JRIHE
JOURNAL OF RESEARCH AND INNOVATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Vol. 6, No. 1 (Special Issue 2025)
ISSN: 2960-4419 (Online)
https://doi.org/10.48341/x2nx-8f30

Reconfiguring Higher Education in Europe: Governance, Values, and Strategic Initiatives - A Selection of Recent Changes and Key Themes in European Higher Education

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Suggested citation: Pausits, A., Agasisti, T., Asante, M., Carvalho, T., Kálmán, O., Kováts, G., Pinheiro, R., Rónay, Z., Rosa, M. J., Soncin, M., Rončević, N., & Ćulum Ilić, B. (2025). Reconfiguring Higher Education in Europe: Governance, Values, and Strategic Initiatives - A Selection of Recent Changes and Key Themes in European Higher Education. *Journal of Research and Innovation in Higher Education, 6*(1), 71-118.

The article is available online at: www.rihe-journal.com

Abstract

This special collection examines recent developments and reform trajectories shaping higher education in Europe within the evolving framework of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). It explores how new governance arrangements, strategic initiatives such as the European University Alliances, and emerging priorities—including sustainability, the green and digital transitions, and the implementation of micro-credentials—are redefining higher education policy and practice across Europe. The collection also addresses key themes such as re-internationalisation, academic freedom, and the reaffirmation of core values and principles that underpin the EHEA. Overall, the collection provides an integrative overview of current trends, challenges, and strategic directions in European higher education, offering insights into the evolving landscape of governance, collaboration, and institutional change within and beyond the EHEA.

Keywords: European Higher Education Area, Re-internationalisation, Internationalisation, European University Alliances, Sustainability, Green and Digital Transition, Academic Freedom

Introduction to the Special Collection

Over the past two decades, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has served as a cornerstone for shaping and coordinating reforms in higher education across Europe. Established through the Bologna Process, the EHEA aims to enhance the comparability, compatibility, and coherence of higher education systems. Its key features include the adoption of a three-cycle degree structure (bachelor, master, doctorate), a common credit system (ECTS), and a strong emphasis on quality assurance, student mobility, and recognition of qualifications (Wächter & Maiworm, 2014). Despite national variations, the EHEA provides a shared framework that supports policy alignment while respecting institutional and cultural diversity (Zgaga, 2012).

The Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) plays a central role in the governance and strategic direction of the EHEA. As the main coordination structure, the BFUG facilitates

cooperation between member states, the European Commission, and stakeholder organisations, monitoring the implementation of Bologna commitments and setting priorities for future reforms (BFUG, 2020). These priorities were reaffirmed and expanded in the Tirana Communiqué (2024), which articulates a shared vision for the EHEA amidst accelerating societal and global transformations (EHEA Ministerial Conference, 2024).

The Tirana Communiqué emphasizes the importance of upholding core values—academic freedom, institutional autonomy, student participation, and the public responsibility of higher education—while calling for renewed focus on Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity (IDE), the digital and green transitions, and stronger support for democratic engagement and resilience (Veiga & Amaral, 2023). It also underlines the need for flexible learning pathways, improved qualification recognition, and closer alignment with lifelong learning (Gornitzka & Maassen, 2021).

Among the most ambitious and structurally significant initiatives supported at the European level are the European University Alliances. These cross-border institutional networks aim to foster deeper integration between universities, develop joint curricula, enable seamless student and staff mobility, and promote shared governance structures (Gatti et al., 2022). University Alliances are also increasingly seen as testbeds for systemic transformation, advancing key priorities such as sustainability, digital innovation, IDE, and societal engagement (Curaj et al., 2020).

In parallel, academic career development has gained renewed political and institutional attention. The Tirana Communiqué highlights the need for transparent, inclusive, and flexible academic career pathways, including reforms in research assessment and recognition. Initiatives such as the development of a European framework for research competences (ResearchComp) and efforts aligned with CoARA (Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment) are seeking to redefine excellence in more holistic terms, recognizing a broader range of contributions beyond publications and traditional metrics (CoARA, 2022; European Commission, 2023).

While EU-level instruments like Horizon Europe (2021–2027) or institutions such as the

Research Executive Agency (REA) play increasingly strategic roles in shaping the higher education landscape—particularly through funding, policy experimentation, and capacity-building—nation-states remain key actors in governance. National governments define the legal frameworks, funding models, and implementation mechanisms through which European initiatives are adapted and applied (Nokkala & Vukasovic, 2017). This creates a dynamic policy environment where European coordination, national autonomy, and institutional agency intersect, sometimes in synergy, sometimes in friction (Martens & Jakobi, 2010).

As Horizon Europe nears its conclusion in 2027, the forthcoming design of the next framework programme, expected to evolve throughout this year, provides a critical opportunity to integrate and consolidate these developments. There is a growing momentum to align funding mechanisms, governance reforms, and value-based agendas around the overarching goals of sustainability, equity, and academic excellence (Reale et al., 2023).

This special collection explores and critically discusses recent developments in European higher education in light of these evolving frameworks and reform trajectories. It examines how shifting governance arrangements, strategic initiatives like University Alliances, and emerging priorities such as sustainability, green transition and digital transformation, or micro-credentials reshape the contours of higher education policy and practice within and beyond the EHEA. Furthermore, aspects such as re-internationalisation and academic freedom as focus areas of change are also covered in this collection. The collection provides an overview about the most recent developments, key issues and aspects with increased attentions in EHEA in recent times.

Re-internationalisation of Higher Education in the Post-COVID Landscape: Goals, Policies, and Global Trends

The internationalisation of higher education has long been a strategic priority for universities worldwide, driven by aspirations to enhance academic quality, build global networks, and increase institutional competitiveness. Knight (2004) defined internationalisation as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education,” a

definition that has since become foundational. De Wit (2011) further highlighted the complex and evolving nature of internationalisation, emphasizing that it must be understood not merely as student mobility or international marketing, but as a comprehensive transformation of higher education institutions.

Historically, the motivations for internationalisation have spanned academic, cultural, economic, and geopolitical domains. Institutions pursued the enhancement of academic quality through international benchmarking and collaborative research (Knight, 2004; de Wit, 2011). Cultural and intercultural exchange played a key role in fostering mutual understanding and preparing globally competent graduates (Ali, Rozaimie, & Khalid, 2024). Many host countries, particularly in the Global North, benefited economically from the tuition fees paid by international students, making international education a lucrative export sector (Marginson, 2022). Moreover, higher education was increasingly used as an instrument of soft diplomacy, enabling countries to project influence and build long-term international partnerships (Chankseliani & Kwak, 2024).

However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 represented an abrupt rupture in these dynamics. Global student mobility halted, universities faced unprecedented operational disruptions, and financial vulnerabilities were laid bare. In the wake of this crisis, the idea of re-internationalisation has emerged to describe the recalibration of international strategies under new global realities. This section examines the historical goals of internationalisation as a starting point, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the subsequent re-internationalisation strategies adopted by major higher education systems, including those of the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and members of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), with a focus on the Netherlands, Germany, France, Italy, Spain, and Hungary. It argues that this phase of re-internationalisation is defined not by a simple return to pre-pandemic norms, but by a fundamental rethinking of global engagement in higher education.

Re-internationalisation and Global Trends in Higher Education Policy

The term re-internationalisation (RIT) , though relatively new in higher education studies, has its origins in the international business literature. It was originally used in the 1980s to describe companies that had exited international markets—often due to poor

performance or misalignment—and later re-entered them with revised strategies and improved capabilities (Nummela, Saarenketo, & Puumalainen, 2004). In the higher education context, RIT captures the post-pandemic efforts by institutions and governments to re-engage globally, but with new goals, safeguards, and values. Rather than simply restoring old patterns of mobility and recruitment, RIT focuses on building more resilient, ethical, and diversified forms of international engagement.

This global trend is characterised by five key shifts: increased attention to risk and resilience, diversification of partnerships and student sources, deeper digital integration, stronger alignment with national policy priorities, and a renewed emphasis on inclusivity and equity. Across many systems, governments and universities are realigning internationalisation strategies to be more socially responsive and economically sustainable.

A case in point is Australia, whose higher education sector was deeply affected by long-term border closures, responded with a significant policy overhaul. The Australian Strategy for International Education 2021–2030 marked a departure from pre-pandemic volume-driven models, prioritising diversification, regional engagement, and stronger links between international education and national skills shortages (Australian Government, 2021). According to Marginson (2022), Australia's new approach also reflects a broader attempt to assert strategic sovereignty in the Indo-Pacific region. Likewise, Canada has also entered a phase of cautious RIT. In 2024, the federal government introduced a cap on new study permits and increased financial proof requirements for international students. These measures sparked concerns about decreased access for students from lower-income countries. However, Canada continues to offer generous post-study work options and immigration pathways, suggesting that its model remains fundamentally open, albeit more regulated. In Europe this shift is visible in the United Kingdom's 2021 update to the International Education Strategy, which reaffirmed the goal of hosting 600,000 international students annually by 2030 and promoted transnational education (TNE), particularly in online and offshore formats (UK Department for Education, 2021). At the same time, new immigration measures introduced in 2024—such as restrictions on dependents for postgraduate students and

tightened graduate visa rules—reflected increasing political resistance to migration (de Wit, 2023).

This increasingly hybrid role of universities—straddling education and migration—has positioned them as key governance actors in the broader migration regime. As Brunner et al. (2025) argue, higher education institutions now function as magnets, gatekeepers, surveillants, and refiners in shaping the international student-to-migrant pipeline.

The European Higher Education Area and the National Dimensions of Re-internationalisation

EHEA created through the Bologna Process, is a unique multilateral framework that facilitates academic mobility, harmonises qualifications, and promotes quality assurance across 49 participating countries. In the aftermath of COVID-19, the EHEA has embraced a broader vision of internationalisation—one that prioritises equity, digital infrastructure, and sustainability. The 2020 Rome Ministerial Communiqué highlighted the need for a more inclusive and student-centred international higher education system. As reinternationalisation becomes a shared objective across the EHEA, member countries are adapting in distinct ways that reflect their domestic priorities, capacities, and challenges.

The Netherlands, once a leading advocate of open internationalisation, has recently taken a more cautious stance. Amid increasing political and societal concerns regarding housing shortages, over-reliance on English-taught programs, and pressure on public services, the Dutch government in 2023 proposed legislation to limit non-Dutch instruction and regulate EU student flows. Universities pushed back, warning that such measures risk undermining their competitiveness and global visibility (Nuffic, 2023).

Germany has focused its reinternationalisation efforts on strengthening academic partnerships and enhancing digital mobility. The DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) has led initiatives to diversify student recruitment beyond traditional sending countries such as China and India, placing new emphasis on countries in Africa and Latin America. The 2021 strategy “Internationalization in Times of Disruption” emphasised sustainability, equity, and institutional resilience as core values (DAAD, 2021).

France has adopted a more explicitly state-driven approach. The “Bienvenue en France” strategy, first launched in 2019 and reaffirmed post-pandemic, aims to increase the number of international students to 500,000 by 2027. The strategy combines funding for international scholarships, improved student services, and expansion of English-taught degrees. France’s government has also positioned international education as a tool for cultural diplomacy and global outreach (Campus France, 2022).

Italy, traditionally less central to European student mobility than Germany or France, has made significant strides since the pandemic in integrating internationalisation into its national recovery strategy. Under the EU-funded NextGenerationEU framework, Italian universities have received investments to improve digital infrastructure, internationalise curricula, and increase the number of joint degree programs. The Ministry of University and Research has emphasised the role of international partnerships in revitalising southern universities and combating brain drain (MIUR, 2023).

Spain has pursued a pragmatic reinternationalisation model grounded in regional collaboration and digital transformation. Spanish universities have expanded their role in Latin America and the Mediterranean, aligning international strategies with linguistic and historical ties. Spain is also at the forefront of adopting European digital learning credentials and has invested in cross-border online learning platforms. Its Ministry of Universities has prioritised equity-based mobility and support for underrepresented groups in Erasmus+ programs, aiming to democratise access to international education. Moreover, Spain has promoted multilingualism in higher education to balance English-taught programs with local linguistic diversity (CRUE, 2023).

Hungary, by contrast, reflects the complexities of internationalisation in politically charged contexts. While Hungary continues to host thousands of international students—especially from China and Central Asia—it has also seen a politicisation of international education policy. The controversial closure of Central European University’s Budapest campus in 2019, followed by restrictions on foreign influence in education, marked a significant departure from liberal international norms. In recent years, Hungary has turned toward bilateral partnerships with non-EU countries and prioritised inward mobility over

broader academic exchange. This illustrates a reinternationalisation model that is more state-controlled, strategic, and selective, aligned closely with national ideological and foreign policy interests (KSH, 2023).

These examples show that reinternationalisation within the EHEA reflects both divergence and convergence: divergence in national approaches, and convergence in shared principles of digital transformation and strategic resilience.

Conclusions

The reinternationalisation of higher education is not merely a restoration of pre-COVID norms but a strategic reconfiguration of global engagement. Across national and regional contexts, universities and governments are moving away from transactional, volume-driven models and toward internationalisation strategies that are more resilient, inclusive, and aligned with public and political interests.

The cases of the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada illustrate how national contexts shape the contours of reinternationalisation, while the evolving role of the EHEA demonstrates the potential for collaborative and values-based internationalisation. As Knight and de Wit remind us, internationalisation must ultimately serve the core missions of higher education—knowledge creation, critical inquiry, and the public good.

Looking ahead, the EHEA can advance reinternationalisation by leveraging its existing tools—such as the Bologna Process, European Universities Initiative, and digital credential systems—to foster innovation and inclusivity. First, it should continue to promote micro-credentials and blended mobility models to support flexible, lifelong learning. Second, a greater emphasis on socially responsible internationalisation—through funding for underrepresented students and conflict-sensitive academic cooperation—can help reduce inequalities (de Wit, 2023). Third, the EHEA should develop stronger mechanisms for data sharing and institutional benchmarking to monitor the quality and equity of international engagement (Marginson, 2022). Finally, reinforcing academic freedom and institutional autonomy across all member states is essential to preserve the core values of European higher education. In doing so, the EHEA

can emerge not only as a global education hub but also as a model for cooperative, ethical, and future-proof internationalisation.

The European Universities Initiative

Since its political inception in President Emmanuel Macron's 2017 Sorbonne speech, the European Universities Initiative (EUI) has evolved into one of the most emblematic projects within EHEA. Positioned as a flagship policy of the European Commission, the initiative is both visionary and experimental, reflecting longstanding ambitions to deepen European integration through higher education. Yet, as is often the case in complex policy initiatives, the grand rhetoric surrounding the EUI is accompanied by uneven implementation, persistent ambiguities, and structural asymmetries.

Policy Emergence: Layers of Continuity and Innovation

While the EUI may appear novel in its scope and ambition, it is best understood as a palimpsest layered upon previous European higher education reforms — notably the Erasmus program, the Bologna Process, and the European Research Area (ERA). These earlier efforts laid the groundwork for mobility, comparability, and cooperation, while the EUI seeks to institutionalise these dynamics through more durable, structured alliances of higher education institutions (HEIs) (Charret & Chankseliani, 2023).

The formal launch in 2019 saw the selection of initial university alliances under a competitive process administered by the European Commission, with the declared aim of fostering transnational campuses, joint curricula, and seamless mobility. By 2025, the initiative had expanded to encompass over 600 HEIs across 65 alliances (Charret, Oancea, & Chankseliani, 2025). Yet this growth masks significant variations in institutional capacity, strategic alignment, and national support.

Viewed through the lens of transnational institution-building, the EUI rests on a delicate negotiation between unity and heterogeneity. As Marques and Graf (2024) argue, its legitimacy stems from combining regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements — a synthesis of formal coordination, shared values, and symbolic alignment. Governance mechanisms are negotiated within each alliance, resulting in a hybrid model that privileges flexibility over uniformity (Estermann et al., 2021).

The case of Portugal exemplifies how the EUI unfolds within semi-peripheral contexts. 29 higher education institutions, including almost all the public universities (13 out of 16) and the public polytechnic institutions (13 out of 15), as well as 3 private universities participate today in European alliances (European Commission, 2025). This indicates a potential for inclusivity beyond core academic elites, albeit one that remains contingent on local strategies, national funding, and alliance configurations.

Ideational Foundations: Between Integration and Stratification

At its core, the EUI is an ideational project — an attempt to forge a shared European identity through academic cooperation. This is not a neutral endeavour. Rather, it reflects an acute response to political anxieties — Brexit, the erosion of liberal democratic values, and the fragmentation of the European project (Brooks & Rensimer, 2023). The initiative articulates an optimistic imaginary: a borderless space of knowledge and mobility anchored in shared values and collective ambition.

Simultaneously, the EUI is a strategic tool for global competitiveness. In an increasingly multipolar knowledge economy, the EU has framed the initiative as a means to enhance visibility, innovation, and institutional excellence (Lambrechts, Cavallaro & Lepori, 2024). This dual ambition — fostering unity and achieving global stature — reveals the core tension of the EUI: it must be both inclusive and excellent, both cohesive and competitive.

This tension plays out differently across institutional landscapes. While elite research universities often have the infrastructure and networks to lead alliances, smaller or teaching-focused institutions may struggle to find equal footing. Empirical evidence from the Portuguese context suggests a partial recalibration: institutions leverage alliance participation not only to internationalise but to reposition themselves symbolically and strategically (Guerra & Carvalho, 2025).

Mission statements, as Guerra and Carvalho (2025) show, provide fertile ground for analysing how institutions narrate their role within alliances. These texts converge on themes such as governance, mobility, digitalisation, research, market integration, and

citizenship — revealing an isomorphic pressure toward alignment with European policy goals, even as national realities differ.

The Promises and Perils of Europeanisation

The potential benefits of the EUI are considerable. It promises to deepen collaboration across institutional, linguistic, and disciplinary boundaries, enabling the co-creation of curricula, research agendas, and learning environments. As Charret and Chankseliani (2022) note, alliances can become laboratories for pedagogical and organisational innovation, especially when anchored in long-term, mission-driven collaboration.

The initiative also provides a platform for responding to societal challenges. As Fuchs, Cuevas-Garcia and Bombaerts (2023) argue, alliances such as EuroTeQ can be conceptualised as "learning networks" — sites where institutional reflexivity, moral deliberation, and strategic adaptation unfold. Another example, the ECIU university, one of the first alliances to be established, has also build its project on the challenge-based learning model, joining together "learners, teachers, and researchers to work with cities, communities, and businesses to solve real-life challenges – and foster change" (ECIU, 2025). This points to a vision of the university not only as a transmitter of knowledge, but as a co-actor in addressing climate change, social cohesion, and technological transition.

Although alliances have been demonstrating their value and potential to promote change in the HE environment, significant challenges remain, namely the legal and administrative barriers that obstruct collaboration between different actors and impact the quality of partnerships (Grumbinaitė, Colus & Carvajal, 2025).

The difficulty in finding an adequate European legal status for the alliances is also a risk for the future development of European universities. Without it, the alliances face significant challenges "with the sharing of financial, human, digital and physical resources, infrastructure and services, as well as with their joint educational and research activities." (Wessels and Craciun, 2024, 4). On another vein, it should also be said that most probably the different alliances will need distinct legal status, since their levels of ambitions towards transnational cooperation can be quite different. Moreover, the authors alert for the fact that in itself the existence of a European legal status won't solve all the

challenges European universities face regarding transnational collaboration. Only through an overall European framework law on Higher Education and Research (e.g., regulation law on governance, quality assurance, funding, accountability, access, staff regulations, salaries, student policies and tuition fees, academic freedom, etc.) these challenges could be overcome. But this has obvious implications in the application of the subsidiarity principle to higher education.

Quality assurance, both internal and external is also a challenge for the alliances, since they very much rely on the offer of joint programmes that need to satisfy the requirements of different national contextsand quality assurance systems. As pointed out by Angouri, S'Jegers & Szabo (2024), the diversity of institutional designs of partners, as well the differences in their legal frameworks, make it challenging to establish uniform QA mechanisms. In a recent report on the outcomes and transformational potential of the EUI, the importance of having a flexible legal framework to recognise degrees and maintain quality standards is emphasised as essential both for developing joint programs and improving student mobility (Grumbinaitė, Colus & Carvajal, 2025).

Funding remains a critical challenge. The current model provides limited-duration support, often insufficient for sustaining complex governance and academic innovation beyond the pilot phase (Estermann et al., 2021). Institutions may find themselves caught between the demands of alliance participation and the constraints of national policy environments.

The risks of the EUI are also substantial. The most obvious concern is the reinforcement of existing hierarchies. As Lambrechts et al. (2024) and Rensimer & Brooks (2024) observe, the EUI tends to favour already successful institutions — those with resources, reputation, and transnational experience. Without deliberate mechanisms for redistribution or support, the initiative may deepen stratification within the EHEA.

Ambiguity is another persistent feature. Stakeholders interpret the initiative in divergent ways — as a vehicle for mobility, a tool of diplomacy, a platform for excellence, or a symbol of integration. While such multiplicity can be productive, it may also lead to fragmentation or policy drift (Charret, Oancea & Chankseliani, 2025).

In a global context, the EUI is also part of a geopolitical contest over knowledge. Chou and Demiryol (2023) draw parallels with China's Belt and Road Initiative, where university alliances serve both diplomatic and strategic aims. The EU's version rests on democratic and multilateral foundations, but it too reflects ambitions to shape the global epistemic order.

Conclusion: Negotiating the Space Between Ideal and Practice

The EUI is at once a policy instrument, a political project, and an institutional experiment. It aspires to transcend national silos, foster shared belonging, and position Europe as a leader in the global knowledge economy. Yet these aspirations are mediated by uneven capacities, conflicting interests, and structural inequalities.

Ultimately, the EUI exemplifies the promise and paradox of integration: unity is not given, but constructed — negotiated within and across borders, through documents, practices, and alliances. Its success will depend less on abstract ideals and more on the capacity to manage difference, support diversity, and build enduring structures of cooperation.

Between Reform and Rights: Academic Freedom in the European Higher Education Area

Academic freedom is one of the fundamental values of higher education, and its existence is an indispensable condition for higher education to fulfil its social mission. Providing and promoting opportunities for active citizenship, research and innovation, personal development, and employability are essential for the maintenance of democratic societies and democratic development. Higher education has a key role to play in this, as only those working in science can provide the responses to natural and social phenomena that can support the realisation of these goals. To fulfil this mission, a critical approach and questioning of established truths are essential. The state often sees it as an attemptagainst the state and, therefore, tends to be discouraged. It is, therefore, protected by legal means, although a normative command such as the protection of human rights under international law, which explicitly refers to academic freedom, appears only in the EU Charter of

Fundamental Rights. Article 13 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights declares that academic freedom must be respected.

As explained above, respect for academic freedom has been a fundamental principle in democratic countries. The traditional perception is that in dictatorships and totalitarian states, systematic repression of academic freedom has been observed. At the same time, particularly in Anglo-Saxon countries, academic freedom has often clashed with other movements in defence of fundamental rights (see, for example, the Woke movement in the United States). In defence of the ideas of diversity, equity, and inclusion, university professors were often not only subject to restrictions on their activities but also to the loss of their jobs. However, restrictions on academic freedom are often the result of the state's deliberate marginalisation. In such cases, a governance model is created in which management, mostly made up of external members, has the power to infringe academic freedom. Karran et al. (2023) discuss this in the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden). The same concerns arise in the case of Armenia, where the government has the power to appoint the majority of the trustees at the country's three leading public universities (Freedom House). University management is given a great deal of freedom; hence, it often subordinates teaching and research activities to efficiency considerations (Niemczyk & Rónay, 2023).

In Europe, the latter phenomena have been most evident in the developed democratic states (Elken et al. 2024). However, signs of erosion have been detectable for longer in the continent's less democratic or totalitarian countries, e.g., Belarus, Russia, and Turkey.

What is a truly worrying and trend-like change is that academic freedom has also been eroding in democratically developed European states. This can be explained by the increasingly sharp distinction between de jure and de facto academic freedom (Elken et al., 2024). This is significant because the tools and mechanisms for measuring academic freedom are typically able to capture the state of academic freedom in a given state at the level of regulation. However, an examination of the regulatory environment often reveals, at most, a lack of guarantees and no directly restrictive norms. This does not reveal particularly complex and difficult-to-grasp phenomena such as self-censorship.

In terms of change, it is particularly worrying that erosion processes are also evident in some EU Member States, despite the fact that the EU considers academic freedom as a common value and that this is reflected in normative form (see EU Charter of Fundamental Rights).

Elken and colleagues have identified nine states within the EU in which 'the level of academic freedom is below average' and where 'eight of these countries have experienced statistically significant declines in academic freedom or aspects of academic freedom over the last ten years' (Elken et al. 2024, p.6). The latter has particularly worrying trends and already ranks low in global indicators (AFI 2024).

The often anti-scientific, anti-intellectual voices calling for restrictions on academic freedom are gaining strength from extremist, mainly populist far-right parties - especially in Belgium, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden (Maassen et al. 2023). With the general shift to the right in Europe and the rise of these political formations to power, the situation of academic freedom is being shaken in all these states. It is important to note that this erosion is not only occurring within the EU but also in advanced democratic countries outside the EU, such as Norway (see Karran et al. 2023).

However, all in all, within the EU, only Hungary has experienced a systemic violation of academic freedom from the government (state) level. Examples include; the government's abolition of the Gender Studies Master's programme, the law imposed on the CEU to 'chase away' the institution by the Hungarian state, the restructuring of the research network of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, the multi-level restructuring of the governance structure of universities, whereby a chancellor appointed by the prime minister has the power to influence teaching and research activities at the level of the rector in state universities. Likewise, when it comes to the transfer of most of the public universities to foundations established by the state, whose trustees are appointed by the state and which have the right to assume all the powers of the Senate and thus have a direct influence on the elements protected by academic freedom. This is reflected in the latest Academic Freedom Index, which ranked Hungary in the fourth category (out of five), being the only EU country to score so low (AFI, 2024).

Global and Europe-wide trends that threaten academic freedom have also triggered another change - mainly in Europe. Whereas previously, the monitoring of academic freedom was mainly a voluntary project of NGOs and/or academic communities (see Freedom House, Scholars at Risk, V-Dem Institute), two major European organisations have now taken academic freedom as their flagship issue. At the initiative of the STOA Committee (Panel for the Future of Science and Technology) of the European Parliament, an annual monitoring study has been launched to assess the situation of academic freedom in the Member States (see Elken et al. 2024). The Council of Europe has also launched a project and set up a working group to raise awareness of the importance of and threats to academic freedom on the continent.

Conclusions: Challenges and Prospects for Academic Freedom

Academic freedom has emerged as a central concern not only for scholars but also for policymakers committed to democratic values. The growing gap between legal protections (de jure) and actual academic conditions (de facto) reveals that formal guarantees alone are insufficient. Subtle threats—such as self-censorship, managerial interference, and ideological pressures—are increasingly common, even in democratic EU states.

The politicisation of higher education, particularly through nationalist or populist agendas, poses significant risks to open inquiry and institutional autonomy. Hungary stands as the most extreme example within the EU, with systemic state-led violations. However, concerns are also rising in countries like Sweden, Germany, Portugal and the Netherlands, where right-wing discourse increasingly challenges the academic sector.

Despite these trends, recent initiatives—such as the European Parliament's STOA project and the Council of Europe's working group—signal growing political recognition of academic freedom as a pillar of democracy. These efforts, coupled with academic monitoring tools and advocacy networks, mark a turning point.

Safeguarding academic freedom now requires more than legislation: it demands institutional accountability, inclusive governance, public engagement, and international

solidarity. If upheld and actively defended, academic freedom can continue to serve as a cornerstone for democratic societies and a critical enabler of scientific progress.

Digital Transformation in the European Higher Education Institutions

In recent years, digital transformation has emerged as a strategic imperative for higher education institutions worldwide. Such transformation has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the rapid transition to online and hybrid models of delivery as well as by the disruptive introduction of Artificial Intelligence (AI) especially in its generative form. The digital changes have significantly affected both pedagogical practices and the provision of administrative services. While technological innovation is a critical enabler, the digitalization process constitutes a broader cultural and organizational shift that challenges universities to reimagine their missions, operational models, and relationships with students, staff, and external stakeholders. Within the European context, digital transformation is a matter of institutional competitiveness and operational efficiency, while it is also increasingly viewed as a question of public value, educational equity, and democratic participation in the digital age (Capogna & Greco, 2024; Kaputa et al., 2022). This promise is coherent with an approach based on policies that explicitly point at supporting social inclusion, quality assurance and cross-border collaboration.

In line with these premises, the objective of this section is to report evidence on how European universities are navigating the digital transformation of teaching and administrative services with a focus on students' services, considering emerging technologies and evolving policy frameworks. In doing so, the paper provides insights that are relevant not only to university leaders and policymakers but also to educators, administrators, and technology developers engaged in shaping the future of higher education. The focus is not on HE systems, but we use instead an institutional-level perspective.

The Digital Transformation of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

The digital transformation of higher education in Europe is unfolding across two interrelated domains: the redesign of teaching and learning practices, and the modernization of administrative services. Both areas are increasingly shaped not only by

technological developments but also by broader regulatory, pedagogical, and institutional considerations.

On the teaching and learning front, digital transformation encompasses both the integration of digital tools into educational practices and the strengthening of digital competences. Universities have expanded their use of digital tools to support a more flexible, interactive, and personalized learning experience. Learning management systems (LMS), asynchronous video content, real-time virtual classrooms, and AI-powered tutoring systems are now widely integrated into teaching practices, offering new possibilities for interaction, personalization, and scalability in higher education. The adoption of AI is a key trend as in all public and private sectors, and the European Union has been the first institutional player to enact a regulatory framework for its adoption, named AI act (Regulation (EU) 2024/1689). The existing regulation introduces a risk-based regulatory framework for the deployment of AI systems, including those used in educational settings. Although most applications in higher education may fall outside the "high-risk" category, some systems—such as automated student assessment or algorithmic decision-making in admissions—may be subject to specific compliance requirements.

Empirical research suggests that the effectiveness of such technologies is highly contingent on implementation context. Systematic reviews (e.g., Bond et al., 2021; Gaebel et al., 2021) highlight that digital tools can enhance student engagement and learning outcomes; at the same time their success depends on alignment with sound pedagogical design, appropriate faculty training, and institutional support structures. Furthermore, the benefits of digital learning environments are not equally distributed, as disparities in digital access, skills, and motivation continue to affect outcomes across different student groups (Elena-Bucea et al., 2021). In this perspective, digital transformation is not conducive to improvements in HE operations and results per se, but they are critically mediated by a clever and intentional approach by actors who are governing and managing the institutions.

On the other hand, reinforcing digital competencies of students (and citizens overall) is a core challenge for HEIs. Strengthening digital competences is a key priority of the

European frameworks such as the Digital Education Action Plan (European Commission, 2023) and the Digital Competence Framework for Education (DigCompEdu), which emphasize the need to equip learners and educators with the skills required to participate fully in a digitally driven society. In 2023, approximately 71% of young people aged 16–29 in the EU possessed at least basic digital skills, with notable disparities across countries. For instance, while 94% of young people in Finland mastered such skills, 46% did so in Romania. Additionally, gender gap was also observed: 73% of young women had at least basic digital skills compared to 69% of young men. These figures highlight both the progress made and the ongoing challenges in achieving equitable digital competence among youth across the EU (EUROSTAT, 2024). Ensuring that all young people (as well as adults) acquire advanced and transferable digital competences remains a major challenge for education systems – particularly for universities, which play a critical role in preparing students for increasingly digitalized labour markets and civic life.

Student services within universities are also undergoing significant digitalization. Institutions are automating and streamlining processes such as student enrolment, course registration, credential verification, and academic advising. These developments are often driven by the need to improve operational efficiency, but they are also interrelated with the process of internationalization within the EU context. Specific initiatives such as the European Student Card (European Commission, 2024a) and the European Digital Credentials for Learning (European Commission, 2024b) reflect broader EU efforts to enable seamless cross-border academic mobility and ensure the interoperability of digital systems across member states. In particular, the European Student Card facilitates access to academic and campus services across institutions and borders, while the Digital Credentials for Learning initiative supports the secure, verifiable, and interoperable recognition of qualifications and learning outcomes in digital format.

Together, these developments point to a multifaceted, ongoing transformation in which universities must balance the potential benefits of digital innovation with ethical considerations, regulatory obligations, and pedagogical effectiveness. The challenge lies in moving beyond technology adoption as an end in itself and, instead, embedding digital

tools into coherent institutional strategies that serve long-term educational and societal goals.

Conclusions: Navigating the Organisational Dimensions of Digital Transformation in European Higher Education

The digital transformation of teaching and administrative services in European universities is a complex and evolving process, far to be completed. It involves the reconfiguration of institutional practices through the integration of digital technologies, with potential benefits in terms of innovation, operational efficiency, and responsiveness to student needs. At the same time, the innovations made possible by technology and digitalisation raise important questions concerning data governance, equity of access, and the sustainability of digital infrastructures. A growing number of European-level strategies and regulatory initiatives provide shared frameworks that guide and influence how institutions design and implement digital solutions. These frameworks support coordination across national systems and offer common reference points for addressing challenges such as skills development, system interoperability, and the responsible use of emerging technologies.

Beyond the adoption of new technologies, digital transformation in higher education must be understood as a fundamentally organizational change process. It affects structures, workflows, decision-making practices, and the everyday routines of academic and administrative staff. As such, successful transformation requires more than technological upgrades, such as a clear focus on people, including their roles, skills, expectations, and professional identities. Academic staff must be supported in developing not only digital competences but also pedagogical strategies that are responsive to new learning environments. Likewise, administrative staff need opportunities for capacity-building to adapt to new systems and digital procedures.

Striving for Flexible Learning in Higher Education: The Rise of Micro-Credentials

Micro-credential s (MCs) are proposed to be of strategic importance within the growing trend of flexible learning in European Higher Education (HE). Flexible learning, characterized by increased accessibility and personalized learning paths, is becoming

essential for continuous professional development and lifelong learning. For a long period of time, European higher education institutions have been searching for alternatives to regular degree programmes, striving to offer new ways of learning for a wider and more diverse student population. Non-degree education is a growing trend: based on the EUA Trends survey, 70% of the participating universities have at least one non-degree programme (Gaebel & Zhang, 2024). Flexible learning in higher education institutions means that studying has broader accessibility and a greater variety of learning paths and pace. Students can more autonomously decide when, where and how they will learn and follow a more personalised learning path for fulfilling (continuous) professional development and lifelong learning activities. Flexible learning can be supported by diverse teaching and assessment approaches (e.g. hybrid, blended format or teaching approaches like work-based learning) as well as learning choices (e.g. topics, methods, workload) within full-time programmes, but also by providing a broader pool of non-degree programmes. The latter is changing more rapidly, so this article will focus on non-degree programmes. To achieve these goals, higher education institutions need to rethink and reorganize programme portfolio, structures, forms, methods and assessment of learning and teaching.

In the last two decades (since 2012), universities have started to offer Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) for alternative, more flexible study opportunities, exploiting the technology development in education. Now it seems that beside clear advantages of flexible learning, using MOOCs has some main barriers as high dropout rates, poor pedagogy and low-quality assessment, and has been stagnating in European HEIs, based on the EUA Trends 2024 survey, less than one-third of the HEIs have MOOCs (Gaebel & Zhang, 2024). Furthermore, the main aims have become narrower than the dedicated support of professional development and lifelong learning promoting accessibility and flexibility. Today European higher education institutions, primarily, focus on outreach, knowledge sharing and self-promotion.

The latest trend in flexible non-degree programmes in European HEIs, beyond any doubt is the introduction of MCs. According to the Recommendation of the Council of the EU (2022, 5:a), MCs are a record of the skills and knowledge acquired by a learner by completing a short amount of learning. The assessment of these learning outcomes is

based on clearly defined and transparent criteria. Further key characteristics of MCs are being shareable, portable, they belong to the learner, can be independent or integrated into comprehensive credentials, and aim to equip learners with specific skills, knowledge, and abilities that meet cultural, personal, societal, or labour market needs. Lastly, MCs are underpinned by quality assurance, which is a highly emphasized criterion specifically within the European trends.

Drivers of MCs show a diverse range of directions in the HE sector, based on a literature review increasing employability is the number one driver (Brown et al., 2021). The main drivers and attractors can be grouped into three main categories such as (1) to increase economic competitiveness by recruiting people for fast study opportunities of reskilling and upskilling for the labour market. The second group supports (2) a more equitable and inclusive culture of lifelong learning, and the third one contributes to (3) the advancement of the digital and green agenda of HEIs (Brown et al, 2023). However, the literature focusing on the European context emphasizes more the drivers of the 2nd group, especially the increased flexibility for learning and the promotion of lifelong learning.

Table 1: Drivers and Attractors for Micro-credentials based on the analysis and tables of Brown et al., 2021, pp. 31-33.

	All publications	Highly relevant	Europe (N=46)	USA (N=72)	Asia-Pacific (N=29)
Increase employability	63.5%	84.4%	**71.7%**	54.2%	75.9%
Support CPD and workplace training	59.5%	62.2%	58.7%	61.1%	55.2%
Increase flexibility for learning	54.1%	75.6%	**73.9%**	43.1%	48.3%
Close skill gaps in response to changing nature of work	50.0%	71.1%	60.9%	37.5%	65.5%
Promote lifelong learning	48.0%	66.7%	**71.7%**	37.5%	37.9%
Develop 21st Century transversal skills	33.8%	51.1%	50.0%	19.4%	44.8%
Develop 21st Century credential ecology	23.6%	48.9%	47.8%	9.7%	20.7%

Increase access and pathways to formal education	20.3%	37.8%	32.6%	12.5%	20.7%
Support new models of pedagogy	18.2%	26.7%	26.1%	13.9%	17.2%

One European example of MCs promoting lifelong learning, social inclusion, and employability for disadvantaged groups is called MyCred4Home. The project develops micro-credentials and validates non-formal and informal prior learning in the field of the personal and household services (PHS) sector. The reason of focusing on the PHS sector is the wide range of relevant transversal skills needed for this work, the lack of sufficient recognition and the increasing demand for these services.

Challenges

One of the greatest risks is oversimplifying the new trend of MCs by focusing too narrowly on designing and implementing them without paying enough attention to the overall strategy for supporting flexible learning within HEIs. This wider scope is crucial in understanding what the quality and impact of MCs are in HEIs, and how it is different from upskilling in vocational education (Ralston, 2021). Institutional understanding of flexible learning requires negotiations and the involvement of diverse stakeholders (e.g. students, teachers, management, representatives of industry and society), and the development of a robust institutional strategy.

HEIs face pressure from students, labour market, society, and policy to offer more flexible learning opportunities, but often must do so within existing resource constrains (e.g. public funding, digital service challenges). Furthermore, regulatory and organisational frameworks, originally designed for traditional full-time programmes, are slow to adapt (Microbol, 2021). For example, defining learner status in the frame of MCs is a regulatory challenge. These slow changes can undermine the effectiveness of flexible learning and the integration of MCs into HEI practices.

Challenges at the institutional level mainly stem from shortcomings of leadership and new strategic institutional responses to MCs (Brown et al., 2023). The “fear of missing out” can hinder finding the best fit-for-purpose strategies. Key strategic questions that

need to be decided, according to Brown et al (2023), include to what extent the HEI should use MCs to compete in global HE markets or democratize access to HE, whether to maintain a clear distinction between macro- and MCs or develop an integrated credential framework, and whether it should follow a supplemental or transformative approach to integration into the HE programme portfolio or credential ecology. On the one hand, integrating MCs management into the current internal structures can maintain greater faculty involvement and academic ownership; on the other hand, establishing new internal structures can offer greater flexibility and the adoption of a clear business model.

At the level of learning and teaching, one of the key challenges is connected to higher educators' preparedness for facilitating the learning of a diverse student body. Although pedagogical training and support for academics have been steadily increasing, the focus on students' diversity and inclusive education is less typical.

Opportunities

As alternative and flexible study programmes MCs offer many opportunities for innovation and innovative programme design and implementation. One typical approach that has been strengthened is the co-creation of MCs which means that external stakeholders (e.g. industry, civil society, government) are involved in the design process, and in some cases, students are also active participants in programme design. For example, ECIU University offers MCs for solving real societal and sustainability challenges through co-creation of external stakeholders, teachers, researchers, and students following an innovative challenge-based learning approach (ECIU University, 2021). Innovative solutions are also boosted by the transdisciplinary nature of MCs.

Based on A European Maturity Model for Micro-credentials (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2024), there are three main areas where new developments will be needed: new business models and marketing, technology, and quality assurance. New business models and marketing will probably contribute to the development of new internal structures for developing and implementing micro-credentials. Technology developments are mainly connected to comparability, transparency, portability, and stackability of MCs, therefore offering credentialing platforms (e.g. European Digital Credentials), standards to describe metadata about learning (European Learning Model),

and supporting students' choices in flexible learning path through blockchain-secured digital passports for learning records (European Blockchain Services Infrastructure). In terms of quality assurance, a more modest development is recommended, where external QA should primarily be based on the assessment of providers and the effectiveness of their internal QA. The Bologna instruments (ESG, QF, ECTS, recognition) can be adopted to MCs without causing too much burden on HEIs, focusing on transparency and proportional changes (Microbol, 2021).

Conclusions: The Evolving Role of Micro-Credentials

In the future, the integration and the mutual impact of MCs and other degree programmes will probably increase in the context of credential ecology. So far, it seems that there is less openness to using MCs as an alternative way of bachelor's degrees, HEIs would insist on building on the regular bachelor's programme as an entrance to degree awards in higher education. Based on the EUA Trends 2024 survey, about 60% of the participating European HEIs reject the idea that MCs could offer an alternative to bachelor's programmes; however, half of the respondents agree with them being an alternative to master's programmes (Gaebel & Zhang, 2024). MCs can have a 'backward' impact on degree programmes and enhance flexible learning through increasing modularization and blended learning (where MOOCs and micro-credentials are integrated parts of full-time study programmes). In addition, the more sophisticated assessment methods of learning outcomes in MCs can contribute to renewing assessment strategies in degree programmes (it can even influence degree transcripts).

There is a shift of developing and implementing MCs from sole HEIs towards multi-campus initiatives, especially within HEIs of European University Alliances (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2024) which will probably be strengthened in the next years. Capacity building for developing, implementing MCs and assessing students' learning outcomes will be needed, which means that university teachers engaged in MCs should be supported by special trainings, extra time, and rewards for doing so. Furthermore, students also need more direct support because they need to learn in a more self-directed and autonomous way. For these reasons, learning analytics can be exploited in a deeper way in HEIs, and the work of academic advisors and counsellors can be strengthened.

Education for Sustainability in Higher Education: A Call for Transformative Approach

In the literature, EfS is often linked to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and in recent years, we have witnessed the rise of university rankings based on these goals. However, SDG index rankings overall are not necessarily the best indicators of societal progress toward sustainability (for example, 2024 while Finland ranked first Croatia ranked eighth on this scale). Alongside a range of critiques of SDG goals and the indicators used to operationalize them, for example planetary boundaries are not discussed at all in the SDGs, while economic growth is mentioned seventeen times (Bedford, 2021); the most explicit message is highlighted by authors Wackernagel at al. (2017): „ranking high on the SDG index strongly correlates with high per person demand on nature (or "Footprints"), and low ranking with low Footprints, making evident that the SDGs as expressed today vastly underperform on sustainability".

According to Macintyre, Tilbury, Wals, (2024) current education and environmental policies are increasingly shaped by six key narratives: the urgent need for a just transition away from fossil fuels (highlighted at COP28), the transformative impact of girls' education and gender inclusion, the integration of nature-based and relational approaches to sustainability, the importance of cross-sectoral partnerships for green transitions, the fusion of digital and environmental education to foster engagement and care, and the necessity for future-oriented, emotionally aware learning that addresses eco-anxiety and promotes intergenerational justice (Vatalis et al., 2022; FCDO, 2023; Seddon et al., 2020; Ansell et al., 2022; Edwards & Larson, 2020; Olsen et al., 2024,). Even the UN SDG Global Report 2024 highlights an urgent need for enhanced education on climate change and sustainability, particularly through strengthened teacher training initiatives.

In that sense 2020s emergent educational trends in education and environment can be describe as regeneration – learning to repair and restore, accepting the damage of human intervention on planet Earth, and transition – learning to transition and transgress, rather than simply solve problem or act (Macintyre at al, 2024).

Education for sustainability (EfS) is not a trend but a constant, increasingly integrated into higher education systems. Over the past few decades, discourse has evolved from

what Sterling refers to as "add-on" approaches toward more voices asking for fundamental transformations within the education system itself. International dialogue with university teachers highlights a strong need for increased support and collaboration to transform sustainability education (SE) in higher education, as add-on lectures alone are insufficient and students require more comprehensive approaches (Annelin and Boström, 2024). Key themes that academics have identified include the necessity of management and peer support, practical teaching inspiration, open resource sharing, and especially actions that foster student-centered and transdisciplinary learning environments. Teachers emphasized that interdisciplinary collaboration and guidance from sustainability leaders are crucial for overcoming challenges such as limited resources, diverse values, and the perception of sustainability as a political issue. Ultimately, Annelin and Boström (2024) conclude that moving toward sustainability as a transdisciplinary science—supported by institutional policies and cross-disciplinary teacher training—can enable more effective and transformative sustainability education. Similar results have been found in DECODE project where authors analysed obstacles in integrating sustainability into higher education institutions from the perspective of deans and department heads (Jongbloed at al., 2022).

Based on these and other findings, we can conclude that for universities to advance and effectively address societal needs and challenges, it is essential to adopt a whole institution approach (WIA) to sustainability, as detailed by for example Holst (2023), Wals & Mathie (2022) and Wals and al. (2024). Furthermore, this transformation requires new forms of leadership—specifically, transformative leadership that emphasizes the distribution of power across all levels of the institution, which is fundamental to the success of the WIA model.

Conclusion: Key Findings from the Education and Training Monitor 2024

1. *Limited Systemic Integration of Sustainability in Higher Education*: in most EU countries, sustainability in higher education is present mainly through isolated initiatives at the level of individual institutions or educators, rather than as a comprehensive, system-wide approach. The integration of sustainability topics into higher education curricula remains limited, and interdisciplinary or cross-curricular approaches are not yet widely adopted.

2. *Gap Between Knowledge and Action*: while a large majority of young people in the EU express strong values related to sustainability, there is a notable gap between these values and everyday sustainable actions. In higher education, students mostly acquire theoretical knowledge about sustainability, but practical, action-oriented learning experiences are less common and often have limited impact.
3. *Need for Strengthening Competences and Teacher Support*: the report highlights the importance of developing transversal and interdisciplinary sustainability competences, including "futures literacy"—the ability to think about and act for the future in uncertain contexts. There is a need for better teacher preparation and support in higher education to enable educators to help students connect knowledge with concrete action and to foster transformative learning.
4. *Recommendations for Future Development*: the Monitor recommends systematically embedding sustainability into all levels and processes of higher education, with a particular focus on curriculum integration, innovative teaching methods, and partnerships with local communities. Emphasis is placed on shifting from learning about the past and present to adopting future-oriented perspectives, so that students develop resilience and the capacity for transformative action.

Higher Education and Green Transitions

The United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a global, comprehensive framework for sustainability. The latter encompasses 17 goals that address global challenges such as poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace, and justice. Several studies point to the importance of the SDGs in providing a basic framework for higher education institutions (HEIs) in their quest to address the policy aim of transitioning into a carbon-free or green economy/society (Cristofoletti & Pinheiro, 2023), a phenomenon broadly known as 'green transitions' (GTs). HEIs are considered important stakeholders in GTs in the context of their primary tasks of education, research, service and innovation (Binagwaho et al., 2022).

Sustainability is often defined as socio-economic development that meets the needs of the present without compromising future generations' ability to meet their own needs. In HEIs, sustainability framed within the SDG framework, tends to emphasize interdisciplinary and practical approaches for social and environmental change. Yet, the

existing literature on HEIs and GTs remains fragmented, reflecting the inherent complexity of national and regional higher education systems and the diverse strategies adopted by HEIs worldwide (Cuesta-Claros et al., 2023; Schwartz et al., 2021).

Recent studies have explored the ways in which HEIs contribute to GTs through adapting strategies, curricula structures and educational practices, alongside campus operations, community engagement, research activities, etc. (Bautista-Puig & Sanz-Casado, 2021; Filho et al., 2024). A recent comparative analysis has revealed a major disconnect between policy intentions and realities, characterised by the absence of a comprehensive policy framework (and mechanisms) supporting HEIs' roles in GTs (Kekäle & Pinheiro, 2025). Likewise, studies show that integrating sustainability into the missions and structures of HEIs is fraught with tensions and challenges insofar: shifts in institutional values (Trevisan et al., 2024); balancing competing strategic interests and normative agendas (Niedlich et al., 2020); resource constraints; the role of leadership structures (Dlouhá et al., 2017; Littledyke et al., 2013; Lozano et al., 2013); and the strategic imperative for embracing interdisciplinary approaches (Bauer et al., 2021). Nokkala et al. (2024) contend that HEIs operate within interconnected spheres of regulation, norms, and cultural-cognitive elements, which collectively shape their capacity to act (or not) with respect to GTs.

Successful initiatives and models are often limited to individual (bottom-up) initiatives rather than institutionalized frameworks, suggesting that greater political and financial support is needed for broader adoption. Institutionalizing sustainability practices and fostering interdisciplinary cooperation within and across HEIs are seen as critical steps toward achieving GTs' goals. Likewise, collaborative frameworks and integrated strategies are thought to be critical requirements to advance sustainability initiatives within HEIs (Dlouhá et al., 2017). Some argue that policy entrepreneurs, defined as critical social agents with the capacity (skills, resources and legitimacy) to initiate institutional change, play a key role in both identifying and leveraging emerging opportunities to foster GTs within HEIs.

The literature on higher education and GTs reveals significant geographic gaps. Most studies from across Europe tend to focus on Western- and Northern- European settings,

like the United Kingdom, Germany, Portugal, and Spain, while more peripheral regions such as the Balkans and the Baltic states remain underrepresented (Lozano et al., 2019). This gap limits the comparability and generalizability of empirical findings, highlighting the need for greater regional diversity in research focusing on the role of HEIs in GTs. Another critical lacuna relates to the fact that the majority of studies assessing HEIs policies and practices for GTs occur within a single point in time, thus making it difficult to determine whether (and to what extent) these initiatives lead to lasting change within HEIs and across the national and regional higher systems in which HEIs are deeply embedded in.

Conclusions: Strategic Priorities for Advancing the Green Transition in Higher Education

When it comes to policy and practice, a recent strategic literature review on HEIs and GTs (Asante & Pinheiro, forthcoming) highlights several key recommendations along four main themes: strengthening institutional policies, enhancing interdisciplinary education, promoting stakeholder collaboration, and encouraging systematic monitoring and reporting.

Strengthening Institutional Policies: HEIs should adopt holistic sustainability strategies that align with national and EU frameworks. This approach would ensure that HEIs are not only compliant with broader regulatory requirements but also proactive in their sustainability efforts.

Enhancing Interdisciplinary Education: Sustainability should be integrated across disciplines through innovative pedagogical approaches. This would enable students to receive a comprehensive education that prepares them to address complex sustainability challenges, like climate change.

Promoting Stakeholder Collaboration: HEIs should foster partnerships with policymakers, businesses, and local communities to enhance the real-world impact of sustainability initiatives. Such collaborations would help bridge the gap between academic endeavours and practical applications.

Encouraging Systematic Monitoring and Reporting: HEIs should implement robust assessment mechanisms to track sustainability progress. This would foster transparency, accountability, and continuous improvement insofar sustainability policies, practices and initiatives across the board.

Final Chapter: Challenges and Opportunities in the Future of European Higher Education

This concluding chapter brings together the main themes explored throughout this special issue to reflect on the future direction of European higher education. The contributions demonstrate how the EHEA is undergoing deep and complex changes—driven by digital innovation (Capogna & Greco, 2024), political shifts, environmental urgency, and a growing emphasis on values such as equity, sustainability, and academic freedom (Academic Freedom Index Update, 2024; Karran et al., 2023). These transformations are not uniform or linear; rather, they unfold amid ongoing tensions between institutional autonomy and supranational coordination, between the demands of global competitiveness and the imperatives of social responsibility. To make sense of this evolving landscape, we structure our concluding reflections around two interconnected dimensions: the challenges that threaten the coherence and inclusiveness of European higher education, and the opportunities that may shape a more resilient and future-oriented EHEA.

Challenges

One of the most pressing challenges remains the legal and institutional fragmentation that continues to hinder integration across national systems. Despite important initiatives like the Bologna Process and the European Universities Initiative (Charret & Chankseliani, 2023; Grumbinaitė et al., 2025; Lambrechts et al., 2024), higher education institutions still operate under widely varying national regulations. These disparities create friction in joint degree development, institutional governance, and the recognition of new forms of learning such as micro-credentials (Brown et al., 2023; ECIU University, 2021). The lack of a clear European legal status for university alliances highlights this problem, limiting the potential of transnational cooperation at a time when such collaboration is both more feasible and more necessary than ever before.

Compounding this structural fragmentation is the growing threat to academic freedom, even in democratic EU member states. Although academic freedom is widely recognized as a foundational value of the EHEA, it is increasingly under pressure—from political interference, managerial governance models, and self-censorship within institutions. The Hungarian case presents a particularly stark example of state-led encroachment, but more diffuse trends can be seen across Europe (Karran et al., 2023; Maassen et al., 2023). These developments suggest that symbolic commitments to academic freedom must be reinforced by enforceable guarantees and sustained institutional vigilance (Academic Freedom Index Update, 2024).

Digitalization, while offering transformative potential, also presents critical challenges. The pandemic-driven expansion of online learning and student services has revealed stark inequalities in digital access and competencies. Moreover, the introduction of artificial intelligence in higher education raises new questions about ethical use, transparency, and regulatory compliance. In many cases, the adoption of digital tools has outpaced the pedagogical and institutional capacity to use them effectively. Without targeted investments in staff development and student support, digital transformation risks exacerbating rather than bridging educational inequalities (Capogna & Greco, 2024; Gaebel et al., 2021).

Institutional capacity also varies significantly across the EHEA. Smaller, less resourced, or regionally peripheral institutions are often expected to participate in ambitious reforms and alliances but lack the infrastructure or funding to do so meaningfully. This imbalance threatens to deepen hierarchies within European higher education, undermining the goals of inclusivity and cohesion that the EHEA was designed to promote.

Sustainability and the green transition represents another domain where ambition often exceeds implementation. While many institutions reference the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and have launched green initiatives, these efforts are frequently isolated or symbolic, compounded by a fragmented policy framework (rules and incentives) at the national level. Without a systemic and well-resourced commitment to sustainability—including integration into curricula, operations, and partnerships—higher education risks

falling short in its ambitions to positively contribute towards the green transition (Lozano et al., 2019).

Opportunities

Despite these significant challenges, there are equally compelling opportunities to reimagine the role of higher education in Europe. One of the most promising developments is the reframing of internationalisation in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Institutions and governments are moving away from narrow, volume-driven models of mobility toward more diversified, resilient, and ethically grounded forms of global engagement.

Flexible learning pathways, especially those enabled through micro-credentials, are also redefining access to higher education. These new modalities hold the potential to democratize education by meeting the needs of lifelong learners, working professionals, and non-traditional student groups. With appropriate quality assurance and governance frameworks, micro-credentials can be a powerful instrument for upskilling, inclusion, and personalized learning (Brown et al., 2023; Council of the European Union, 2022). Their integration into mainstream higher education may also foster innovation in curriculum design and assessment practices, encouraging greater modularity and responsiveness.

Digital transformation, though uneven, continues to offer opportunities for enhancing teaching, learning, and administration. When thoughtfully implemented, digital technologies can improve educational equity, increase operational efficiency, and enable more flexible learning environments. EU-level frameworks such as the Digital Education Action Plan and the European Digital Credentials for Learning initiative provide important tools for member states and institutions to coordinate and scale digital innovations (Gaebel & Zhang, 2024).

Sustainability, too, offers higher education institutions a renewed sense of public mission. Universities are uniquely positioned to lead green transitions through research, interdisciplinary education, and civic engagement. Emerging practices—such as stakeholder collaboration, sustainability audits, and mission-driven leadership—can help institutions turn sustainability rhetoric into systemic practice (Lozano et al., 2019; Filho

et al., 2024). With coordinated support from national and European bodies, higher education can play a catalytic role in addressing the climate crisis and promoting a more just and resilient society.

Finally, the growing political recognition of academic freedom and institutional autonomy at the European level suggests a renewed commitment to core academic values. Recent initiatives by the European Parliament and the Council of Europe to monitor and promote academic freedom are important steps toward ensuring that the principles underpinning the EHEA remain not only symbolic but operational (Academic Freedom Index Update, 2024; Karran et al., 2023). These efforts must now be institutionalized through mechanisms of accountability, peer review, and cross-border solidarity.

Outlook

Taken together, the challenges and opportunities outlined above point to five strategic imperatives for the future of the EHEA. First, legal and structural reforms are needed to enable deeper transnational cooperation while respecting national diversity. Second, digital and green transitions must be pursued in ways that are equitable, inclusive, and pedagogically sound (Gaebel et al., 2021; Capogna & Greco, 2024). Third, academic freedom must be protected not only through declarations but through enforceable standards and systemic monitoring (Maassen et al., 2023). Fourth, new metrics of excellence should be developed that recognize social impact, inclusivity, and educational quality alongside research output. Finally, governance at all levels—from institutional to European—must be guided by a shared sense of responsibility, mutual learning, and public purpose.

The EHEA is not a static arrangement but a living project—one that must continually negotiate between unity and diversity, ambition and pragmatism. The contributions in this volume show that transformation is already underway. The task ahead is to consolidate progress, address persistent gaps, and build a higher education system that is not only more integrated and innovative but also more democratic, inclusive, and future-ready.

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