ro)

Instead of fleetingly touching upon issues of accessibility, engagement and agency, some teachers acknowledged that adopting inclusive education requires a shift in mindset, as higher education has historically been exclusive in nature (O'Leary et al., 2020). Teachers prioritised multimodal dissemination of content and engaging lessons that do not neglect students' academic competence-building and learner autonomy.

The interviewees suggested that universities may need time to adapt but emphasised that inclusive education is the way forward. One teacher noted the importance of inclusive education in preparing individuals to be active participants in a democratic society, equipping them with the necessary skills, especially in an era of misinformation and the need for critical thinking and literacies. In this response, we also see the key role of fostering critical thinking and student agency. The development of critical thinking is included in most conversations related to the development of so-called "*21st century skills*" (Sellars et al., 2018). In fact, fostering students' multiliteracies is imperative for all higher education students, as critical thinking and agency are key ingredients of active European citizens (Seglem & Garcia, 2018).

3.2 Developing Awareness About Students' Learning Needs

In the interviews, academics often acknowledged the need for more cooperation between students and academics. While there may be an implicit expectation that students must be aware of their needs, this is a complicated matter and cannot be taken for granted, as students' needs in higher education are diverse and often unexplored:

> What we expect from students when they come to tertiary education is [...] to know what are their needs and expectation as student. (I1_Gr)

The same interviewee expressed that university teachers have a responsibility in:

> we need to create learning environments where students can detect what they need and want through questions or questionnaires. To achieve this, I often ask questions with regards to participation needs or group dynamics. I try to encourage students to share this their opinions and thoughts, I explain them the challenges of group dynamic. (I1_GR)

As seen in this response, the university teacher is aware that students may lack awareness of learning processes that may be for them. According to Rea et al. (2022)*, most students can recognise the positive impact of active, effective learning strategies, but self-efficacy concerns may be a barrier.* In the interviews, teachers gave examples of interactive course design as a way to meet all student needs, and one example involves asking the students at the beginning of a course if there is something they think the teacher should know about them from the start.

> I put a lot of attention on course content: creating a curriculum that incorporates diverse social and cultural perspectives and on teaching methods: developing a broad repertoire of teaching methods to address learning … of students from different social backgrounds more effectively (I3_Ro)

Assessment is mentioned as a critical element where students with dyslexia, for instance, may need other ways of presenting their knowledge than in a paper and pencil test.

> Depending on the students' characteristics, I make sure that they all have access to materials and activities we do. For example, I have had several students with visual impairments in several courses, so I needed to ensure that the information reaches them through a non-visual channel, and the activities were adapted so that they could participate (I1_Ro)

Teachers mentioned having a dialogue with students with special needs regarding options in assessment format and procedure. One teacher explained that teachers need to be sensitive to different needs so they can recognise when they meet students with certain needs.

3.3 Adapting to Students' Different Ways of Learning

Not all teachers perceive inclusive teaching approaches as addressing students with difficulties. Some teachers perceive the inclusive approach as universal. This is in line with (Molina Roldán et al., 2021), as students without learning difficulties or disabilities can benefit from participating in inclusive, interactive learning environments. As one Romanian teacher pointed out, not all students like to read, and it may be good to have lectures recorded for those who struggle with reading. Multimodal input and engagement opportunities in and out of class are also suggested as viable means of implementing I-ScP:

> Courses are both online and face-to-face. So, we don't exclude anybody in that respect do we? Also, the material is not only reading, it's also video, so in that respect anyone can access it according to their particular needs (I5_Gr).

This is in line with Sanger (2020,) who suggests considering aspects of the course that may not be particularly intuitive for some students. Unfortunately, some teachers still share instances where students' requesting special accommodations could potentially alter the intended course goals, outcomes, and skills, potentially compromising the course's integrity. One teacher explicitly emphasises the need for discernment in determining when accommodations are feasible, especially when a physical disability poses a genuine obstacle to performing certain activities and when an accommodation would entail a different task altogether. I-SCP architecture with pedagogy in mind can make a substantial difference in what teachers can do if they are willing to make a change:

> when I teach in amphitheatres that do not have modular desks is a huge problem. I used to have a student in a wheelchair and she had to stay just in front of the first desk. It was so uncomfortable for her, because she wanted to stay next to her colleagues. In some old university buildings, we do not have an elevator and I think some classes have a smaller entrance door that will not enable a student in a wheelchair to enter. Other missing resources are: the lack of a tactile rug for blind students because at our university, at my department of special education we always have visually impaired students. But we also need some sound amplifiers for our students who have problems with hearing…I think that is necessary in all the student's secretariat office because there is just a small open window between students and the secretary responsible, I think we could all benefit from this resource even if we have or do not have hearing impairment (I3_Ro).

In the interviews, teachers are also queried about how they encourage students to take the lead. A common response is by implementing interactive teaching methods that foster engagement in classroom discussions. They also highlight the significance of group work and assigning small research/inquiry projects to activate students. In line with Sanger (2020), using varied teaching techniques and formats, integrating representational modes, and mixing up learning activities and modes of expression is a recurring theme in teacher responses. As articulated by one teacher and in line with Sanger (2020), another key component of Universal learning is transparency, which entails being "explicit about expectations and strategies for success". Providing students with clear instructions and apt information about teacher or course expectations also contributes to empowerment and inclusive education. Also, personalised feedback, with the help of technology, is identified as a pivotal tool for empowering students to assume responsibility for their own learning. Another teacher underscores the importance of maintaining high expectations for students, accentuating that they are present to learn and should come prepared for seminars without considering lowering standards. This aligns with the think-pair-share principle, wherein students are encouraged to contemplate before class, engage in paired or small group discussions, and share their thoughts collectively.

3.4 Encouraging Perspective-Taking in the Classroom Based on Non-Judgmental Approaches to Discussing Cultural, Social, or Other Types of Differences

In the interviews, teachers emphasise that inclusive teaching involves considering diverse backgrounds. One teacher advocates for a perspective-based approach that allows for the presentation of different viewpoints, ensuring that all perspectives are valued equally without showing favouritism. They provide an example of how students from various backgrounds can serve as valuable resources, acting as "living encyclopedias" and explaining how to approach sensitive subjects from their own perspectives. This approach involves actively including the students by asking for their input considering their background knowledge, context, and identities. Also, in line with recent literature, providing students with reasonable choices fosters inclusive learning environments (Collins et al., 2019; Katsampoxaki-Hodgetts, 2023). As one teacher aptly puts it, embracing differences enriches us:

> I usually assign group projects or allow students to take turns leading class discussions or activities because this can give students a sense of ownership and responsibility over their learning. I am very keen on providing opportunities for students to make choices about their learning and by this, I mean I encourage them to select their own topics for research papers, choosing from a variety of project options, or selecting the format for a presentation (I1_Gr).

In this response, it is germane to note that i-ScP practices include allowing students to make research, activity, presentation choices and act as equal partners by presenting new input in a multimodal way. It also indicates teachers' awareness of group dynamics and instructional choices being conducive to student agency and ownership. This is also in line with the reflective participatory pedagogies of new literacies and multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2021).

Another effective method of empowering students is to foster an environment where questioning is encouraged, and students feel accepted for who they are, treated with respect and feel that their teacher is there for them, willing to listen and give advice if necessary:

> To build trust, I give them space and freedom to ask questions and ...and solve things on their own and I see that working. (I2, Gr). Also, 'in the first class I tell them that I'm available by mail, phone and office. You can bother me at any time... also at the end of the course [...]they come and ask me and so I take all the questions, [...]and I see that slowly building and more and more people are coming. Still, I tell them that if anyone wants to tell me anything personal and so on, the office is open (I2_Gr)

Moreover, teachers pointed out the importance of focusing on the entire group as a unified entity rather than singling out individuals or subgroups. This approach underscores inclusivity, focusing on unity rather than highlighting differences. However, this does not need to be considered as a means of standardisation or homogenisation in our curricula. Using multiliteracies pedagogies, university teachers can design courses that allow students to make their voices visible and respected.

Another critical component of I-ScP is personalised learning opportunities. As vast student numbers in a lecture theatre can become a learning barrier, students may feel that the teaching style or lecture delivery is quite impersonal and generic, and this feeling may be intensified if they do not receive adequate and diversified feedback. To tackle this issue, university teachers are looking for ways they can strengthen this component by providing examples of diverse perspective-taking and feedback through online quizzes or videos: "[Students] send [the teacher] videos and [the teacher] responds to them in videos. [...] I have the text, on which I have put my comments on but at the same time I show the text in the video and at the same time I am correcting the video ....in the video while I am correcting it I am showing it." [I5_Gr].

Time allocated to formative assessment and experiential learning is another way suggested by a university teacher as a form of establishing I-ScP:

> Participatory learning and [...] formative assessment means I'm putting in assignments, I'm in class with the students participating. That's very important in formative assessment, that is the experiential part that we talked about before. They are all connected to each other, they are not concepts in isolation. We cannot see them in isolation, there are links in this chain whose end is LEARNING. (I5_Gr).

As shown in this response, creating experiential tasks as part of formative assessment does not only increase student participation but also their sense of belonging in an inclusive community of learning. This response is in line with Swanson and Deshler (2003) who maintain that formative assessment in the form of mini products can raise student awareness regarding their own strengths and weaknesses, facilitating self-regulation through adequate support and feedback.

Other ways of amplifying the sense of personalised feedback are by utilising peer-feedback opportunities in or out of class: ‘when I’m doing this assignment for the evaluation, the evaluation is given for the students. So, there’s what we call the mutual teaching …. the evaluation should not be punitive…evaluation needs to be done in many ways and from many angles to ensure objectivity. The goal is improvement with the goal of learning” (15_Gr). This response indicates that multimodal feedback and peer feedback can be of value to students as teaching models steer away from the assumption that the lecturer is the only correct authoritative source of knowledge.

However, teachers also acknowledge the challenges that can arise when not all students appreciate the importance of considering different perspectives, and they must navigate these situations.

> Sometimes it’s difficult, especially when there are many, but I try to offer them a safe space, a space where mistakes are a learning context. I always tell them this to alleviate their fear of making mistakes and ridicule, which often inhibits initiative. I think I succeed most of the time, in general, after the first meetings, they understand that we have an open environment where they can express themselves (I5_Ro)

3.5 It Is Important to Embrace Diversity in the Classroom

In the interviews, teachers are queried about how they ensure they reach all of their students. This question prompts some teachers to reflect on whether they are achieving this goal or if it is even possible despite it being their aim. Teachers acknowledge that smaller groups of students naturally facilitate this process. The strategies for reaching all students encompass various elements, such as leveraging communication technology and email, maintaining regular contact with students during office hours, and extending availability by staying a bit longer after class. Additionally, teachers call attention to the importance of employing diverse learning strategies and classroom activities to cater to students with different needs.

> I think that meeting students’ learning needs involves customizing instruction, teaching strategies, and assessments to fit each student’s learning style, abilities, and interests. It is a lot of hard work but I tend to use different teaching methods and materials, if my technical abilities allow me, multimedia or digital tools to make learning more engaging and accessible and relevant to them. I have a class where my students showcase some of the learning apps that they have discovered and this is how I learn from them, as well (I4_Ro).

In summary, although teachers perceive that inclusive teaching is already taking place to some extent, there remains room for improvement in ensuring that students perceive their needs are being met to the same degree as teachers believe they are. As most teachers expressed concerns regarding the feasibility of individual accommodations, given the vast student numbers in lecture theatres, we embrace the work of Lombardi et al. (2013, p. 221) who called for the need to provide I-ScP academic development opportunities to ‘promote universal design for student participation and success without extensive individualised accommodations and support’. Another approach is for teachers to be more explicit about their inclusive practices, without singling out students or making them feel stigmatized, but rather by explaining how these approaches are universally applied for the benefit of everyone.

4 Conclusions

Teachers interviewed in this study verify underpinning principles of inclusive teaching practices in line with the literature and the holistic, inclusive outlook of the Bologna Process. Our findings reinforce the view that university teachers need further academic development opportunities to acknowledge potential barriers in I-ScP learning and assessment that are not limited to disabled students and that, if designed proactively, can benefit all students (Collins et al., 2019). In line with Bologna values and the expected standard 1.3 regarding student-centred learning, teachers are willing to improve their inclusive practices by being flexible and transparent, but they are not always aware of the range of choices available. As shown herein, I-ScP academic development can be implemented with the proviso that accessibility, engagement, learning output, and self-regulation opportunities can be adequately designed and improved to benefit all students proactively. This is in line with Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011, p. 826), where inclusive pedagogy 'is underpinned by a shift in pedagogical thinking from an approach that works for most learners existing alongside something "additional" or "different" for those (some) who experience difficulties, towards one that involves providing rich learning opportunities that are sufficiently made available for everyone, so that all learners are able to participate in classroom life'.

Although in this paper, we made a link to multiliteracies pedagogical constructs, there are numerous instructional choices that may be implemented. University teachers can also take responsibility for how their own instructional choices can improve inclusive student learning and measure their impact through action research. As well as action research, peer observations and reflective i-ScP syllabus design can also be agents of transformation (Katsampoxaki-Hodgetts, 2022). In line with the social model of inclusion, using means of identifying potential learning barriers as a response to individual student needs may stigmatise students. By contrast, the provision of multimodal forms of input and output in conjunction with diverse, inclusive choices can improve not only student contribution and agency in terms of access, engagement, and student output but also increase their sense of belonging and ownership of their own learning (Lapan et al., 2002). This is also supported by Olivier (2021, p. 22) whose work verifies that multimodal teaching strategies and assessment "attend to students' varying individual needs and [...] and can accommodate different learning styles of individual students."

The connection between the Bologna Process and inclusive, student-centred learning lies in their shared objectives of enhancing the quality and accessibility of higher education across Europe. The "Bologna Declaration" process that started in 1999 and still continues to shape the higher education systems across Europe is aimed at creating a single European Higher Education Area (EHEA) with flexible and inclusive national educational systems through fostering mobility, transparency, and comparability among them. In this respect, inclusive student-centred learning is relevant to the objectives of the Bologna Process which includes engaging students as well as acknowledging differences among them. Universities can assist student movements within EHEA by adopting inclusive modes of instruction that account for different student needs and backgrounds. This can be implemented by encouraging bottom-up to top-down policies, engaging more university alliances with I-SCP in mind (e.g., INGENIUM) and creating measurable academic development goals while respecting institutional and personal teaching philosophies. Some of the characteristics associated with student-centred education include action learning, team work, personalisation; all these can lead to various competencies necessary for a successful student during their study period, given the diversity produced by the Bologna Process on academicians' purposes. Consequently, a relationship exists between the Bologna Process and inclusion centred towards students because they both seek to improve higher education's quality inequity and pertinence across Europe. To conclude, all higher education students are entitled to more transparent and equitable learning systems that put forward the provision of adequate formative and personalised feedback that empowers capacity building, self-regulation, and progress for all students.

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Promoting Student-Centered Teaching Through a Professional Development Program for Academics—A Mixed Study

Radu Balan, Velibor Mladenovici, Mădălin O. Bunoiu, and Marian D. Ilie

Abstract In the context of student-centered learning (SCL) promoted by the Bologna process, West University of Timişoara (WUT) encourages SCL implementation by organizing an annual didactic grant competition. Participation is voluntary and consists of creating a SCL activity project. After the blind peer-review process, the winners must participate in a pedagogical program based on WUT's reflexive-collaborative instructional model (RCL) to improve their SCL teaching practices. The present study aims to evaluate the impact of a pedagogical program on academics' teaching approaches and conceptions, their work environment experiences, well-being, and the occurrence of burnout. We used a within-subjects quasi-experimental design with two measurement points. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from the 13 beneficiaries. Depending on the fulfillment of the assumptions, the quantitative data were analyzed through paired samples T-tests or the Wilcoxon signed rank test, while the qualitative data were organized into categories via thematic content analysis. The pedagogical program positively impacted academics' SCL conceptions and teaching approaches and decreased exhaustion levels. Implications for the design of faculty training and relevant stakeholders are further discussed.

Keywords Higher education · Pedagogical professional development · Student-centered teaching

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1 Introduction

Within the last decades, higher education (HE) institutions have come under the strain of the ever-changing global context, leading to gaps that cannot be addressed by the traditional paradigm (i.e., teacher- or content-focused teaching) (Hoidn & Reusser, 2020). The student-centered learning (SCL) paradigm tackles those issues by changing the compass toward the students and their needs. SCL targets an instructional process that stimulates imagination, active participation, reflection, independent thinking, and knowledge construction and promotes meaningful learning (Postareff & Lindblom-Y, 2008; Prosser & Trigwell, 2014). Higher education teaching activities structured and implemented according to SCL principles tend to be associated with increased deep learning, leading to higher motivation to learn, retention, and understanding of taught content (Uiboleht et al., 2018). Consequently, SCL became a policy priority area of the European Bologna Process (Hoidn & Reusser, 2020).

To facilitate these processes, universities ensure opportunities in the form of professional development programs, which can take many forms depending on the objectives pursued, such as teaching grants, workshops, or instructional development programs (IDPs) (Ilie et al., 2020). There is evidence worldwide that IDPs can help teachers adopt student-centered teaching (e.g., Ilie et al., 2020). Regarding the Romanian context, evidence of the impact of the pedagogical programs tailored to enhance SCL and teaching is somewhat limited (e.g., Eraşcu & Mladenovici, 2022; Mladenovici et al., 2019). However, there are some recurrent initiatives to stimulate the adoption of SCL approaches in Romanian universities. For example, at the West University of Timişoara (WUT), an annual didactic grants competition is implemented to help teaching staff develop SCL practices. As part of this competition, there is an IDP and an impact assessment process. The present study describes the grant's implementation and impact assessment process.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

There is evidence that academics' teaching conceptions and approaches transform positively toward a more SCL approach, thanks to their participation in IDPs (Ilie et al., 2020). Accordingly, academics can also enhance their self-efficacy after participating in an IDP (Noben, 2021; Postareff et al., 2007). However, these changes could be influenced by several other variables such as supportive communities, wellbeing (Esdar et al., 2016), specifics of discipline (hard vs. soft disciplines), teachers' burnout (Trigwell & Prosser, 2020), peer support (Kurtts & Levin, 2000) or autonomy (Esdar et al., 2016). For example, suppose a teacher has a community of practice or a professional learning community at the university. The existence of a supportive community might allow a teacher to share, discuss, and reflect on its best teaching practices. It could also provide emotional support, a sense of empowerment, as well as networking and collaboration opportunities to implement the lessons learned in an

IDP. All these factors could facilitate the implementation of a different instructional approach in the classroom. Also, several studies (e.g., Lindblom-Yl et al., 2006; McMinn et al., 2022) concluded that academics from "soft disciplines" (e.g., Social Science and Humanities) are, in general, more learning-focused in their instruction than academics belonging to "hard disciplines" (e.g., Mathematics or Medicine). Therefore, significant changes in the academics' teaching approaches after participating in an IDP could happen slower in the case of teachers who teach hard disciplines as compared to teachers teaching soft disciplines. Even more, a teacher who feels too exhausted will have higher levels of resistance against new initiatives or changes promoted by an IDP and limited availability for extra effort. Consequently, investigating IDP's impact on those variables is a regular research topic in international literature (Ilie et al., 2020).

1.1.1 Academics' Teaching Conceptions and Approaches

Depending on the specific teaching conception academics have, they will be inclined to have specific intentions, ultimately determining the implemented teaching strategy (Kember & Kwan, 2000). Therefore, teaching conceptions centered around knowledge transmission are more likely to lead to teaching strategies focused on delivering content specific to the discipline (Prosser & Trigwell, 2014). Likewise, teachers who consider students to be individuals capable of building their knowledge will try to encourage active implication and critical thinking (Prosser & Trigwell, 2014; Postareff & Lindblom-Yl, 2008). Therefore, a teacher should display conceptions and approaches that are student-centered rather than teacher-centered since they are more likely to encourage implication, increase interest, and promote growth (Kember, 1997; Prosser & Trigwell, 2014).

Until recently, both conceptions and teaching approaches have been considered dichotomously as poles of the same continuum (i.e., teacher- or student-centered) (Postareff & Lindblom-Yl, 2008; Prosser & Trigwell, 2014). However, the approaches described using this dichotomic categorization were characteristic of a specific subject taught by the teachers. As academics' teaching approaches and conceptions can be influenced by various personal (e.g., teaching experience, gender, age, etc.) or contextual variables (e.g., institutional and teaching context, type of teaching activity, etc.) (McMinn et al., 2022; Vilppu et al., 2019), recently, an alternative perspective has been used to describe academics' teaching approaches not in a specific context but in teaching activities in general (Postareff et al., 2023). General teaching approaches are defined beyond the classical dichotomy of student- and teacher-centeredness (i.e., four teaching dimensions: transmissive, interactive, unreflective, and organized). Moreover, conceptions and approaches are closely related to teachers' roles. According to Grasha (1994), there are five possible roles, three of which resemble the teacher-centered approach (i.e., expert, formal authority, and personal model) and the other two of the student-centered one (i.e., facilitator and delegator).

1.1.2 Autonomy

According to the Self Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), autonomy is an essential psychological ingredient to foster psychological growth, integrity, and well-being. Autonomy is the desire to balance one's activity and integrated sense of self (Sheldon and Elliot 1999). Perceived autonomy substantially impacts motivation; for this reason, it is considered a crucial requirement in higher education (Esdar et al., 2016). Also, high autonomy indicates feelings of freedom and integration, paramount elements of healthy human functioning (Deci & Ryan, 2000). From this point of view, we could argue that the effectiveness of an IDP is directly connected to its ability to satisfy the need for autonomy. Unfortunately, research on the role of autonomy in professional development programs in HE is lacking.

1.1.3 Peer Support

Offering complementary forms of support in addition to the IDPs can increase the programs' positive effects (Steinert et al., 2019). For instance, the mentor-mentee relationship is a form of support where participants are sustained by disciplinary experts (Noben et al., 2021). This kind of support entails public evaluation of the outcomes (Zellers et al., 2008) and scheduled meetings (Phillips & Dennison, 2015). Mentorship increases satisfaction, supportive reflection, and the chances of faculty development impacting teaching activity outside the program (Steinert et al., 2019). Thus, mentorship could facilitate academic learning and thinking, with positive outcomes for both the mentee (developing teaching skills and increasing confidence) and the mentor (sense of accomplishment and increased networking) (Beckerman, 2010).

1.1.4 Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is one's belief in acting successfully in a specific context (Bandura, 1997). Instruction-related self-efficacy is a teacher's belief concerning their capability to manage the educational process to positively influence students' learning (Trigwell et al., 2004). Teachers' self-efficacy beliefs have been researched mainly at the pre-university level, with research in HE settings relatively scarce (Postareff et al., 2007). The little existing evidence on academic self-efficacy concluded that this variable is influenced by the teachers' physiological and affective states and social experiences (Bandura, 1997). In HE settings, teachers' self-efficacy is positively associated with students' learning outcomes (Daumiller et al., 2016), increased classroom engagement (Fong et al., 2019), and increased teachers' job satisfaction and commitment (Han et al., 2021). Prior research has shown that IDPs were an effective way of increasing academics' self-efficacy (Noben et al., 2021). Specifically, after participation in an IDP, increases in academics' sense of competence (self-efficacy) indirectly influence them to be more student-centered in their instruction (Fabriz et al., 2021). Less experienced teachers appear to benefit the most following their participation (Postareff et al., 2007). Nevertheless, once established, academics' self-efficacy seems to remain relatively stable (Morris & Usher, 2011).

1.1.5 Burnout

There are many definitions for the concept of burnout; the most sustained and accepted definition is the one proposed by Maslach (1982 p. 2), which represents *burnout* as a "syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and low personal fulfillment" that occurs as a reaction to chronic emotional stress from working with others. Unfortunately, despite its importance, the concept of burnout remains understudied in relation to academics' participation in IDPs (Trigwell & Prosser, 2020).

2 Methodology

2.1 Study Design

The current study aimed to determine whether an IDP significantly affected teachers' teaching conceptions and approaches, autonomy, support, self-efficacy, and burnout. We used a mixed quasi-experimental design (quantitative and qualitative data) with two measurements (pre-test and post-test) without a control group. Four research questions were formulated:

Q1. Does the program significantly change teachers' teaching approaches in a specific subject context or the teachers' general teaching approaches?
Q2. Does the program significantly change the teachers' work-related experiences (autonomy and peer support)?
Q3. Does the program significantly change the teachers' well-being (self-efficacy and burnout)?
Q4. Does the program significantly change the teachers' conceptions about teaching?

2.2 Participants and Procedure

Our sample comprises 13 academics (i.e., all female, mean age = 36.62, mean teaching experience = 10.42 years) who teach soft disciplines (i.e., Social Science and Humanities). Four academics were at the beginning of their teaching career. The academics were informed about data anonymity and consented to its use in our research. The participating teachers were required to select a subject they taught (i.e., referential subject) for which they applied what they learned during the IDP and about which we collected the data. One participant did not complete the form during the second measurement, leaving us with a final sample of 12 participants.

2.3 The Training Program

All the academics of the WUT were invited to participate in one didactic grant competition. Following the double-blind peer review process, only 13 applications were awarded a grant of around 1000 euros (i.e., 5.000 RON) from the total number of applications (n = 17). Afterward, grant winners assume to participate in a training program and implement an innovative instructional model (i.e., Reflective-Colaborative Learning—RCL; CDA, 2019) in one specific subject they teach during one semester. Consequently, a team of academic developers organized two training sessions to help the grant winners deepen their understanding of the RCL model and change their teaching and learning conceptions and practices towards a more SCL approach. Both sessions took place before the beginning of the semester, and participation was mandatory. Throughout the semester (i.e., between the measurements), the academics benefited from support mentoring from teachers experienced in using the RCL model. The program had 25 h of activities, of which 8 h represented the two workshops (4 h each) and 17 h to complete the individual and mentoring activities.

The first workshop informed participants about the RCL educational design principles and tools, aiming to help the participants design a syllabus (according to the RCL model) for a subject they taught. The elaboration of the syllabus was considered the final assessment task of this workshop. In the second workshop, academics learned how to elaborate a lesson plan according to the RCL model. To complete the program, participants had to elaborate three lesson plans according to the RCL model for three different instructional activities for the same subject they previously elaborated on the syllabus. During the semester, the participants received mentorship from experienced teachers to use the RCL model in their current instructional activities on the same subject for which they prepared the syllabus and the lesson plans. The mentoring process included scheduled meetings and a public evaluation of the outcomes.

2.4 Instruments

To increase the current study's internal validity, we collected both quantitative and qualitative data.

2.4.1 Quantitative Measurements

To assess academics' teaching conceptions, we employed the Romanian form (Mladenovici & Ilie 2023) of the Conceptions of Learning and Teaching (COLT) inventory (Jacobs et al., 2012). This inventory comprises 18 items divided into three dimensions: Teacher-centeredness, Appreciation of active learning, and Orientation to professional practice. Each item is measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree".

To assess academics' specific teaching approaches, we employed the five-factor R-ATI (i.e., Revised-Approaches to Teaching Inventory), as validated on the Romanian population by Mladenovici et al. (2022). R-ATI has 22 items divided into five dimensions: three representing a student-centered teaching approach (i.e., conceptual change, discussions between teacher and students, and discussion between students) and two a teacher-centered approach (i.e., information transmission and focus). The items are scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Very rarely true" = 1 to "Almost always true" = 5.

To assess academics' teaching approaches (in general), their well-being, autonomy, and work environment experiences, we used the HowUTeach self-assessment tool developed by Parpala and Postareff (2021). HowUTeach contains 22 items covering general approaches to teaching (i.e., four approaches to teaching, three items each: transmissive, interactive, unreflective, and organized), experiences of the work environment (autonomy—three items, peer support—three items), and well-being (self-efficacy—four items). The items use a five-point Likert scale, from "Totally disagree" = 1 to "Totally agree" = 5.

To evaluate the burnout level of the participating teachers, we used the shortened version of the Burnout Assessment Tool (BAT-12, Hadžibajramović et al. 2022). The 12 items of the instrument are split into four dimensions (i.e., exhaustion, mental distance, cognitive, and emotional impairment), assessed on a five-point Likert scale (i.e., 1 = never to 5 = always).

2.4.2 Qualitative Measurements

The online forms (both in the pre-test and post-test) also contained the following open-ended questions: *Q1. What do you want to achieve through your teaching (in the university context)? Q2. From your point of view, what is teaching (in the university context)? Q3. What do you think your role is? Q4. Do you think your teaching influences student learning? If so, how?*

Questions 1 and 2 are meant to collect information regarding teaching conceptions by revealing the meaning teachers attribute to their didactic activity from a practical and theoretical point of view. The answers to these questions are analyzed within the framework proposed by Kember (1997), which proposes five categories: two teacher-centered/content-oriented categories (A. Imparting information; B. Transmitting structured knowledge); one intermediary category (C. Student-Teacher interaction/Apprenticeship); and two student-centered/learning-oriented categories (D. Facilitating understanding; F. Conceptualizing change/Intellectual development).

For questions three and the second part of question four, we can further expand our understanding regarding the respondents' teacher-focused or student-focused approaches by determining the roles teachers identify with and whether their actions are aligned with those roles. There are five roles, according to Grasha (1994): expert, formal authority, personal model, facilitator, and delegator. The first three represent the teacher-focused approach, and the other two represent the student-centered one. The first part of question 4 indicates the teachers' self-efficacy beliefs.

3 Results

3.1 Preliminary Results

We verified the reliability and distribution of the quantitative data collected. Most of the variables presented adequate levels of internal consistency (alpha Cronbach ≥ 0.70) in both moments. The few exceptions that presented a less-than-desirable value (alpha < 0.70, e.g., the organized approach and mental distance dimensions) were also included in the study following the recommendations of Tavakol and Dennick (2011). Next, depending on the degree to which the assumptions were met, we employed the paired sample T-test (Table 1) or the non-parametric alternative. As in some cases, the assumption of the symmetrical distribution of differences for the Wilcoxon signed rank test was not met, we used the Paired-Samples Sign Test (Table 2).

3.2 Quantitative Results

Following the analysis of the normally distributed data through the paired samples T-test, we found a significant change in the academics' conceptual changes dimension (of the R-ATI), for which we identified a significant increase from the pre-test (mean $= 4.27$) to the post-test (mean $= 4.55$), $t(11) = 6.352$, $p < 0.05$, with a small to medium effect size ($d = 0.41$).
The results of the Paired-Samples Sign Test did not yield significant changes from the pre-test to the post-test for the variables related to conceptions and approaches toward teaching ($p < 0.05$). However, regarding the burnout level, there was a significant median decrease in Exhaustion (0_17) from pre-intervention (2_50) to post-intervention (2_33), $p < 0.05$, with a large effect size ($d = 0.88$).

3.3 Qualitative Results

For the open-ended questions, we decided to use an exploratory approach and analyze the answers for questions 1 and 2 based on Kember's (1997) framework and questions 3 and 4 based on the five roles described by Grasha (1994). After analyzing the content of the answers given by the 12 teachers, we often identified teachers expressing views

Table 1 Results of the paired samples T test

Variable	Dimension		M	SD
Academics' teaching conceptions	Teacher Centeredness	Before	3.11	0.613
		After	3.20	0.616
		Change	−0.093	
		t	−1.511	
		p	$p > 0.05$	
	Appreciation of Active Learning	Before	4.53	0.365
		After	4.68	0.289
		Change	−0.150	
		t	−1.750	
		p	$p > 0.05$	
Academics' general teaching approaches	Interactive Approach	Before	4.58	0.452
		After	4.69	0.301
		Change	−0.111	
		t	−0.688	
		p	$p > 0.05$	
	Organized Approach	Before	3.78	0.520
		After	3.89	0.457
		Change	−0.112	
		t	−0.941	
		p	$p > 0.05$	
Academics' perceptions of the work environment	Support	Before	4.28	0.600
		After	4.08	0.867
		Change	0.195	
		t	0.778	
		p	$p > 0.05$	

belonging to a student-centered and teacher-centered style. For ease of analysis, teachers were framed in the category for which we considered they expressed a higher tendency.

Q1. What do you want to achieve through your teaching (in the university context)? At the pre-test moment, 41.67% (5 teachers) expressed views specific to Kember's cluster C, 33.33% (4 teachers) with cluster D. Clusters E, B, and A had 8.33% (one

Table 1 (continued)

Variable	Dimension		M	SD
Academics' burnout	Mental Distance	Before	1.61	0.446
		After	1.50	0.415
		Change	0.109	
		t	0.917	
		p	$p > 0.05$	
	Cognitive Impairment	Before	1.39	0.446
		After	1.56	0.557
		Change	−0.168	
		t	−1.153	
		p	$p > 0.05$	
Academics' teaching approaches in the referential subject	Conceptual Change	Before	4.27	0.637
		After	**4.55**	**0.385**
		Change	**−0.276**	
		t	**−2.593**	
		p	**0.025**	
	Discussion Student	Before	4.63	0.742
		After	4.42	0.764
		Change	0.208	
		t	.923	
		p	$p > 0.05$	
	Test-Focus	Before	3.77	0.516
		After	3.77	0.750
		Change	0.000	
		t	0.000	
		p	$p > 0.05$	

teacher) each. At the post-test moment, 50% (6 teachers) of the teachers were inclined toward cluster D, 33.33% (4 teachers) toward cluster E, and 16.67% (2 teachers) to cluster C (no one identified with A and B). The change from one moment to the other was significant: 83.33% of teachers belonging to clusters specific to student-centered conceptions following the completion of the program.

Q2. From your point of view, what is teaching (in the university context)?

At the pre-test moment, 41.67% (5 teachers) of the answers seemed to correspond to cluster C, 25% (3 teachers) to cluster E, 16.67% (2 teachers) to B, and lastly, A and

Table 2 Results of the paired-samples sign test

Variable	Dimension	Neg/Pos/Ties	N	Median T1	Median T2	Median difference	Z	p	d
Academics' teaching conceptions	Orientation to Professional Practice	Pos.	2	4.80	4.80	0.00	0.00	$p > 0.05$	0.05
		Neg.	2						
		Ties	8						
Academics' general teaching approaches	Unreflective Approach	Pos.	4	2.17	2.50	0.00	0.00	$p > 0.05$	0.03
		Neg.	3						
		Ties	5						
	Transmissive Approach	Pos.	2	2.50	2.33	0.00	−1.58	$p > 0.05$	0.50
		Neg.	8						
		Ties	2						
Academics' perceptions of the work environment	Autonomy	Pos.	6	4.33	4.33	0.00	0.32	$p > 0.05$	0.00
		Neg.	4						
		Ties	2						
Academics' well-being	Self-efficacy	Pos.	4	4.38	4.38	0.00	0.00	$p > 0.05$	0.24
		Neg.	3						
		Ties	5						

Table 2 (continued)

Variable	Dimension	Neg/Pos/Ties	N	Median T1	Median T2	Median difference	Z	p	d
Academics' burnout	Exhaustion	Pos.	1	2.50	2.33	−0.17	−2.21	0.021	0.88
		Neg.	9						
		Ties	2						
	Emotional Impairment	Pos.	5	1.50	1.17	0.00	0.00	$p > 0.05$	0.24
		Neg.	4						
		Ties	3						
Academics' teaching approaches in the referential subject	Discussion Teacher Students	Pos.	2	5.00	5.00	0.00	0.00	$p > 0.05$	0.28
		Neg.	1						
		Ties	9						
	Information Transmission	Pos.	5	2.93	2.93	−0.07	−0.29	$p > 0.05$	0.15
		Neg.	7						
		Ties	0						

D had 8.33% (1 teacher) each. At the post-test moment, 75% (9 teachers) of teachers identified with cluster D, 16.67% (2 teachers) with C, and 8.33% (one teacher) with B (no one identified with A and E). Teachers' conceptions significantly shifted after the program, with the majority (75%) expressing student-centered opinions.

Q3. What do you think your role is?

At the pre-test moment, 41.67% (5 teachers) of the teachers' views seemed to correspond to the role of facilitator, 25% (3 teachers) with delegator, and the roles of expert and formal authority represented 16.67% (2 teachers) of the teachers each. No teacher identified with the role of a personal model. At the post-test moment, 75% (9 teachers) of the teachers' comments tended to fall within the role of facilitator, and each of the role's expert, formal authority, and delegator represented 8.33% (one teacher) of the total. Again, no teacher identified with the personal model. We can observe a significant increase in teachers identifying with the facilitator role after the program (75%).

Q4. Do you think your teaching influences student learning? If so, how?

All teachers responded positively to the first part of the question, expressing confidence in their teaching (i.e., self-efficacy). For the second part of the question, at the pre-test moment, the roles of facilitator and formal authority had an identical distribution, representing 33.33% (4 teachers) of the sample's views. The delegator followed in the hierarchy with 16.67% (2 teachers); one teacher expressed the personal model role, while another did not identify with any role. At the post-test moment, the answers of 50% (6 teachers) of teachers could be framed within the facilitator role, the delegator role was specific for 25% (3 teachers), and the personal model role was identifiable in the answers of the remaining 25% (3 teachers). No teacher identified with the expert and formal authority roles in the post-test. Overall, at the post-test, the evolution from teaching practices specific to a teacher-centered role to a student-centered one was sustained by the qualitative data (i.e., 75% of academics started after the IDPs to use mostly student-centered roles such as facilitator and delegator).

4 Discussions and Implications

The present study attempted to investigate the effect of a pedagogical training program offered to academics in the 2022–2023 WUT's grants competition by employing a mixed quasi-experimental design with no control group and two measurement points. Both quantitative and qualitative data sustained the existence of positive transformation in academics' teaching approaches regarding the extent to which they perceive instruction as enabling students to develop new insights into the taught subject independently. This conclusion aligns with previous findings of studies investigating IDP's effects (Ilie et al., 2020). However, the lack of impact over general approaches limits the program's capability to determine changes outside the subject considered during the training.

Even though the current IDPs positively determined positive transformation in academics' SCL conceptual change in the referential subject, there were no significant decreases in teacher-centered approaches. This finding aligns with previous studies that show that it is more challenging to change teacher-centered approaches compared to student-centered approaches (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Lindblom-Yl et al., 2006). One possible explanation is that the IDPs usually focus too much on increasing SCL approaches and overlook the need to decrease teacher-centered instruction. Support in the form of debriefing sessions to increase awareness of these differences and help teachers extrapolate what they learned outside the specific context of the program could yield positive results. Thus, academic developers should independently target the two approaches through distinct activities (i.e., increasing student-centered and decreasing teacher-centered approaches) (Mladenovici & Ilie, 2023).

Regarding our teachers' burnout level, we identified a significant decrease in exhaustion after completing the program, which is an encouraging result since, in a previous edition of the teaching grants, academics reported a significant decrease in their resilience levels after participating in the program (Balan et al., 2023). We attribute this result to the mentoring process, the only novelty element differentiating this edition's training from the previous one. Although we could not identify studies directly speaking of the relationship between academics' involvement in mentoring activities and burnout levels, we did find other elements that could indirectly lead to a decrease in burnout. Namely, mentoring increases productivity and confidence (Beckerman, 2010) and facilitates building learning communities (Margalef & Roblin, 2018). Learning communities, in turn, lead to a further increase in teaching culture, collaboration focused on student learning, and teacher empowerment (Vescio, 2008). Knowing they can receive assistance whenever necessary may make academics less stressed by the workload, which could decrease psychological exhaustion. Considering the implications for teachers' well-being, academic developers should integrate mentoring systems as part of IDPs to ease the workload while enhancing effectiveness.

We observed a significant change in teachers' conceptions and roles based on the qualitative data. At the post-test, more teachers identified with cluster D (i.e., facilitating understanding) and the role of facilitator. This may indicate an impact on teaching practices outside the limited scope of the self-reported instruments. Previous studies stated that quantitative and qualitative data are needed to understand an IDP's impact (Miles et al., 2014). For example, some studies that used mixed methods confirmed with both types of data the positive impact of their IDPs over teaching conceptions (Noben et al., 2021) and approaches (Postareff et al., 2007). We could not obtain similar results due to the low statistical power resulting from our small sample size. After all, previous studies discovered that SCL conceptions and approaches are related to high levels of self-efficacy (Noben et al., 2021; Postareff et al., 2007), and our sample maintained a high level of self-efficacy during both measurement moments.

5 Limits and Recommendations

Our results should be interpreted cautiously, considering limitations that make their generalization challenging. First, our small sample of participants lowered the study's statistical power, increasing the possibility of a type 2 error (i.e., false negative) and lowering the internal consistency for some variables. Second, we could not realize separate analyses based on teaching experience, type of discipline, and gender (i.e., a small sample comprising only female teachers from soft disciplines). Besides the obvious need for a more balanced sample, previous research stated that these variables influence the effectiveness of IDPs (McMinn et al., 2022; Mladenovici & Ilie, 2023; Postareff et al., 2007). For example, Mladenovici and Ilie (2023) presented evidence that debutant teachers in HE are more likely to change their teaching approaches (compared to more experienced teachers), which may further determine complementary teaching conceptions. In our case, it would be more beneficial to have implemented separate training directions depending on the participants' experience, focusing more on the development of teaching approaches in the case of debutants and more on the teaching conceptions in the case of experienced academics.

Third, previous studies show that teacher-centered approaches require more time and effort to reduce the emphasis on teachers themselves and the teaching content (Lindblom-Yl et al., 2006). Additionally, research evidence indicates that soft discipline teachers are more inclined towards student-centered approaches (Postareff et al., 2007). Our intervention is both too general and too short to enact fundamental changes. To address this, Mladenovici and Ilie (2023) recommend the use of distinct training practices (i.e., for increasing student-centeredness and decreasing teacher-centeredness), and Postareff and her collaborators (2007) recommend IDPs at least one year long.

Fourth, a follow-up could help observe the changes in time, even for a short intervention (Ilie et al., 2020). Fifth, our study's qualitative approach (i.e., open-ended questions) could be improved. To increase the quality and validity, future studies should employ observations of teaching (i.e., real-time or recordings) and interviews in addition to quantitative self-reported data. Using more measurement methods might also address one last limit: many variables presented already high values at the pre-test, leaving little room for improvement (i.e., the floor and ceiling effects).

6 Conclusion

Our investigation reveals (once again) how challenging it is to reinforce teaching and learning to achieve effective, sustainable, student-centered teaching in Academia. The present study measured the impact of an IDP offered as part of a teaching grants contest meant to encourage the implementation of SCL practices in a comprehensive Romanian university. After the program, there were significant transformations in academics' SCL approaches (i.e., conceptual-change intentions and strategies) but only in the subject they chose as referential. Participants also reported significant decreases in their exhaustion levels. Also, data revealed changes in teachers' conceptions and roles, with academics stating that they see themselves as facilitators regarding students' learning. Given the positive results of our endeavor, we believe that future IDPs that foster the creation of teaching practice communities where academics can share and reflect upon their difficulties and successes related to implementing SCL in their teaching will have sounder outcomes. Also, developing a recognition and reward system supplemented by training and peer support for academics eager to implement SCL into their daily teaching practices will be a step toward a more effective and sustainable SCL in HE. Making higher education a genuinely inclusive and sustainable process can only be achieved with the transversal integration of knowledge from the social sciences and humanities, especially from university pedagogy and educational psychology. To further equip students with the necessary higher-order competencies to navigate and succeed in a rapidly transforming economic landscape as an engine of innovation, knowledge dissemination, and human capital development, HE has to reinvent itself permanently and look for innovative solutions to reinforce teaching and learning. Although it remains to be seen why some academics became more student-centered than others, we hope that other stakeholders interested in implementing similar IDPs to reinforce student-centered teaching and learning in higher education will consider our study's main takes and keep documenting how individual participants make sense of such learning experiences.

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Student-Centred Learning in Higher Education: Relevant Quality Assurance Indicators

Adina Elena Glava, Cristina Ghiţulică, Nicolae Adrian Opre, and Petrişor Laurenţiu Ţucă

Abstract Student-centred learning (SCL) is a key quality assurance standard promoted across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), as established by the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG, 2015). Its implementation requires articulated commitment, decision and practice undertaken by institutions, teaching staff and students. The current literature on quality academic learning and teaching explains SCL through various factors that range from the creation of a student-centred higher education culture to the implementation of active and innovative learning strategies. However, the national quality assurance policies and practices might vary importantly. The present paper aims to offer a view on the latest thinking and evidence regarding the SCL approaches in the EHEA and Romanian higher education, analysed from the quality assurance perspective. Our research had a dual focus. We performed a systematic review of the strategies and frameworks used by quality assurance agencies to assess SCL implementation in higher education. We also explored the perspective of Romanian higher education management and academic representatives on the SCL and its use for the design of quality higher education study programs. Our main research questions were: (1) What are the strategies and practices employed by the EHEA quality assurance agencies for the assessment of SCL implementation in higher education institutions? (2) What is the perception of Romanian higher education stakeholders on the concept of SCL, its implementation and its impact on curriculum development and students' learning? (3) What are the critical factors of SCL implementation that can be considered in elaborating future effective assessment procedures? Our study contributes to improving higher education quality assurance procedures by highlighting pos-

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sible future guidelines for supporting and evaluating the implementation of SCL approaches.

Keywords Student-centred learning · Quality assurance in higher education · SCL variables · Effective higher education

1 Student-Centred Learning Concept and Approaches

Student-centred learning (SCL) is a critical internal quality assurance standard promoted across EHEA. Its importance was highlighted from the early stages of the Bologna Process implementation in higher education institutions (London Communiqué, 2007). Further, it was reasserted in relation to the need for an ongoing reform of higher education curriculum towards the development of learning outcomes and towards an improved connection with the labour market (Leuven Communiqué, 2009). It received a more concrete and action-focused shape through the Bucharest Communiqué (2012), when SCL was presented in association with innovative teaching methods and "a supportive and inspiring working and learning environment" (p. 2) and was explained as an approach that fosters the development of students' intellectual autonomy, critical thinking, and self-confidence. After the Yerevan Communiqué (2015), which called for the adoption of pedagogical innovations favourable for SCL, this principle became an explicit part of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (namely, the internal evaluation standards 1.3 and other related specific standards that state the status and roles of students as active agents in the academic context: 1.6—support and learning resources and 1.5—teachers' new roles). All these focused approaches inspired the future solid recommendations of the European Commission and EC commissioned studies, that SCL should be directly targeted and financed through concrete actions related to curriculum development, teacher training and raising of student agency (Klemenčič et al., 2020).

Today, student-centred learning is a key policy area of the Bologna Process. Through the Rome Communiqué, adopted in 2020, the ministers agreed on "Recommendations to National Authorities for the Enhancement of Higher Education Learning and Teaching in the EHEA", to support the institutions in fostering student-centred learning and teaching. This is seen in close relation to the learning-outcomes approach in curriculum design and requires new approaches to teaching and learning and tailored, flexible learning. SCL also involves empowered learners who are active participants in their learning, enhanced teaching competencies, and an inspiring working and learning academic environment.

While the formal context for the implementation of SCL was created and consolidated, the later thematic analyses (ESG 2015–2018 ENQA agency reports: thematic analysis) observe that "the most problematic standard for agencies to verify through external quality assurance activities is standard 1.3 (Student-centred learning)" (Tomas & Kelo, 2020). The idea is also underlined in a European University Association 2019 report on approaches to quality assurance of student-centred learning (Gover et al., 2019) that states two of the possible sources for the difficulties in SCL implementation: a lack of shared understanding of the concept and persistent uncertainties on the evidence that would prove that the requirements of the standard are met.

Yet, the existing literature on the topic reflects a clear effort made by a variety of European stakeholders to reach a common understanding of the concept of student-centred learning. Thus, the concept of SCL is generally presented as a meaningful (ESU, 2016), multidimensional concept that implies specific values, policies, practices related to human resources, curriculum, teaching, learning and evaluation practices, distinct academic community features and a specific institutional culture, based on flexibility and equity. In the policy and governance documents, it is primarily regarded as a true paradigm shift (Gaebel et al., 2018) towards an improved institutional culture characterised by supportive learning environments, connectivity, and collaboration. It is also presented as a new mindset (of teachers and students) that implies teaching staff training and recognition of quality teaching, students' involvement, interactivity, and valorisation of individuality.

In the context of quality assurance recommendations and reports, SCL is often considered a *transversal filter for evaluation* (Klemenčič et al., 2020) that is *context–sensitive* and would require quality assurance agents to focus on the evaluation of institutional and teaching *adaptability* and *curricular flexibility*, associated with academic mobility, targeting specific learning outcomes, and recognition and transfer of credits.

The *transversal/ overarching nature of SCL* refers to its pervasive effect when adopted institution-wide as an approach with implications for academic quality assurance. Thus, SCL has the potential to reshape the functioning paradigm of higher education institutions and the structure of the educational process, with significant effects on multiple levels:

a. in terms of the quality of academic teaching and learning;

b. in empowering teachers and providing continuous professional development for university teaching staff;

c. in streamlining educational and research policies and practices by involving students as decision-making partners in curriculum development.

These influences will lead to a better alignment of study programs with contemporary professional development needs and expectations, including the ones coming from the labour market. Student-centredness involves revisiting the institutional culture, restructuring policies and fostering an academic community that promotes communication, cooperation, continuous curriculum development, enhanced access to resources, inclusivity, and a focus on learning and development. The 2017 study of Klemenčič, focused on conceptual considerations of European Policies on student-centred learning in higher education, highlights all these implications and advances by labelling SCL as a 'meta-concept' (Klemenčič, 2017, p. 30). In our view, this global perspective has real practical implications for both the implementation of SCL and its assessment from a quality assurance viewpoint.

A recent analysis developed for the European Commission looks at SCL from the students' perspective and identifies three fundamental elements: student satisfaction, student engagement, and student agency, stressing student agency as the critical, definitory factor. These three variables may become central in a SCL quality assurance strategy (Klemenčič et al., 2020).

Even though recent literature is unanimous in accepting that student-centred institutions and educational processes extend beyond adapting or diversifying teaching practices, when seen in practical terms, SCL is frequently described as an educational approach of a constructivist nature that requires active teaching and learning strategies, implementation of innovative pedagogies and digital technologies to enhance significant learning, and professional and personal development of students (ESU & EI, 2010a, 2010b; ESU, 2018; Todorovski et al., 2015).

To articulate all the dimensions of SCL philosophy and practice, for the present study, we advance a *working definition* of SCL:

> *Student-centred learning (SCL) is a strategic approach to the educational process. SCL involves designing and implementing study programs, training activities, and teaching interactions to best cater to the academic, professional and personal developmental needs and interests of students. Specifically, SCL entails prioritising learning outcomes, promoting engaging and authentic learning through innovative teaching practices, valuing high-quality teaching, and constructing learning communities where students are viewed as direct partners in developing the university curriculum and enhancing academic culture, policies, and practices.*

In the understanding of the authors of this paper, the term "learning" encompasses all the key attributes of the educational process: teaching, learning, and assessment, along with their specific interdependencies. For the sake of brevity, the acronym SCL is used as a conceptual label for the focus on the student in the educational and academic processes.

The evaluation of SCL implementation and impact is still problematic. Thus, relatively recent reports of the European Students Union (ESU, 2018) and the European Commission (Klemenčič et al., 2020), as well as the recent statement on the future of student-centred learning issued by ESU (2022) stress that students' perspective on SCL is not sufficiently considered and urge for the development of standards and indicators that prove how SCL is working in practice. Its actual implementation requires articulated commitment, decision and practice undertaken by institutions, teaching staff and students.

The current literature on quality academic teaching and learning explains SCL through various factors ranging from the creation of a student-centred higher education culture to the implementation of active and innovative learning strategies. However, the quality assurance policies and practices are not convergent in using a commonly accepted set of assessment criteria and indicators for the effective implementation of SCL in higher education. We support the idea that each national quality assurance system should develop its own understanding of SCL and make the concept operational through specific quality assurance instruments and criteria.

Along the years, several assessment frameworks and instruments[1] were developed. Even though they were not meant to be adopted as internal or external evaluation instruments that would be assumed at the level of national agencies, they represent an essential effort in the process of operationalising SCL and its assessment.

2 Method

The purpose of the present paper is to offer an extensive view of the latest thinking and evidence regarding the SCL approaches in international and Romanian higher education, analysed from the quality assurance perspective, as well as to reflect on the subject in relation to the Romanian higher education context.

Our research consisted of two studies. The first study was a systematic review of the strategies, frameworks, and factors used by national and international quality assurance agencies for the assessment of SCL in higher education as they came out from synthetic reports, policy, and regulation documents. The second study explored the perspective of the Romanian higher education stakeholders on SCL and its possible impact on the design of qualitative higher education study programs.

Our main research questions were: (1) What are the strategies and practices employed by the EHEA quality assurance systems for the assessment of SCL implementation in higher education institutions? (2) What is the perception of the Romanian higher education stakeholders on the concept of SCL, its implementation and

[1] The SCL toolkit (2010a) [https://www.esu-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/100814-SCL.pdfhttps://www.esu-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/100814-SCL.pdf], elaborated as part of project T4SCL. Self-assessment tool for HE (provided by EC) (SCLT): Todorovski et al. (2015). Overview on Student-Centered Learning in Higher Education in Europe: Research Study. European Students' Union https://www.ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/Student_centred_learning/63/2/Overview-on-Student-Centred-Learning-in-Higher-Education-in-Europe_679632.pdf.

impact on the curriculum development and students' learning? (3) What are the critical factors of SCL implementation that can be considered in the elaboration of future effective assessment procedures?

In the attempt to answer the first research question, we included two types of sources:

a. Official national and EHEA policy and regulation documents, including principles, criteria, and practices of quality assurance assessment of SCL
b. Research reports regarding the initiatives and criteria for SCL implementation evaluation in the context of internal and external quality assurance.

Inclusion criteria. We considered documents dated no earlier than 2010, where the significance of SCL started to emerge at the level of the EHEA. The selected documents included the perspectives of stakeholders involved in the quality assurance of HE, including students. We selected and organised the sources so that they offered information on both the QA assessment strategies and practice and on the assessment criteria employed by the QA structures.

The second study aimed at exploring the perception of the Romanian higher education stakeholders on the concept of SCL, its implementation, and its impact on curriculum development and students' learning. This was a survey-type study that required the development of a specific data collection instrument.

Participants. The study engaged two categories of respondents. One category included higher education QA expert evaluators and managers of higher education institutions. The additional category included other higher education stakeholders (faculty members). The respondents acted voluntarily by answering our call to complete an online questionnaire.

Survey instrument. The exploratory study was based on data collected through SCL-HE Inventory, an instrument developed for the present study. The inventory included five categories of items, organised as follows:

- demographic data: higher education institution (university of employment), status-role in relation to quality assurance assessment, work seniority.
- items related to the perceived significance of SCL (category 5) and the perceived institutional initiatives of implementing SCL (category 7 in the annexed SCL-HE Inventory). These two categories of items were to be ordered by the respondents in a hierarchy so that the most important associations for SCL to be highlighted.
- items related to the representation of SCL in the institutional culture (category 6.A).
- items related to the manifestation of SCL in learning, teaching, and academic assessment (category 6.B).
- items related to the inclusion of SCL in institutional policies, inclusively related to internal quality assurance, and professional development (category 6.C).

Items in categories 6A, 6B and 6C were to be evaluated on a 5-option Likert scale.

A total of 386 participants were involved in a survey undertaken through the online administration of the SCL_HE Inventory. The composition of the respondents' cohort

Table 1 Description of participants to the SCL_HE survey

Seniority in higher education		Role undertaken in quality assurance in academic structures	
Less than 5 years	10	Without QA responsibilities	106
6–**10 years**	21		
		With QA responsibilities	280
More than 10 years	355		

partially determined the selection of statistical measures performed. The table below offers an image of the participants' specific seniority and QA related roles (Table 1): At the level of each category of items, a set of statistical processing was undertaken. For items 5 and 7 that asked participants to order the options hierarchically, we performed descriptive statistic processing. For the three dimensions of item 6 (A, B and C), the internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) was calculated. Since the groups formed by the seniority variable are unequal in volume, the homogeneity of variances of the groups was tested to choose the most appropriate comparative statistical test.

As a result of both studies, we extracted a set of critical factors of SCL implementation that can be considered in the elaboration of future effective assessment procedures, and we developed a model that may guide the future creation of assessment procedures and criteria.

3 Results

3.1 Analysis of Strategies and Practices Employed by EHEA Quality Assurance Systems for the Assessment of SCL Implementation

The evaluation of student-centred learning implementation in higher education is particularly reported as difficult to carry out. A recent ENQA Agency report highlighted several reasons for this issue as expressed by different EHEA QA agencies and systems, starting with a limited understanding of the very concept to the absence of its mapping and to the new status of this standard (Tomas et al., 2020). However, different EHEA quality assurance agencies, such as the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation of Spain—ANECA, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre—FINEEC, the High Council for the Evaluation of Research and Higher Education—HCERES (France) and the Academic Information Centre—AIC (Latvia), are promoting the student-centred education concept through their external assessment processes. In this section, we report on different benchmarks used by QA agencies to assess SCL implementation in higher education of these assessments, focusing on how they have influenced the dynamics of teaching and learning, curriculum development and the overall educational experience of students.

One important benchmark is focused on promoting **SCL higher education environments** through teaching and learning practices. Thus, the assessment practices draw stakeholders' attention towards the practicalities of student-centred learning. The evaluations by these agencies often highlight the need for institutions to adopt and effectively implement teaching methodologies that are able to support active learning and students' direct engagement with the contents, collaboration with peers, and application of knowledge in practical settings.

A second focus we identified was on observing the way SCL is reflected by ***academic curriculum design and development***. In terms of curriculum design, the reports from agencies like ANECA and HCERES include recommendations for curriculum improvement, ensuring that courses are designed to meet the evolving needs of students and the wider societal and professional contexts. This involves innovation in teaching, students' and teachers' academic mobility and student participation (ANECA, 2024), integrating interdisciplinary approaches, fostering competence acquisition and providing opportunities for all the students to reach the learning outcomes (HCERES, 2024).

Developing fruitful educational experiences for students is a third aspect of the SCL approach, which we identified as a focus of QA systems evaluation. This aim is evaluated by stressing the importance of certain specific actions, such as:

a. Enhancement of student participation and feedback mechanisms
In accordance with the ESG standards, agencies often recommend that institutions involve students in decision-making processes related to curriculum design, teaching methods, and assessment strategies (particularly stressed by FINECC). This participatory approach not only empowers students but also ensures that educational offerings are closely aligned with their needs and expectations, and with the expectations of the labour market (particularly stressed by HCERES).

b. Resource Allocation and Support Services
Cyclical QA evaluations generally lead to improvements in resource allocation and the provision of support services. Agencies like FINECC and AIC emphasise the importance of adequate resources, including learning materials, technology, and faculty support, to facilitate effective student-centred learning and acquire the intended learning outcomes. Additionally, student well-being, supporting students' motivation and providing other support services, such as counselling and career guidance, are often highlighted in these assessment systems.

3.1.1 Challenges in Assessing Student-Centred Learning

The impact of consistent focus on the SCL approach is evident in educational practices' gradual but significant transformation towards more student-centred approaches. Institutions are increasingly adopting pedagogies responsive to student needs, preparing them not just academically but also for their future professional lives.

A key challenge identified is the *practical observation of student-centred learning*, as outlined in ESG standard 1.3. Despite its critical importance in improving the educational experience, agencies often have difficulties verifying the proper implementation of student-centred learning practices (Tomas et al., 2020). This highlights the need for more effective strategies and methodologies in assessing and promoting student-centred approaches in higher education, such as:

- The assessment of student-centred learning from the perspective of learning outcomes implementation. A particular issue highlighted in this respect is a need for a common understanding of how learning outcomes function in the institution, between faculty members and at the students' level.
- The assessment of SCL impact on institutional culture. The approach should be visible in the institutional statements, strategic plans, missions, and actions within the European universities' alliances (as SCL is mentioned as a standard in the call for alliances);
- The implementation of the mobility principle as a means of promoting connected frameworks, good practices, and diverse study programs (joint programs, short-term programs etc.).
- The assessment of SCL from the perspective of study program flexibility. A particular issue to be observed in this context is the degree to which the adoption of micro-credentials is observed as a means of meeting employers' and students' needs and interests.
- The use of data to improve students' learning experience. This dimension implies observing the use of digital means and the data collected through them in order to inform decisions that directly affect the educational and personal experience of students.
- Making learning resources accessible through institutional measures. It implies ensuring that all materials and digital resources are accessible to all students, including those with disabilities.
- Leadership and funding related to SCL. It is an evaluation dimension that implies exploring ways in which leadership can influence and shape organisational culture to support and promote SCL.
- The assessment of the manner in which students' perspective expressed through representatives in decision-making processes is included in future actions and policy documents.
- The assessment of students' learning experience quality (the way study programs foster students' autonomy, self-regulation, use of academic resources and services, flexibility and inclusivity of learning environments, support services).
- The assessment of SCL from teachers' perspective and the evaluation of teaching experience in higher education. This is an important criterion included in the very recent study prepared for the European Commission, including recommendations on SCL implementation under the expression teaching ecosystem (Klemenčič et al., 2020). The main aspects expected to be included in future QA assessment

procedures would be the extent to which teaching and learning ecosystems are supportive, flexible, inspiring, in association with innovative pedagogies, digital technologies, learning technologies, active learning spaces, LOs based course contents, curriculum development principles and models (including constructive alignment (Biggs, 2003).

Analysis of external QA practices demonstrates the complexity and diversity of approaches taken. Overall, the consulted quality assurance reports and policy documents reflect a multidimensional evaluative approach on SCL and include SCL-type criteria in the assessment of different institutional and study program dimensions. The results of our analysis highlight the challenges in mapping these assessment undertakings. As higher education continues to evolve, these assessments play a critical role in supporting institutions to adapt and respond effectively to the changing educational landscape and student needs.

3.2 Analysis of the Romanian Higher Education Stakeholders' Perception of the Concept of SCL, Its Implementation and Impact

Two perspectives on the SCL approach perception, implementation and impact on the curriculum development and students' learning are articulated on the basis of a survey implementation: QA experts and other stakeholders' perspective. Examining the respondents' perception on the meaning of student-centred learning was necessary as literature states that one of the important sources of difficulties in SCL implementation seems to be a lack of shared understanding by various higher education stakeholders (Klemenčič, 2017). The results, synthesised in the figure below, show that the option selected as *the most relevant* for explaining SCL was *Teaching strategies that encourage direct student involvement and cooperation (31%),* followed by *Authentic cooperation and communication between teachers and students in actions that have implications for program quality and study/learning experience (27%).* The two options indicated as the most relevant for SCL significance seem to express a tendency of the respondents to perceive SCL as a practical approach that may be promoted mainly within the teaching and learning processes and through formative interactions with students. This tendency is supported by other similar studies (e.g., Trinidad, 2020). On the other end of the hierarchy, we have surprisingly found one of the essential ways of SCL implementation: *Student involvement in institution decision-making structures and processes.* 57% of respondents placed this option on the lowest rank of the hierarchy, despite the formal requirement implemented in all Romanian universities for the specific representation of students in all governance structures and processes. The frequency of this option is followed by the statement *Students have access to resources and services contributing to creating complex, relevant, and authentic learning experiences,* which occupied the lowest rank for 17% of the respondents. These findings suggest the necessity of going beyond the formal representation of students in management and decision-making structures and creating authentic ways to facilitate the students' direct involvement in their academic pathway and experience. Our finding is consistent with the results of a recent study that explored students' perspective on SCL, emphasising the need for a more genuine involvement of students in consultative and decision-making processes (ESU, 2018) (Fig. 1).

The perception of higher education stakeholders on the specific implementation of student-centred learning in higher education institutions was also explored. Participants scored the incidence of three categories of SCL implementation measures/ actions: measures related to institutional culture (vision, values, institutional climate), measures related to teaching, learning, and academic assessment and measures related to institutional policies and professional development. Fig. 2 offers a synthetic image of the results (Fig. 2).

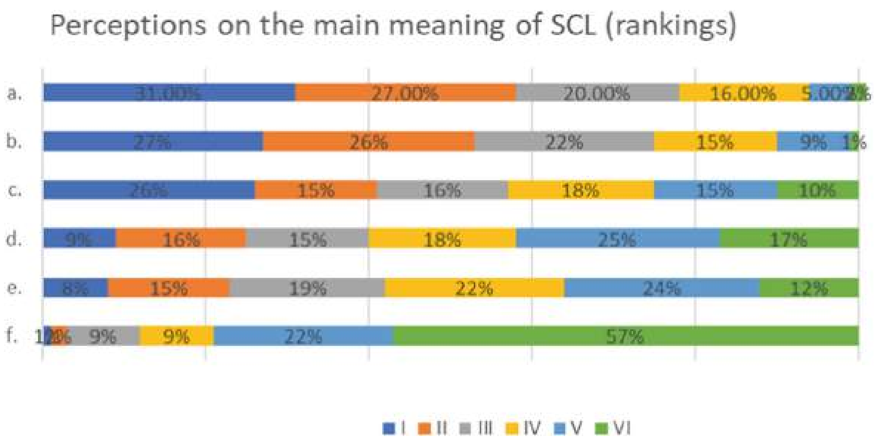

Fig. 1 Perceptions of the main meaning of SCL (rankings)

• Legend:
a. Teaching strategies that encourage direct student involvement and cooperation
b. Authentic cooperation and communication between teachers and students in actions that have implications for program quality and study/learning experience
c. Focusing academic programs and processes on developing professional and transversal competencies
d. Students' access to resources and services contributing to creating complex, relevant, and authentic learning experiences
e. Real implementation of learning outcome-focused academic approach
f. Student involvement in institution decision-making structures and processes
• I, II, III, IV, V, VI represent the ranking order of selection

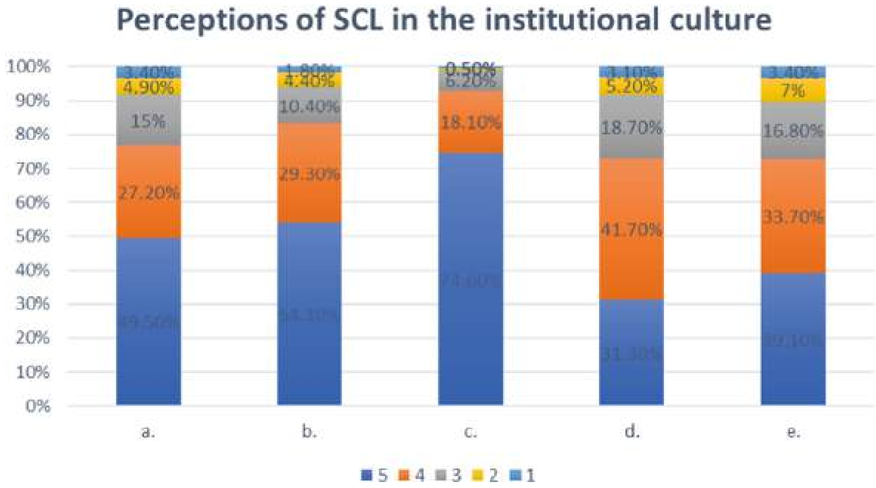

Fig. 2 Perceptions of SCL presence in the institutional culture

• Legend:
a. There is a **culture of partnership and collaboration among teaching staff** in the university
b. There is a culture of partnership and **collaboration between teachers and students** at the university
c. There are clear policies **involving students in decision-making** structures and processes impacting the quality of study programs and teaching practices
d. The principle of **flexibility and freedom of choice** is applied in the design and implementation of academic training programs
e. The institution has **leadership practices** focused on institutional development towards better SCL implementation
• 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 are the answer options on the Likert scale

As indicated by the average scores attributed to the academic culture-related statements, the statement with the highest incidence (74.6%) is: *There are clear policies involving students in decision-making structures and processes impacting the quality of study programs and teaching practices.* While this is primarily a formal requirement in Romanian higher education, its high score suggests that respondents may perceive it as having a potentially significant impact on institutional culture. Consequently, it may have important implications for academic practice and other aspects of university life.

The scoring of statements that refer to the culture of collaboration and partnership existing in the university is significantly high. Thus, 54.1% of the respondents indicated the presence *to a high extent* of a collaboration and partnership culture among teaching staff, and 49.5% reported the existence of a collaboration and partnership culture between teachers and students at the university. This perception may be a good base for future specific SCL implementation actions such as a reflective attitude of teachers and students and an improved involvement of students in shaping the academic programs.

With regard to the actions related to SCL implementation in teaching, supporting learning and assessment, the most intriguing result was on the statement: *In the design of study programs/in the development of course outlines, in teaching, and evaluation, there is a clear concern for student engagement.* A relatively low number of respondents (29,5 %) recognised the existence of this concern in their institutions, a situation that may indicate the need for an explicit promotion of students' involvement beyond their engagement in formal institutional structures. Namely, it could be useful to involve students in practical aspects related to SCL implementation, such as curriculum development actions. Meeting students' academic needs is a critical approach of SCL, present in the Romanian external quality assurance criteria, and involving students in curriculum design may be a good way to accomplish this expectation. The use of former students' feedback and reflections could be an effective initiative in this respect. However, the above-discussed result is pondered with a high recognition of the action: *In the academic activity, there are direct moments and ways to integrate student feedback* (54.1% of respondents indicated its presence *to a high extent*). This may indicate that universities would rather employ indirect ways to involve students in shaping academic activities.

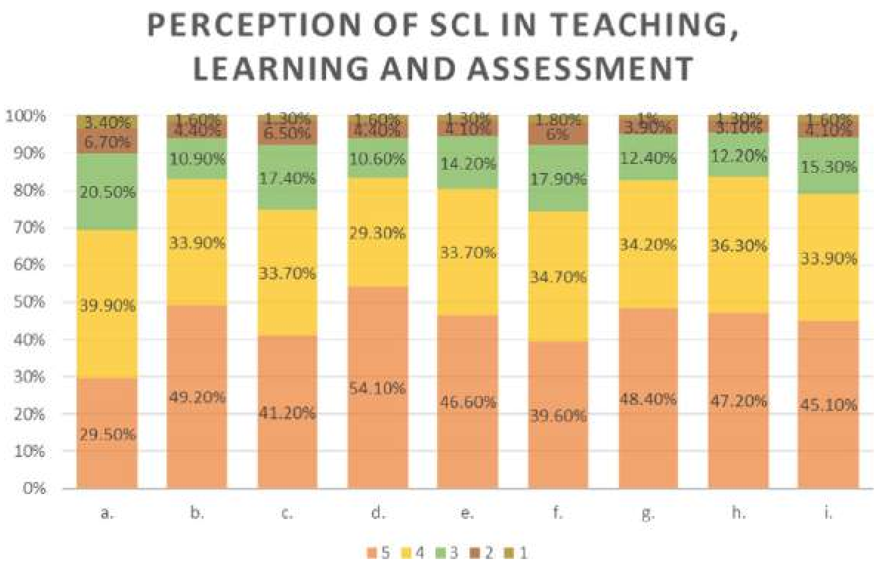

Fig. 3 Perception of SCL in teaching, learning and assessment

• Legend:
a. In the design of study programs/ in the development of course outlines, in teaching, and evaluation, there is a clear **concern for student engagement**
b. In the design and implementation of teaching processes, there is a genuine concern for developing **students' competencies**, including those related to learning preparedness and lifelong development. c. Study programs are designed to allow adaptation of the curriculum and educational processes **according to the knowledge needs and interests**, as well as the development of students
d. In the academic activity, there are direct moments and ways to **integrate student feedback**
e. Academic **assessment has a clear formative dimension** through feedback provided to students
f. Teaching processes allow recognition and valorisation of **student diversity**
g. Teaching strategies encourage learning through **direct and active involvement** of students
h. The **learning environment is inclusive**, supportive, and constructive, promoting access to resources and creation of learning communities
i. **Digital technologies** favour the implementation of SCL practices
• 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 are the answer options on the Likert scale

The relatively high scores attributed to specific instruction-related aspects of SCL, such as focalisation on competence training (49.2% of respondents recognised its presence *to a high extent*), use of active learning strategies (48.4% of respondents recognised its presence *to a high extent*), creation of inclusive learning communities (47.2% of respondents recognised its presence *to a high extent*) and use of digital technologies (45.1% of respondents recognised its presence *to a high extent*) indicate a clear tendency of respondents to associating SCL with specific practical approaches to instruction. The data suggest that student-centred learning may be perceived primarily as being the responsibility of the teacher and the academic curriculum developers (Fig. 3).

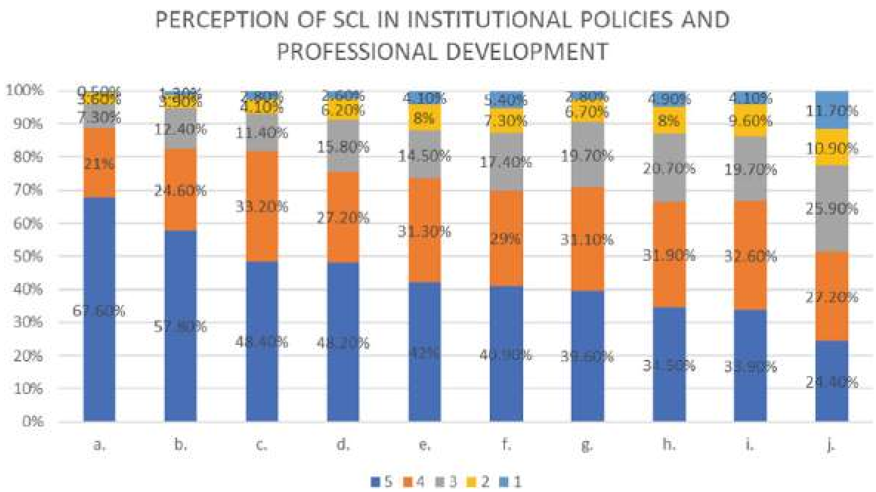

Fig. 4 Perception of SCL implementation in institutional policies and professional development

• Legend:
a. At the institutional level, support for **student mobility and exchanges of best academic practices** is promoted
b. The institution provides **quality counselling and support services** to assist students in academic activities and personal development
c. At the institutional level, there is a direct promotion of implementing the **principle of competence-based and learning outcomes-focused education**
d. There are clear policies for **involving students in decision-making structures** and processes with impact on the quality of study programs and teaching practices
e. Quality assurance structures in your institution undertake **periodic evaluations of SCL** implementation
f. Explicit promotion of **student-centred university pedagogy** and quality learning is encouraged at the institutional level
g. Teachers have **access to resources** directly contributing to or facilitating SCL implementation in the teaching and research processes
h. The **impact of students' involvement in academic decisions** is significant and relevant
i. The institution has structures and programs aimed at supporting the **professional development** and ongoing training of its teaching staff in SCL-related fields
j. There is an explicit policy for acknowledging/rewarding/**formally recognising quality teaching**
• 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 are the answer options on the Likert scale

The perception of SCL-related actions in the academic institutions' policies and professional development was also explored. Participants in the survey evaluated the presence of ten specific actions that could be identified in institutional policies and in relation to continuing professional development of faculty members. Figure 4 presents the respondents' perception in order of their appreciation (Fig. 4). The promotion of students' mobility and exchanges of best academic practices were practices recognised by the respondents as highly present in their respective institutions (67.6% of the respondents evaluated the presence of this action *to a very large extent*). This result is consistent with the fact that students and staff mobilities are recognised as the main way of promoting SCL by ESU and EUA. Important percentages of participants perceived the *explicit promotion of **student-centred university pedagogy** and quality learning at the institutional level* to a large extent (29%) and to a very large extent (40.9%). This is a systemic approach that may have an important impact on teaching vision and practices and draws attention to the relevance of a so-called *scholarship of learning and instruction* explicitly assumed by universities. A recent study that analyses possible ways of bridging the policy-practice gap with regard to SCL argues for the necessity of such an undertaking (Šušnjar & Hovhannisyan, 2020).

The items perceived as present in the academic institutions to a lesser extent are the ones related to *structures and programs aimed at supporting the **professional development** and ongoing training of its teaching staff in SCL-related fields* (33.9% of the respondents evaluated its presence *to a very large extent*) and to the existence of an *explicit policy for acknowledging/rewarding/**formally recognising of quality teaching.*** *(24.4%* of the respondents evaluated its presence *to a very large extent*). This perception may be considered problematic as the latest studies underline the necessity of considering the *quality of teaching experience* as a relevant focus for the promotion of SCL (Gover et al., 2019; Nesamvuni, 2021). Similarly, literature argues for the relevance of implementing formal ways of teaching expertise and mastery recognition (Gover et al., 2019), an initiative that is worth receiving greater attention in Romanian universities that are generally organised according to a Humboldtian model. The recent prefiguration in the Romanian new educational law of higher education of the differentiated professional routes may be a solution in this respect.

Surprisingly, another aspect that was reported as present to a lower extent in the academic landscape was the *impact of students' involvement in academic decisions*. While the presence of students in academic structures was recognised to a high extent by the respondents, the relevance of their involvement is less appreciated, as about 34% of the respondents consider its significance as moderate and low. This finding raises the issue of the effective and qualitative involvement of students in different aspects of academic life. With regard to SCL assessment, going beyond the formal representativity of students and exploring specific aspects such as students' credibility in the eyes of stakeholders and ways trustworthiness can be cultivated in the academic environment or students' pedagogical or administrative expertise and experience and ways it can be increased and used may be aspects to be considered in the future.

An in-depth analysis of the data related to the perception of SCL in the three dimensions of institutional culture, teaching and institutional policies and continuing professional development of academic staff allowed us to explore possible correlations between reported perceptions and two specific aspects characteristic to the survey participants. Thus, at each dimension level, the total score was calculated as the arithmetic mean of the items composing the dimension. The internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) of each dimension was as follows: Institutional Culture ($\alpha = 0.88$), Teaching, Learning, Evaluation ($\alpha = 0.93$), Institutional Policies ($\alpha = 0.94$). The range of each scale varies between the values of 1 and 5. Since the groups formed by the seniority variable are unequal in volume, the homogeneity of variances of the groups was tested to choose the most appropriate comparative statistical test. As the analysis of variance homogeneity (Levene's test) revealed significant heterogeneity of variances, we opted for the Welch test. Table 2 presents the comparative results. As it can be observed, there were no statistically significant differences among the three seniority groups regarding the perceived level of implementation of SCL in higher education. We also performed an analysis of the perceived level of SCL implementation based on participants' involvement in the quality assurance process. The table below presents the descriptive statistical data related to this variable (Table 3). From the table above, it can be observed that respondents with institutional responsibilities related to quality assurance perceive a significantly higher degree of SCL implementation in higher education, a difference that holds true for all three analysed components. This result may be explained by the fact that academics with quality assurance responsibilities have a deeper understanding of SCL and its implications. By knowing what to observe and being able to see the implications of SCL implementation, the respondents with quality assurance responsibilities may become resource professionals in promoting SCL and quality assurance principles and standards in their institutions. On the other hand, the data emphasises the need for a more system-

Table 2 The perception SCL implementation in higher education based on seniority.

Dimension/ Seniority		N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Welch test	p
Institutional culture	Less than 5 years	10	3.98	0.86	1.85	0.187
	6–10 years	21	3.78	1.17		
	More than 10 years	355	4.23	0.75		
Academic teaching, learning and assessment	Less than 5 years	10	4.20	0.74	1.67	0.216
	6–10 years	21	3.76	1.02		
	More than 10 years	355	4.18	0.75		
Institutional policies	Less than 5 years	10	3.90	0.85	1.60	0.229
	6–10 years	21	3.57	1.21		
	More than 10 years	355	4.04	0.85		

Table 3 The perception of SCL implementation in higher education based on participants' involvement in quality assurance.

Dimension/responsibility in QA		N	Mean	Std. Dev.	t test	p
Institutional culture	without QA responsibilities	106	3.94	0.91	−3.54	0.001
	with QA responsibilities	280	4.29	0.71		
Academic teaching, learning and assessment	without QA responsibilities	106	3.98	0.91	−2.37	0.019
	with QA responsibilities	280	4.21	0.70		
Institutional policies	without QA responsibilities	106	3.78	0.99	−2.88	0.004
	with QA responsibilities	280	4.10	0.80		

atic and large-scale promotion of quality assurance principles such as SCL and its operational implementation through actions such as continuing professional development of teaching staff on specific topics associated with student-centred approaches to learning and instruction.

The survey we carried out also looked at the participants' actions for SCL implementation. Fig. 5 includes participants' perceptions on the importance of six different specific initiatives related to student-focused teaching (Fig. 5).

The data shows that the continuing development of courses and teaching seems to be the initiative that could help shape more student-oriented study programs. This may be a very complex initiative that could include variations in different components of academic activities, from redefining learning outcomes to new learning content insertions or new instructional strategies. The incidence of certain recent accents adopted in Higher education is, however, surprisingly low. Thus, *involving students in research, designing learning outcomes focused evaluation* or *organising and participating in scientific events for students* were placed at the lowest ranks, an indication of a possible lack of pedagogical expertise on how these approaches could be accommodated in the academic instruction routines.

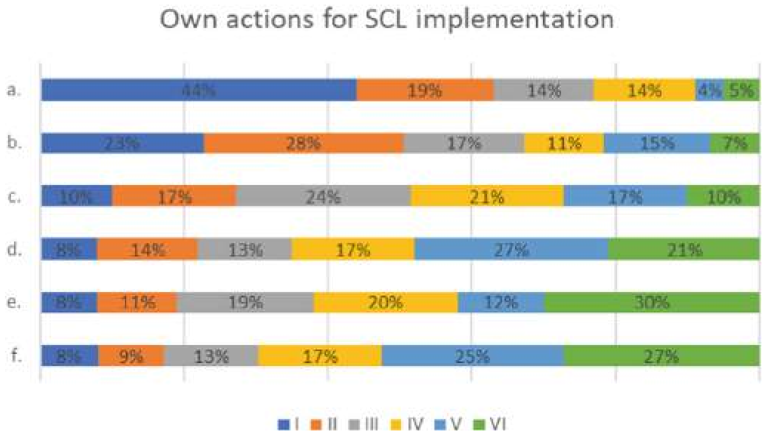

Fig. 5 Own actions for scl implementation

• Legend:
a. Permanent design and development of courses and teaching activities
b. Intensifying active and interactive teaching
c. Utilising feedback received from students
d. Involving students in research
e. Learning outcomes-focused evaluation
f. Organising and participating in scientific events for students
• 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 are the answer options on the Likert scale

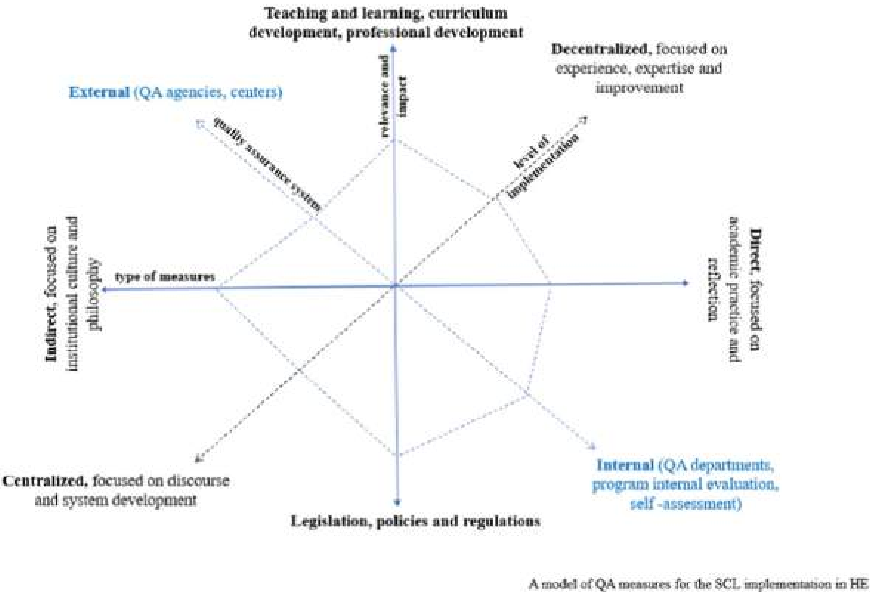

Fig. 6 Glava et al. A model of critical categories of factors in SCL implementation

3.3 Critical Factors of SCL Implementation to Be Considered in Elaboration of Effective Assessment Procedures

Our analysis of available literature on the implementation of SCL in higher education institutions and the quality assurance evaluation related to SCL, and the survey undertaken lead us to the organisation of various actions and criteria we identified in accordance with four dimensions which we articulated in the following model (Fig. 6):

The model groups the quality assurance actions and criteria that may be considered in future assessment strategies related to the implementation of SCL according to:

– Type of measures. This is a dimension emphasised by the European University Association in the research report issued in 2019, with reference to primary, secondary, and latent measures undertaken at the institutional level. Recent literature reviews on SCL implementation also give credit for this dimension. For example, Grøndahl Glavind et al., (2023) stress that in SCL implementation, direct measures prevail while creating a SCL-oriented culture is still less present;
– Relevance and impact. This dimension refers to the implementation context, which may be institutional (legislation and institutional policy and rules) or/and practical (in teaching, learning, evaluation and curriculum development). A recent study by Klemenčič (2017) highlights the main factors that must be considered in both main categories (policy and teaching practices), stressing the need for a comprehensive approach in this respect

– Level of implementation: a dimension that groups specific actions according to their impact on legislation and systemic higher education development (centralised measures) or on the improved teaching and learning experiences (decentralised measures, self-generated, and with a visible impact on improved expertise in both teachers and students);
– Quality assurance authority: a dimension that refers to the authority that proposes or imposes the quality criteria related to SCL. While SCL is mainly promoted as an internal QA standard, the adoption of a SCL orientation in external QA processes may impact the focuses undertaken during an external assessment mission.

The interaction of the respective dimensions creates action areas that may be practically relevant for the elaboration of assessment strategies with specific accents. Thus, for instance, a combination of measures included in the QA systems that comprised decentralised measures with implications for the practice of teaching, learning and curriculum development will lead to a SCL implementation strategy that is assumed more autonomously by the teaching staff through continuing professional training or adaptive teaching and learning measures.

4 Conclusion

Our study contributes to the improvement of higher education quality assurance frameworks by highlighting possible future guidelines for supporting and evaluating the implementation of the SCL approaches. As a result of the literature review and the survey-based investigation, we developed a comprehensive model of quality assurance actions and measures related to student-centred learning approach implementation in higher education. The model emphasises four categories of factors that could be observed both by internal or external QA evaluation missions and may be promoted as routines that could enhance a student-centred learning institutional culture and environment.

Annex 1.

4.1 SCL-HE Inventory

SCL-HE inventory was created to collect data on how the principle of Student-Centred Learning (SCL) is understood and applied in higher education institutions in Romania. Thank you for agreeing to complete this inventory. To enhance the informative value of our initiative, we kindly ask you to read the explanatory notes at the end before proceeding with the questionnaire. Additionally, please respond to each item according to the specific instructions.

We assure you that your provided responses will be used solely as aggregated data and will be extremely valuable to us in better understanding the subtle implications of SCL on the quality of education in higher education.

1. Which of the phrases below explains, to the greatest extent, the meaning you attribute to the concept of Student-centred Learning Select the three most relevant phrases that, in your opinion, are the most significant, marking them in the table below:

	Mark your choices in the boxes below
Teaching strategies that encourage direct student involvement and cooperation	
Authentic cooperation and communication between teachers and students in actions that have implications for program quality and study/learning experience	
Student involvement in institution decision-making structures and processes	
Students' access to resources and services contributing to creating complex, relevant, and authentic learning experiences	
Real implementation of learning outcome-focused academic approach	
Focusing academic programs and processes on developing professional and transversal competencies	

2. Evaluate, based on the indicators below, the extent to which student-centred learning (SCL) is found and assumed at your institution (where 1 means *to a very small extent* and 5 means *to a very large extent*).

A. In INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE (VISION, VALUES, INSTITUTIONAL CLIMATE)					
The principle of flexibility and freedom of choice is applied in the design and implementation of academic training programs.	1	2	3	4	5
There is a culture of partnership and collaboration among teaching staff in the university.	1	2	3	4	5
There is a culture of partnership and collaboration between teachers and students at the university.	1	2	3	4	5
There are clear policies involving students in decision-making structures and processes impacting the quality of study programs and teaching practices	1	2	3	4	5
The institution has leadership practices focused on institutional development towards better SCL implementation.	1	2	3	4	5

B. In TEACHING, LEARNING, AND ACADEMIC ASSESSMENT					
In designing study programs/developing course outlines, in teaching and assessment, there is a clear concern for implementing the principle of student-centred learning (SCL)	1	2	3	4	5
In the design and execution of teaching processes, there is a genuine concern for developing students' competencies, including those related to learning preparedness and lifelong development.	1	2	3	4	5
Study programs are designed to allow adaptation of the curriculum and educational processes according to the knowledge needs and interests, as well as the development of students.	1	2	3	4	5
In designing study programs and within the teaching process, there are direct moments and ways to integrate student feedback	1	2	3	4	5
Academic assessment has a clear formative dimension, through feedback provided to students, transparency, and a regulatory nature for subsequent teaching-learning processes.	1	2	3	4	5
Teaching processes allow recognition and valorisation of student diversity	1	2	3	4	5
Teaching processes allow differentiated and individualised approaches	1	2	3	4	5
Teaching strategies encourage learning through direct and active involvement, contextualised and practical engagement of students	1	2	3	4	5
The learning environment is inclusive, supportive, and constructive, promoting access to resources and the creation of learning communities	1	2	3	4	5
Digital technologies favour the implementation of SCL practices	1	2	3	4	5

C. In INSTITUTIONAL POLICIES AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT					
At the institutional level, the direct promotion of implementing the principle of focusing on competency development and results-oriented teaching is encouraged	1	2	3	4	5
Quality assurance structures in your institution undertake periodic evaluations of SCL implementation	1	2	3	4	5
There are clear policies involving students in decision-making structures and processes impacting the quality of study programs and teaching practices	1	2	3	4	5
The institution provides quality counseling and support services to assist students in academic activities and personal development	1	2	3	4	5
The institution has structures and programs aimed at supporting the professional development and ongoing training of its teaching staff in SCL-related fields	1	2	3	4	5
Teachers have access to resources directly contributing to or facilitating SCL implementation in the teaching and research processes	1	2	3	4	5
There is an explicit policy for acknowledging/rewarding/formally recognising quality teaching	1	2	3	4	5
Explicit promotion of student-centred university pedagogy and quality learning is encouraged at the institutional level	1	2	3	4	5
The impact of student involvement in academic decisions is significant and relevant	1	2	3	4	5
At the institutional level, support for student mobility and exchanges of best academic practices is promoted	1	2	3	4	5

3. To what extent do you consider that you have/will put into practice SCL-specific approaches in your own academic and teaching activities?

Communicating with students	1	2	3	4	5
Involving students in research	1	2	3	4	5
Organising and participating in scientific events for students	1	2	3	4	5
Permanent design and development of courses and teaching activities	1	2	3	4	5
Utilising feedback received from students	1	2	3	4	5
Intensifying active and interactive teaching	1	2	3	4	5
Outcome-focused learning evaluation	1	2	3	4	5

Thank you.

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One-Time Pedagogical Events to Teach Academics Instructional Models and the Effect on Students' Perceptions of Teaching Effectiveness

Marian D. Ilie, Laurenţiu P. Maricuţoiu, Mariana Craşovan, Marius L. Matichescu, and Adrian Marcu

Abstract Different types of pedagogical programs for academics are implemented worldwide. Out of these types, one-time pedagogical events were presented as having a medium effect size when aiming to develop academics' pedagogical skills. Also, the academics' ability to organize the course was strongly associated with students' achievement. In this study, we investigated whether using instructional models as training content in one-time pedagogical events aimed to improve academics' ability to organize the course could improve their teaching behavior as perceived by their students. Three instructional models (*Gagné's instructional model, an adapted version of Gagné's instructional model, and Engelmann's Direct instructional model*) were taught in three one-time events, and we used the academics' current practice as a baseline for comparisons. Twelve academics involved in one-time pedagogical events used their new skills in 47 classes and were evaluated by 1226 students. As compared with the academics' current practices, learning instructional models by attending one-time pedagogical events led to improved evaluations from their students. These effects were moderated by class size and students' academic year.

Keywords Higher education · Instructional development programs · Instructional models · Students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness

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1 Introduction

Attention to teaching practices in higher education has grown due to the necessity to sustain students' active learning and achievement. Universities from many countries (e.g., the UK, Sweden, or the Netherlands) have opted for compulsory pedagogical training of academics (e.g., Sonesson and Lindberg Sand 2006) and have also set up different institutional structures (centers or units) to provide instructional development programs (IDPs) for academics (Jacob et al., 2015). The (European Commission, 2016) has highlighted the strategic importance of improving the quality of teaching in higher education through sustaining academics to adopt the student-d learning paradigm, which is one of the priority areas of the Bologna Process (Hoidn & Reusser, 2020).

All over the world, different models of IDPs for academics have been implemented (Amundsen & Wilson, 2012). Among these models, one-time pedagogical events are a particular type of IDP (De Rijdt et al., 2013). Traditionally, one-time pedagogical events were perceived as having a low efficacy level (Stes et al., 2010). Recently, a meta-analysis on IDPs for academics (Ilie, 2020) suggested that one-time events could have a medium effect size ($d = 0.571$). Ilie and his collaborators (2020) reported that one-time events are effective, especially when the intervention aims to increase participants' pedagogical skills. Organizing the course seems an essential pedagogical skill for academics to promote student-centered teaching and learning activities. Schneider and Preckel (2017) highlighted that this university teachers' capacity is strongly associated with student achievement ($d = 1.39$).

In this study, we argue that using instructional models (IMs) in one-time pedagogical events to improve academics' ability to organize the course could have a positive effect on students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness. *Gagné's IM* (Gagné & Briggs, 1974), *Gagné's Adapted IM* (Ilie, 2014), and *Engelmann's Direct IM* (Engelmann, 1980) were taught in three one-time IDPs. The effect on students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness of using these IMs in practice by medical academics was compared with the effectiveness of academics' current practice. Additionally, we considered the possible effect of class size and students' year of study.

2 Instructional Models as Training Content in IDPs

IMs are step-by-step procedures that allow the lesson to be structured as a series of instructional events. The IMs are rooted in behavioral psychology and evolved in response to new information about the learner and learning (Magliaro et al., 2005). IMs could be effective tools for organizing and structuring instruction during a course. For example, (Hattie, 2009) reported that the usage of the seven steps of direct instruction, outlined by Adams and Engelmann (1996), had a medium effect size ($d = 0.59$) on students' achievement. Moreover, the effect of direct instruction varies from medium to large depending on different groups of students (Hattie, 2009).

The IMs are used in various areas (e.g., teacher education—Krull et al., 2010; military training—Spector 2000; or higher education—Hampton & Reiser, 2004). Out of these models, *Gagné's IM* (Gagné & Briggs, 1974) is one of the best-known, most influential, and most used IM (Smith & Ragan, 2000). For example, in the context of teachers' professional development, Krull and his collaborators (2010) successfully used the nine events of *Gagné's IM* (Gagné & Briggs, 1974) to promote the teachers' lesson analysis skills. Other studies showed the utility of using various adaptation versions of *Gagné's IM* in higher education. Hampton and Reiser (2004)) used an approach derived from *Gagné's IM* (i.e., *Reiser & Dick's IM*, 1996) to provide pedagogical training to teaching assistants. The authors reported a significant impact of the training on students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness. Also, after observing university teaching activities, Ilie (2014) highlighted that the usage of *Gagné's Adapted IM* (Ilie, 2014) had a significant impact on SPTE. Despite such evidence, the interest in using IMs is different from field to field. On the one hand, the interest in using these models is always high in areas such as industry, business, and the military (Reiser, 2001). On the other hand, there is little interest in public schools, and there is even less interest in higher education (Reiser, 2001). University teachers 'do not consciously think of their work as *design*, nor do they articulate or conceptualize what they do in design terms' (Bennett et al., 2017, p. 142). Furthermore, Noben et al. (2020) reported that 8.9% of academics observed in the classroom obtained an excellent score when clear and structured instruction was used as a criterion of teaching effectiveness. Therefore, the quality of the academics' instructional approach in higher education could be enhanced by including IMs into IDPs dedicated to academics.

3 Impact of One-Time IDPs on Students' Perceptions of Teaching Effectiveness

The length of the pedagogical interventions was considered a feature that could influence the final impact of the IDPs (Stes et al., 2010). Generally, the following dichotomy has been used: *one-time events* versus *extended overtime interventions*. It should be mentioned that there were divergences between different authors when they defined one-time events. For example, De Rijdt et al. (2013) described one-time events as interventions varying from one hour to two consecutive days. Also, in this category, Stes et al. (2010) included events ranging in duration from one hour to four days, while Steinert et al. (2016) included interventions ranging from one hour to six days. The present paper defines one-time IDPs as events lasting between one hour and two consecutive days.

Studies that evaluated the impact of IDPs operationalized teaching effectiveness using concepts such as *change within teachers*, *institutional impact*, and *change within students* (Stes et al., 2010). However, defining the nature and concrete procedures to measure the effectiveness of such training initiatives is highly demanding (Jones et al., 2017). Thus, research studies focused mainly on the changes among teachers (Steinert et al., 2016), while students' ratings are rarely included in this kind of study (Steinert et al., 2016). Therefore, there is a clear need to add new evidence regarding the change in students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness as an outcome of one-time IDPs. Such a research topic could be of interest because students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness are frequently used for assessing teaching quality in universities. Even if students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness are not necessarily related to students' learning (Uttl et al., 2017), it is a relevant method for formative evaluation of teachers' classroom behavior, especially when it is based on robust behavioral rating instruments, and it is used together with other indicators of teaching quality (Lohman, 2021).

Several review papers that summarized the research on the effect of IDPs have been published in the field of instructional development for academics until now (e.g., Ilie, 2020; Steinert et al., 2016; Stes et al., 2010). None of these studies addressed the issue of changes in students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness as an outcome of one-time IDPs. Steinert et al. (2016) included students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness in one general category named *Observed change* (together with perceptions of peers, leaders, senior house officers, and teachers). Stes et al. (2010) included seven studies that investigated the impact of IDPs on SPTE, but none presented a one-time event. Ilie (2020) included six studies that showed the effect of one-time interventions on students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness (e.g., Baroffio et al., 2006; Notzer & Abramovitz, 2008). However, the authors did not analyze these six studies as one specific category and only discussed the two subjects (*one-time events* and *students' perception*s) separately. All interventions reviewed by Ilie and colleagues (2020) aimed at improving participants' pedagogical skills were designed based on the assessment of the participants' needs (excepting Notzer & Abramovitz, 2008) and were focused on the participants' current teaching practices. For example, Baroffio et al. (2006) planned their three-hour workshops in response to the participants' expressed teaching needs. The workshops also took place during the month preceding the participants' teaching period and aimed to help participants finalize their teaching plans.

4 The Present Study

This study aimed to test the effect of three one-time interventions that use instructional models as content to train medical university teachers. We used ANOVA analysis to investigate the effect of the instructional development programs on students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness and analyze if *class size* and *students' year of study* are associated with these effects. We advanced two research hypotheses:

(*H1*) Students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness *are more positive when teaching activities are taught by teachers using IMs (learned in one-time interventions) than when taught by teachers without using IMs.*

(*H2*) *Class size and/or students' year of study have little or no impact on the* students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness *of activities taught by teachers who use IMs to plan and deliver university teaching activities.*

Table 1 The instructional events of the three IMs proposed as content in the IDPs

Gagné's IM (Gagné & Brigges, 1974)*	Gagné's Adapted IM (Ilie, 2014)	Engelmann's IM (Engelmann, 1980)***
Gaining attention	Learning organization**	Introduction of new concept based on previously mastered skills and knowledge
Informing the learner of the objective	Gaining attention	
Stimulating recall of prerequisite learning	Informing the learner of the objective**	Presentation: explanation, demonstration, examples, and non-examples Task and questions for students Feedback from teacher to students Independent practice
Presenting the stimulus material	Presenting the stimulus material	
Providing learning guidance	Providing learning guidance	
Eliciting the performance	Eliciting the performance	
Providing feedback about performance correctness	Providing feedback about performance correctness	
Assessing the performance	Assessing the performance	
Enhancing retention and transfer	Enhancing retention and transfer	
	Final appreciation**	

* "order of these events for a lesson or lesson segment is approximate and may vary somewhat depending upon the objective" (Gagné & Brigges, 1974, p. 135).
** "these events are considered mandatory events in every didactical activity, no matter what the type and the scope of the activity" (Ilie, 2014, p. 781).
*** all the events are mandatory in the specific order

4.1 Participants and Procedure

A total of 108 academics from a Romanian medical university enrolled in a mandatory pedagogical program were invited into an initial meeting which aimed to shift the mandatory character of the program toward a partnership model (DeRijdt et al., 2016). An open discussion was held to identify the participants' training needs. Possible learning goals and relevant instructional content were highlighted. Based on this analysis, we selected *Gagné's IM* (Gagné & Briggs, 1974), *Gagné's Adapted IM* (Ilie, 2014), and *Engelmann's Direct IM* (Engelmann, 1980) as the content of three one-time IDPs aiming to improve the academics' capacity to organize their courses. Because these models are well described in the literature, we presented only a short overview of their instructional events in Table 1. These events were also the central concept of the instructional content of our IDPs. For each IM, the lecturer prepared a four-hour training session with the following elements: (a) a presentation of the history of the model; (b) an explanation of the instructional events; (c) an example of how the model can be applied; (d) an example of how a lesson plan is designed using the model.

Twenty academics expressed their willingness to participate in the one-time IDPs. Before participating in the training, the academics taught a lesson using their current practice models. Next, the following steps were taken: first, participants received training on *Gagné's IM*; second, they made a lesson plan using *Gagné's IM*; and third, they taught a lesson using their lesson plan. Then, the training, planning, and teaching process was repeated with *Gagné's Adapted IM* and *Engelmann's IM.*
Out of 20 academics, 11 completed their tasks, and another one taught only three lessons, respecting the three steps for each IM (training, planning, and teaching). Another four participants could not complete their tasks in the correct order and were eliminated from the study sample. Also, another four participants dropped out at some point. Thus, we analyzed 47 different activities taught by 12 teachers (of these, ten females taught 40 classes). Out of these 47, 12 lessons were planned and taught using the *Current Practice Model* of each teacher (attended by 394 students), other 12 used *Gagné's IM* (attended by 330 students), other 12 used *Gagné's Adapted IM* (attended by 270 students) and the remaining 11 used *Engelmann's IM* (attended by 231 students). The academics have different staff grades (one associate professor, two lecturers, and nine university assistants) and different teaching experience (from 1 to 15 years, $M = 9.58$, $SD = 3.68$). The total number of evaluations by students (between years 1 and 7 of study, $M = 2.78$, $SD = 1.62$) that attended the lessons was 1,226 (72.7% female).

For each IM, two authors of this paper analyzed all lesson plans independently. Both decided that all the academics' lesson plans respected the instructional events that characterized the IM applied. In the last ten minutes of each lesson, the academic left the classroom, and a member of the research team asked the students to evaluate the teaching practices based on a questionnaire. Before completing the questionnaire, a research team member informed the students about the standard procedure to fill in the questionnaire, that the participation is voluntary, and that all answers are anonymous.

4.2 Measures

We used a questionnaire developed from *the Instructional Activities Feedback Form* (Hampton & Reiser, Hampton and Reiser 2004) and the instrument proposed by Ilie (2014). The first section of the instrument had five items that identified the students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness using a 5-point Likert scale (i.e., 1 = very little to 5 = very high). A general perception of SPTE was calculated by averaging these five aspects. The internal consistency of the scale was at an optimal level ($\alpha = 0.89$). The second section included possible instructional activities. For each of these, students had to report whether (a) the event was included or (b) the event was not included in the lesson they just attended. This section aimed to identify if the university teacher followed the lesson plan proposed in teaching the lesson and consequently kept to the IM. The third section collected data about the respondents (i.e., gender, students' year of study, and class size). For the data analysis, we considered the results of the lessons taught using teachers' current practice models as data for the pre-test. We also used the results from the other three situations (*Gagné's*; *Gagné's Adapted* and *Engelmann's*) as data for independent post-tests.

5 Results

5.1 Preliminary Analyses

We examined the research sample data to decide the design of the factorial ANOVA. In two cases, we found fewer than ten subjects (five and two, on *First-year students* * *>30 students* * *Gagné's model* and respectively *Adapted Gagné's model*[1]). Consequently, the analysis of three-way interaction was not sustainable (Sava, 2011). Next, we investigated whether our data met the assumptions required for conducting factorial analyses of variance (i.e., factorial ANOVAs). We used the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test to check the normality of distribution and Levene's test to check the homogeneity assumption. As our data met these requirements, we proceeded to the analyses of variance presented below.

5.2 Main Analyses

The results of the ANOVA $4 \times 2 \times 2$ analysis (Table 2) showed that the IDPs had significant effects on SPTE ($F(3,1225) = 4.765$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.012$), *class size* had a small significant effect on SPTE ($F(1,1225) = 11.364$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.009$), while *students' year of study* did not have a significant effect ($F(1,1225) = 1.847$, $p < 0.174$, $\eta^2 = 0.002$). Also, the data showed that the interaction between *students' academic year* and *class size* does not have a significant effect on SPTE ($F(1,1225) = 0.126$, $p < 0.723$, $\eta^2 = 0.001$). On the contrary, the combination of *IDPs***students' academic year* and that of *IDPs***class size* had significant effects ($F(3,1225) = 4.793$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.012$ and respectively $F(3,1225) = 7.483$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.018$).
To have a better understanding of the IDPs impact in various contexts arising from the other variables (i.e., *IM*, *class size*, and *students' year of study*), we conducted a one-way ANOVA for each situation. The results (Table 3) indicated a significant improvement in SPTE when any of the theoretical IMs were compared with the teachers' current practice ($F(3,1225) = 15.254$, $p < 0.01$, $d = 0.55$). For *First-year students* (Table 4), the results showed a significant difference ($F(3,223) = 5.302$, $p < 0.01$, $d = 0.54$) between any two of the theoretical IMs (*Gagné* and *Engelmann*), as compared with the teachers' current practice. In the case of *non-first-year students*,

[1] such a situation was possible because, at that university, first-year students can attend in advance one or two courses dedicated to non-first-year students. These seven cases are probably in this situation.

we also found a significant effect of IM type (F(3,1001) = 15.918, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.44$). In this case, *Adapted Gagné's IM* reported the highest effect ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 0.67$, $d = 0.54$) as compared with the "current practice" evaluation. Regarding *class size*, the results were divergent (Table 4). In the case of classes with ≥ *30 students*, there was no significant impact (F(3,571) = 2.369, $p < 0.05$, $d = 0.22$) between the usage of any IMs and teachers' current practice. In the case of classes with > *30 students*, we found significant differences between all three IMs (F(3,653) = 21.272, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.63$) and teachers' current practice. Thus, the results support the hypotheses of the study.

6 Discussion

We explored whether learning IMs by medical academics through one-time pedagogical events could be an effective professional training practice. Such a research approach could address the request formulated by Amundsen and Wilson (2012) and Steinert et al. (2016) in what concerns the importance of shifting from evaluating the overall impact of IDPs to the evaluation of specific program characteristics (e.g., instructional content = IMs, in our case) to increase our understanding of whether, why, and how different kinds of IDPs work. Also, we investigated the effect of our one-time pedagogical events on participants' student population perceptions of

Table 2 Factorial ANOVA 4x2x2 results of IDPs, class size, and students' level of expertise impact on students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness

	SS	df	MS	F	p	Partial eta squared	Observed power
Between-Subjects effects							
IDPs	7.815	3	2.605	4.765	0.003*	.012	0.902
class size	6.213	1	6.213	11.364	0.001*	0.009	0.921
students' academic year	1.009	1	1.009	1.847	0.174	0.002	0.274
IDPs* students' academic year	7.861	3	2.620	4.793	0.003*	0.012	0.904
IDPs*class size	12.273	3	4.091	7.483	0.000*	0.018	0.986
students' academic year * class size	0.069	1	0.069	0.126	0.723	0.001	0.065
Error	663.127	1213	0.547				

Note significant * $p < 0.01$

Table 3 ANOVA results for the impact of the IDPs on students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness

	The three IDPs (named after the IMs used as content)								F	d
	Teachers' Current Practice Models ($n = 394$)		Gagné's IM ($n = 330$)		Gagné's Adapted IM ($n = 270$)		Engelmann's IM ($n = 232$)			
SPTE	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*		
	3.80	0.80	4.08	0.68	4,12	0.74	4.14	0.80	15.254*	0.55
	bcd		a		a		a			

Note * p <0 .01. Difference regarding the three IMs and teachers' current practices: Teachers' Current Practice Models (a), Gagné's IM (b), Gagné's Adapted IM (c), Engelmann's IM (d); according to posthoc comparisons *Games-Howell* because the test of homogeneity is significant in all six cases

Table 4 ANOVA results of IMs, class size, and students' level of expertise impact on students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness

Teaching effectiveness					IMs used as content in IDPs										
		Teachers' current practice models			Gagné's IM			Gagné's adapted IM			Engelmann's IM				
		N	M	SD	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	F	d
IMs* students' academic year	First-year students	85	3.76 bd	0.78	23	4.28 ac	0.74	51	3.67 bd	0.86	65	4.12 ac	0.87	5.302**	0.54
	Non-First-year students	309	3.81 bcd	0.81	307	4.07 ac	.67	219	4.22 ab	0.67	167	4.14 a	0.79	15.918***	0.44
IMs* class size	≥ 30 students	130	4.14	0.72	122	4.25	0.59	169	4.03	0.79	151	4.19	0.80	2.369	0.22
	> 30 students	264	3.63 bcd	0.80	208	3.98 ac	0.71	101	4.27 ab	0.63	81	4.03 a	0.81	21.272***	0.63

Note significant *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$. The difference regarding the usage of IMs and teachers' current practice: Teachers' Current Practice Models (a), Gagné's IM (b), Gagné's Adapted IM (c), Engelmann's IM (d); according to posthoc comparisons *Hochberg GT2*, and *Games-Howell*. Only in the case of the variable ≥ *30 students* the test of homogeneity is not significant; consequently, the data shown in the table is according to the *Hochberg GT2* test teaching effectiveness. Our findings added some new information to the narrow body of knowledge about the effect of IDPs on students. In their review study on ten years of research, Steinert et al. (2016) presented that out of 111 studies, only five reported results on the participants' student population.

Our main results showed that using IMs as instructional content in one-time interventions had a medium effect size on students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness. Similar effects were reported by Hattie (2009) for the seven major steps of direct instruction presented by Adams and Engelmann (1996). Also, our results are in line with previous studies that reported a positive effect of one-time IDPs (based on IMs) on SPTE (e.g., Hampton & Reiser, 2004). Hampton and Reiser (2004) conducted a controlled study and reported significant improvement in SPTE after a group of university teacher assistants received consultation on instructional practice based on Reiser and Dick's IM (Reiser & Dick, 1996). These similarities could highlight the usefulness of IMs as instructional content in various forms of IDPs for academics.

Our results are convergent with the conclusions of the first meta-analysis (Ilie et al., 2020) published in the field of instructional development programs dedicated to academics. These authors concluded that one-time events could report a medium effect size when the pedagogical intervention aims to improve teachers' skills (Ilie et al., 2020). This is also the case for the three IDPs assessed in this paper. Our three IDPs aimed to develop academics' capacities to organize and implement teaching activities by using IMs.

When we analyzed the effect of *class size* and *students' year of study* on the final impact of IDPs, the results showed small effects of *class size* and a non-significant effect of *students' year of study*. These results confirmed previous research on *class size* and student evaluations of teaching (Badri et al., 2006). Also, Hattie (2009) reported similar effects of the general impact of *class size* on teaching effectiveness. In the context of assessing the impact of IDPs, Stes et al. (2012) presented limited effects of *class size* and *students' year of study* variables. Stes et al. (2012) reported that non-first-year students increased their interest and enjoyment after their teachers participated in an instructional development program. Also, the same study showed a significant negative effect on support from teachers to students in larger classes, as perceived by them (Stes et al., 2012).

The present study investigated the impact of using instructional models on students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness in different contexts (i.e., classes with $\geq$ *30 students*, classes with $>$ *30 students*, *first-year* and *non-first-year students*). In classes with fewer than 30 students, the use of instructional models did not yield significant results. It has been shown that in small classes, students are more active and more likely to take responsibility for their learning (Finn et al., 2001). Thus, teachers could need more time practicing the application of an IM to significantly increase the level of students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness in classes with few students. In the other three cases, the use of instructional models in higher education had a significant impact on students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness.

6.1 Implications for Practice

Our results can be used to develop training activities for academics. First, instructional models (IMs) could be included as units in instructional packages of instructional development programs (IDPs) for academics. Such an approach could be useful for academic development centers in improving the content of in-service teacher IDPs. Also, IMs could enhance the theoretical frameworks used in IDPs to improve the academics' skills for organizing the courses or analyzing the lessons. Developing such skills for academics could be of particular interest to ensure the quality of teaching in higher education. Noben and her collaborators (2020) showed that when clear and structured instruction was taken into consideration as a criterion for effective teaching, only approximately 60% of the academics observed in the classroom received a sufficient score. Also, academics could use IMs as teaching quality frameworks to carry out more effective self-assessments and/or peer-assessments of their instructional approaches (e.g., Kull et al., 2010). The peer review of teaching has been a significant instrument for assessing the quality of teaching in universities in recent decades. In this context, Johnston et al. (2022) highlighted that using a systematic teaching framework is a key feature of the IDPs dedicated to academics and based on the peer review of the teaching approach. Thus, academic developers could consider different IMs as teaching frameworks when designing IDPs based on academics' peer review of teaching.

We found that academics' involvement in one-time IDPs is associated with a significant enhancement of their students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness. Therefore, if we put together our results and those reported in previous papers that show positive effects of one-time IDPs (e.g., Baroffio et al., 2006; Notzer & Abramovitz, 2008), some features of effective one-time events are highlighted: (a) designing it by taking into consideration the academics' pedagogical needs and their daily teaching practice and (b) setting improving teachers' skills as the aim of the pedagogical training. Thus, experts could consider developing in-service teachers' one-time IDPs using specific content, starting with needs analysis and sustained by action research. The specialists in academic development can design an action research program based on an analysis of the academics' instructional needs. A series of one-time interventions with specific contents could be designed to address these needs, and each of these programs can respond to a particular teaching challenge (e.g., using student-centered methods, providing feedback, improving teacher-student relationships, etc.). Only the academics with a particular instructional need could attend that one-time IDP. In this vein, one could consider the example offered by Greer et al. (2016), which used the action research approach for designing and implementing a pedagogical intervention dedicated to early career academics.

6.2 Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

The findings of this study should be considered with due caution. The study had a pre-test -post-test research design and involved a small number of academics. Results may be influenced or not by some other variables (e.g., participants' gender or teaching experience). However, the large number of observations by students ($n = 1226$) mitigates, to some extent, the possibility of response bias. Therefore, future work can use the idea of this study and improve the research design by adding more academics to the sample and including a control group.

This study analyzed the impact of three IMs as content in one-time IDPs. Future work could use other IMs (or other concepts such as curriculum development models or instructional strategies) as content in one-time events. Such research could provide evidence to substantiate if academics must know more IMs (and/or other educational concepts). Studies that compare different characteristics of IDPs implemented in the same context can have a significant contribution to knowledge about what works better for whom and in which context (Steinert et al., 2016).

The academics involved in the study had different teaching experiences. So, the study does not show if the results are the same for early career and more experienced academics. Future studies could use IMs (or/and other concepts) as content in one-time IDPs on two different groups of academics (beginners and seniors). Pre-service and in-service IDPs can be developed and tested for their impact on teaching effectiveness. The study reported the effects of one-time IDPs on SPTE in different contexts, namely first or non-first-year students, classes with ≥ 30 students, or >30 students. However, given the small number of studies on these topics (Stes et al., 2010), future research is necessary.

7 Conclusion

The paper presented evidence of using instructional models (IMs) through one-time events for training academics to develop their skills in designing student-centered teaching and learning activities. Academics' student-centered approaches to teaching seem to have a positive impact on students' active and deep learning (e.g., Prosser & Trigwell, 2014; Uiboleht et al., 2018). For this reason, developing university teachers' skills to design and implement student-centered teaching and learning activities is one of the primary objectives of the European Bologna Process (Bologna Declaration, 1999) and one of the main aims of the pedagogical development programs dedicated to academics in universities worldwide (Hicks et al., 2010). We showed that using IMs to plan and teach classes with first-year students or classes with more than 30 students could have a medium effect size on students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness. Our results could encourage experts to include instructional models as content in current instructional development programs dedicated to in-service university teachers. Instructional development programs based on the peer review of teaching could be a specific type of such program in which instructional models could be used as systematic teaching quality frameworks for conducting the peer review process of teaching. This could lead to an improvement in the quality of the peer review of the teaching process across universities. In European universities, this could also be a means to better implement desirable Bologna Process practices as academics' peer review of teaching is promoted in our universities mainly because of the adoption of the Bologna Process. Also, academic developers could consider the enrollment of in-service academics in one-time events to increase their teaching skills. Such an approach should be a useful practice, especially if the one-time events will be designed by considering the academics' pedagogical needs and their daily teaching practice. For example, to develop academics' skills to teach using specific teaching methods (e.g., problem-based learning, inquiry-based learning, etc.) to promote students' active, deep, and reflexive learning.

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