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Understanding European Universities Initiative as the limestone to cement Europe together: a review of existing literature.

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Abstract
"Creating a feeling of belonging is the cement that holds Europe together" Macron, 2017. Forty-four alliances were created among European universities since 2020. This initiative came about as a recognition of the lack of capacity of the European Union to create a European citizenship. This study focuses on summarising the results and lines of research within this European Universities Initiative (EUI) by completing action research and a review of existing literature. A scoping review was used to assign each of the articles found to one of the analytical variables: lecturers, students, and managers. Where a study fell into more than one category, it was assigned individually to each variable. The results show that most of the studies focus on a single university or country. Furthermore, there is a disproportionate interest in students, to the detriment of lecturers and managers. Based on the literature review analysis the conclusions ascertain that the alliances need a full rebranding to achieve visibility and communicate their purpose. The application of an action research methodology has allowed the authors to identify the lack of branding of the initiative and they propose the term EuroAgoraDigital University (EDU) to describe the new paradigm that these EDUs stand for. In the wake of the European Union's efforts to forge a unified educational space, the European Universities Initiative (EUI) emerges as a pivotal experiment in fostering a European identity through higher education. This paper delves into the transformative potential of the EUI, set against the backdrop of ongoing debates about the Europeanization of education and the quest for cohesive European citizenship.
        Keywords: EuroAgora Digital University (EDU), European Higher Education
        Educational Area (EHEA), European Universities Initiative (EUI), Higher
        Education Institution (HEI), Scoping review, Higher Education Policy

Introduction
Since 1945, Europe has experienced one of its periods of greatest peace, stability, and economic growth (McNamara, 2018). The collective failure represented by Brexit, together with populism and independent movements, pose a serious risk to the project of European

unity (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2008; Cremonesi & Salvatti, 2019). In this context, and at the initiative of French President Emmanuel Macron, the European Union has decided that it is time to create a common European educational space (Macron, 2017). The Education initiative will serve to connect the talent of future generations as well as foster language acquisition. However, the European Universities Initiative implies enhancing the current higher education model (Una Europa, https://www.una-europa.eu). The purpose is building Super European Universities—as they have come to be known in the media— that will share students, facilities and digital resources. Until now, it has been the different nation-states that make up the European Union (or in some cases, even the regions that make up each of the states) that have been managing each of the university systems. However, in this model proposed by the European Universities Initiative, students can study different subjects within the universities that make up the alliance, and do so in person, via distance learning or a mixture of both (blended learning). For example, students beginning an engineering degree in Milan can study the second year in Warsaw and finish their studies in Valencia. The students can also study subjects given on other campuses belonging to the alliance in a hybrid or distance format. Through the European Universities Initiative project, the European Union aspires to make it easier for citizens to feel they are part of a common project and thus make headway towards the process of European unity (Gunn, 2020)

The Alliances' Funding and Goals
In total, 44 alliances have been formed among European universities. For three years (2020-2023), these alliances are receiving up to five million euros from the Erasmus+ programme and up to two million euros from the Horizon 2020 programme (Arnaldo-Valdes & Gómez-Comendador, 2022) to begin implementing their plans and pave the way for other higher education institutions throughout the entire EU. The alliances include universities of applied sciences, technical universities, schools of film and multimedia arts, and multidisciplinary universities. The institutions selected to take part in this initiative are characteristic for being leaders in research. This concept of a transnational university behind the EUI (European Universities Initiative) means uniting physical and virtual campuses to create shared degrees whose main purpose should be "advancing (and enhancing) market integration in European higher education" (Cino Pagliarello, 2022). Furthermore, the Super European Universities represent the natural continuation of the EHEA (European Higher Education Area) and the ERA (European Research Area). This goal is being brought about effectively, since the alliances' funding comes from the programmes aimed at educational projects (Eramus +) and research projects (Horizon). It was with this premise that the EUI project was launched, intended to become the next springboard to enable the construction process of the European Educational Space to go further (Veiga et al., 2015; Karvounaraki et al, 2018).
European Universities seek to establish themselves as models of good practices to blaze a trail toward the university of the future and enable students to get a degree by combining their studies in various countries of the European Union. The inter-university campuses must allow for physical, virtual and blended mobility of students, academics and service staff to study, teach, do research, work and share services among the institutions participating in each of the alliances (Sin & Tavares, 2018). In this way, transdisciplinary and transnational teams can be created involving students, academics and other external agents interested in tackling the big problems facing Europe, such as climate protection, democracy or migration (YUFE Alliance, https://yufe.eu; Enhance Alliance, https://enhanceuniversity.eu/).

These European alliances are the model towards which the European Commission aspires to guide the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in order to create European universities in which European values are fostered and solutions are provided to the challenges facing the

continent. These university alliances are intended to take on the great challenges of the 21st century while at the same time constructing a European citizenry. To do so, strategies for cooperation will need to be implemented between different countries in order to reinforce the so-called knowledge triangle (KT) made up of education, research and innovation (Unger & Polt, 2017), fostering a holistic approach to knowledge that will result in a real impact in the societies that fund such research. This approach is in line with Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) (Jakobsen et al., 2019).

Background

In examining the European Universities Initiative (EUI), it is vital to situate our analysis within the broader discourse of higher education's Europeanization. This initiative epitomizes the tensions and synergies between national educational traditions and supranational European aspirations, a dualism thoroughly explored by Cino Pagliarello (2022). The European Union Council (2021) has acknowledged the EUI as a pivotal step towards a new dimension in European higher education, envisioning a more integrated and innovative educational landscape within the single market.

Fehrenbach and Huisman (2024) provide a systematic literature review highlighting strategic gaps in transnational alliances, emphasizing the need for alignment in higher education strategies across Europe, directly relevant to the EUI's mission. Gunn's (2020) study further expounds on the formation of these educational alliances, portraying them as vehicles for advancing the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) into a new era of collaborative excellence.

Moreover, the legacy of the Bologna Process must be considered. Sin and Tavares (2018) critically assess the Process's unfulfilled potential in creating a unified higher education market, shedding light on the complex interplay between European policy ambitions and national sovereignty. This interplay continues to shape initiatives like the EUI. Similarly, Veiga et al. (2015) discuss the differentiated integration within the Bologna Process. This concept resonates with the EUI's aim to foster educational coherence while respecting the diversity of its member institutions.

This background necessitates our study to delve into how the EUI harmonizes with these established frameworks and what new dimensions it brings to the Europeanization of higher education. By doing so, we aim to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on how transnational educational initiatives can not only coexist with but also enhance the rich tapestry of European higher education.

In the process of building a space to create and transmit European knowledge, it is important to consider together with the Bolonga process, some past examples in the areas of mobility, collaborative management and international programmes. These three examples have been chosen based on the experience of the authors who have been participating in one of the alliances. One of the challenges of this initiative is to be able to explain and convince students, lecturers and institutions of the convenience of collaboration. The three examples have been used in meetings, conferences and presentations to explain the shift in paradigm of this initiative. The examples of the shift represent the key points of this initiative: international mobility, human collaboration in a multilingual and multicultural context.

1. Paths as the First Successful Experiment in International Mobility. Mobility via walking routes as a model of successful exchange.
2. Collaborative management of resources - the European Coal and Steel Community (CECA). In this case, human capital is the factor that most determines a country's wealth.

3. Business schools. It is important to learn from the experience that some business schools have had over the last two centuries in training students in international and intercultural environments.

There are previous initiatives to develop European higher education that could be included here e.g. the Bologna Process, the EHEA and the Lisbon Treaty but their connection and impact have already been explored in other publications (Díaz-Méndez & Gummesson, 2012).

Paths as the First Successful Experiment in International Mobility

Paths are a success story in the process of building European identity by exchanging and discovering natural and cultural heritage, created by Europeans in different eras with a common goal: the search for vital meaning through travel, mobility and cultural exchange. The European paths that formed an association in 2014 have been an example for more than twelve centuries of the exchange of knowledge, culture and heritage between the European countries that originally created them. The best-known path finally arrives in Santiago de Compostela, but there are also others just as old such as the *Via Regia*, which sets out from Santiago de Compostela in Spain, crosses France, Belgium, Germany and Poland and finally reaches Ukraine, a country which at the time of writing this article is undergoing a period of great anxiety on seeing its territorial integrity threatened by the Russian invasion.

The key to the path's success lies in the fact that the pilgrims could freely cross different territories thanks to the credential they held (Smith et al., 2020). Originally, Latin acted as a *lingua franca* and the path thus became a shared space to exchange knowledge. The initiative proposed by this new educational model being analysed in this study puts forward the role that international mobility can play in fostering a true European conscience. The European Universities Initiative puts forward an educational system connecting campuses from different countries through an itinerary that enables students to acquire and strengthen their skills in an open, multicultural environment (Teichler, 2017).

The ECSC. European Coal and Steel Community

In the 20th century, after the collective failure of World War II, the need arose to jointly manage the industrial production of coal and steel in the areas disputed between Germany and France: the Ruhr and the Saar areas. The ECSC —European Coal and Steel Community— was a supranational European entity that until 2002 regulated the extraction and use of raw materials. Following the same philosophy as on the pilgrimage paths, this union meant an abolition of tariffs, helped the circulation of goods, services and people, and prevented the signatory states from taking protectionist steps that would compromise efficiency and make the product more expensive and less competitive (ECSC, 1951).

In the same way that the iron, steel, and mining industries were strategic in European development in the mid-20th century, further education for human capital is undoubtedly the main source of wealth for developed societies in the 21st (Kapur & Crowley, 2008). That said, Europe's future and its level of development depends on the way this talent is managed and connected. This means that the training of human capital in Europe must be carried out in a European, multilingual context, which is what inspired the common European project from the outset (García-Gato, 2016). Agreements in the European context have always been reached using a vehicular language (fundamentally French or English), but interpreters have also been essential, allowing the different stances to find common ground to make agreements possible. Therefore, following this spirit, it is important that the new model of European university does not forget the importance of the member countries' different languages, but encourages and promotes their use (Orr et al., 2019).

European Business Schools (EAPs)

The need to connect skills acquisition in different fields in an international, multicultural and multilingual environment is something that the educational sphere has been working on for at least the last 200 years. Business schools are a successful example of how European elites over the last two centuries have been receiving an education in a multidisciplinary, international and multilingual context that has trained leaders capable of starting up businesses in which they combine technological skills with those of leadership and management.

These business schools are very important in qualitative terms due to the experience accumulated in developing an educational project with many points in common with the one proposed by the European Universities Initiative. Nevertheless, the impact of business schools has been limited because not many students can afford to pay the tuition fees, so they have created a kind of human capital that is very valuable but very small in number and very much limited to the continent's economic and political elites (Kaplan, 2018).

Furthermore, there have been complaints that in these institutions' educational programmes there has been an absence of critical thinking and ethical criteria in the decision-making processes, especially given the context of the economic crisis of 2008. Even so, the EUI must take advantage of these institutions' experience in providing international, multidisciplinary and multilingual training, and connect it with Europe's main social challenges. Such education must be provided in a way that is accessible to citizens and connected to innovation and research (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Beauchamp et al, 2022).

Microcredentials and European Degrees.

After the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union, the representation of European universities in the top positions of international rankings has fallen. Therefore, is urgent to improve the quality of education and research in the European Union to regain leadership in creating and producing knowledge (Wolszczak-Derlacz, 2017). Therefore EUI proposes the use of microcredentials as the basis of the new European Degrees. These two tools, that is microcredentials and the new European Degrees, will facilitate the relevance of European Higher Education in an international context. This is important because these two tools instigate geographical and social mobility into the higher educational system.

Microcredentials

Micro-credentials focus on smaller, shorter courses, often targeting a specific skill or competence. Various micro-credentials that are used by students to acquire a degree can also be used by professionals wishing to gain or refresh knowledge in a given area. This innovation underlines and fosters the importance of offering inter-generational and inter-professional training (Oliver, 2019). Micro-credentials can help people attain knowledge and skills useful for their professional and personal development. These micro-qualifications are for everyone, regardless of age, education level or employment status; micro-credentials therefore also support inclusion and access to higher education. Unlike traditional degree programs, micro-credentials can be offered online. The workload needed to achieve micro-credential learning outcomes consists of participation in the learning activity, assessment, and other obligatory and optional information characteristic of any particular micro-qualification (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2021).

European Degrees

The degrees offered by these alliances are intended to broaden the opportunities for learning, social integration and employability in keeping with the general objectives of the European Union. To do so, it is necessary to remove administrative barriers and offer international joint study programmes to bolster cooperation between higher education institutions on the

continent. For this reason, the alliances are working on multilingual teaching programmes, shared evaluation and certification systems, homogenisation of scholarship programmes and tuition fees, duration of studies, etc. (European Union Council, 2021).

The degrees must be part of a long-term, planned strategy to put education at the service of sustainability, excellence and European values (ANECA, 2022). Such alliances of European universities must become universities that foster European values and identity, while increasing their competitiveness.

Objectives

EUI is a relatively new policy development, and although the research published on this topic has not been extensive, developing a literature review methodology, seems appropriate to provide context, to identify methodologies, and to avoid duplicative research. In this context, the action research and the literature review methods aim to identify the gaps and the challenges that the Alliances need to face to create a common European education and research space.

The European Universities are intended to become established in alliances seeking to provide quality education that fosters European identity and connection with the continent's social challenges. Moreover, there is an excellent opportunity for them to become established as a model to be followed by all the other institutions. This is why it is essential to analyse the research that has been carried out so far on these alliances to identify the lines of work that may help discover the main opportunities to connect students and researchers from the participating institutions. To do so, this study has been structured to meet three fundamental objectives:

    (1) To summarise the main results and lines of research on the common European education space.

    (2) To identify gaps and research opportunities in the area, and define future lines of research and the main challenges facing the EUI.

    (3) To gather the different keywords referring to European higher education and put forward a single definition, classifying and unifying terminology in the area.

Method

3.1. *Action research methodolgy*

The adoption of an action research methodology (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013) arises from the absence of previous case studies with which to compare or collect data, due to the innovative nature of the proposal presented in this study. The researchers have participated in the Enhance University Alliance since 2021. The Enhance Alliance is a European project funded by the ERASMUS+ Programme selected in the second call of the European Universities Initiative. The objective was to trigger and deepen levels of institutional cooperation making it systematic, structural, and sustainable. This study contains the results of this participation for one year from July 2021 until the end of June 2022. During this period the researchers have been leading the communication work package of this Alliance. During the project a lack of knowledge and connection to the outcomes and work developed by other Alliances has been detected; this is the reason we have seen the need to develop a literature review to achieve a picture of the forty-four alliances' achievements and challenges. This methodology has combined research and the experience of hands-on management to address the specific issues of the alliance. The researchers have implemented a methodology of planning and executing the subsequent actions related to communication and project management and then observing and evaluating the progress of the milestones in weekly meetings. The outcomes were assessed in monthly meetings with the other partners. Action research is effective because it has allowed collaboration with researchers, practitioners, and stakeholders. However, the results focus only on a particular Alliance. To ensure the findings

can be directly applicable to other alliances, the following literature review method has been implemented to contrast and enrich the validity of the results.

3.2 Literature Review

An exploratory systematic literature review known as a scoping review has been used. Scoping reviews are a tool to determine the scope of scientific output in each area and provide key indicators of the volume of literature and studies available. In addition, they enable research opportunities to be identified; determine the scope of a study area; clarify concepts; and investigate research behaviour (Munn et al., 2018). Systematic literature reviews focus on the field of biomedicine and health, though they can accept studies from any area, especially Human and Social Sciences (Codina, 2020a) and transnational alliances in Higher Education (Bendenlier et al, 2018; Feherenbach and Huisman, 2022).

Scoping reviews arose in the healthcare sphere, with Arksey and O'Malley (2005) being the first to propose a methodological framework. Over time, this type of review has received great attention from academics, becoming widely validated by the scientific community (Tricco et al., 2018; Peters et al., 2020). Furthermore, they are recognised by relevant sites and groups in the field of systematic reviews, such as the PRISMA Group, the Cochrane Collaboration and the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI).

Scoping reviews follow the SALSA (Search, Appraisal, Synthesis, Analysis) model (Grant and Booth, 2009; Booth et al., 2012) and are used to guide and evaluate systematic reviews. To sum up, a SALSA framework is made up of: 1) Search: This is carried out meticulously, systematically and transparently, using the most important academic databases; 2) Appraisal: developing an appraisal system that discards documents that are not of sufficient quality to be included in the analysis; 3) Analysis: this requires the use of a systematic procedure to ensure the articles are dealt with in the same way; 4) Synthesis: providing a new product as a result of bringing together the analysed parts, not a mere juxtaposition of results (Codina, 2020a).

Although the search and appraisal phases are common to all spheres, the analysis and synthesis phases are adapted to the sphere of social and human sciences. The proposal for this analysis is called ReSiste-CHS (Systematised Reviews in Human and Social Sciences) based on the work by Booth et al. (2012).

The most noteworthy characteristics of the proposal (Codina, 2020a) are:
- Its use for conceptual frameworks for new projects.
- Its focus on the sphere of human and social sciences.
- Use of the SALSA method.
- Use of the general principles of Human and Social Sciences for the analysis and synthesis phase.
- Addition of another phase: presentation, understood to be an extension of the synthesis phase. This phase focuses on presenting the results using tables and diagrams.

Search

The aim of the first phase is to provide a database of items that are candidates to become part of the final bank of documents to be analysed. Since it is impossible to analyse all of the publications in a discipline, the Web of Science was chosen as the data source, considering its strict selection criteria accepted by the scientific community.

To ensure the efficiency of the search, the FDC method (faceting, deriving and combining) was used (Codina, 2020b). For the first part of the proposal, an exploratory search was carried out in European education thesauruses. However, the results obtained by Web of Science for these terms were not satisfactory as regards the topic under study. After carrying out several trials, the following keywords were included: European Strategy for universities, European Universit* Initiative, Erasmus+, European Higher Education Area.. To complete the

search equation, the year of publication was filtered, taking 2020 as the starting point, since it was the year when the European university alliances initiative began. The period analysed comprehends since 1ˢᵗ January 2020 until 30ᵗʰ June 2022.

Appraisal

The suitability of the articles and their validity for the analysis were measured, thereby including or excluding them from the document bank in this phase (Codina, 2020b). The articles' titles, keywords and abstracts were visually and manually codified, discarding any that did not meet the minimum inclusion criteria and also excluding research addressing solely the impact of COVID-19 on higher education. After this first appraisal, a deeper analysis was carried out, reviewing the articles in their entirety, with particular emphasis on the introduction, conclusions and results. The search and appraisal phase resulted in a diagram summarised by the workflow in Fig. 1.

[Figure 1]

Analysis

To obtain data, an analysis plan was drawn up that was applied to each article equally, generating an extract that included the title of the study, an informative abstract, its objectives, and its main contributions.

Different analysis variables were also included, with options, so that the articles could be classified into mutually non-exclusive criteria. These appraisal criteria considered whether there was a direct mention of the EUI; whether the article focused on a particular area of knowledge or several across disciplines; whether the study included one or several countries; the type of research method used; and the article's classification that has been codified into five areas, three categories of status and eight topics (Table 1).

[Table 1 near here]

The five areas, developed *ad hoc* for classification were proposed based on the most common areas found in a preliminary exploratory search for studies. These areas (Table 1) are: 1) studies on the EUI; 2) comparative studies between European universities; 3) international competitiveness, excellence and employability in the EHEA; 4) universities' connection to their social impact (based on the SDG objectives); and 5) other studies.

As for the categories of status, we divided the studies analysed into the three collectives involved in universities: academics, students and administrative staff and managers. We then classified these three categories in turn according to the topic in the paper analysed, these topics being for academics: research, teaching and management; for students: learning, international mobility and employability; and for administrative staff and managers: international mobility and management. As a result, there were eight topics covering the three categories of status (See Table 1).

For the final phase of the scoping review, a summary (and presentation) was made of the results. This stage is presented in the Results section, where the data is shown. Finally, in the discussion phase, the data obtained was interpreted, thus rounding up the synthesis of the results (Noblit & Hare, 1988; Codina, 2020c).

Results

    1. Action Reseach

The main weaknesses detected during the process were lack of branding of the alliance, the difficulty of running the project in an intercultural environment, and the use of the medium of English that in the case of Enhance Alliance is not the native language of any of the members.

    1.1 The lack of visibility and branding of the Alliance.

The lack of a meaningful single brand with which all the alliances identify makes it difficult to implement an effective communication strategy. This lack of identity was the main obstacle to

foster bottom-up innovation, modern administration and students' co-creation that are the main challenges of Enhance Alliance. It is difficult to get involvement inside the Universities when the ethos of the initiative is difficult to share because the official name EUI (European University Initiative) lacks a clear meaning. In the context of all the European Union organisations and institutions there are very similar names and acronyms. To address this lack of identity, the researchers designed a communication strategy to illustrate the main targets of Enhance Alliance. These main targets were **students**, the **educational community**, **decision-makers, partners, and the media because of their influence on the rest of society. The collaboration with events that were held in the cities members of the members of the Alliance or that were collaborating with the institutions members, for example, Festival of Science of Berlin, COP 26 in Glasgow and World Design Capital in Valencia were particularly successful. These events allowed us to address different targets: partners, decision makers and media that facilitated the visibility of the Alliance into the students and the educational community.**

The Table 2 shows the main goals for each one of the ENHANCE Alliance targets:

(Table 2)

1.2 Difficulty of running the project in an intercultural environment

The ability to manage the process of taking decisions, ensuring the deadlines of the deliverables, and measuring the workload for the different partners has been found as the key points during the monthly meetings with the leaders of the different universities of the Alliance. For that reason, a strategy has been implemented that combines online meetings with face-to-face encounters under some specific recommendations:

- Organize work task-oriented meetings with the objective of deciding the requirements of the deliverables with clear responsibilities and due dates.
- Engagement of at least 3 partners in each task should be a guiding principle and exceptions should be explained and justified.
- In each work package, there should be one key contact for each partner university.
- All partners should be encouraged to comment and respond to drafts. Those who after a reminder do not response will be considered to have agreed to the draft/proposal.

1.3 The use of a language

Although English is the medium of common communication, it is important to use the language of each country of the alliance to have an impact on the media and decision-makers. Therefore, it is priority to have flexibility to agree on and translate the press releases after each of the events. The researchers implemented an specific workflow chart that explains how to record the reports and information in a way that enables each institution to customize the content according to their institutional priorities and their students' interests.

2. Literature Review

The 54 scientific publications have been published in 43 different specialised journals, one book and two congress presentations, indicating a high dispersion of the relevant literature analysed, with no specific journals today containing the bulk of the scientific literature related to the European Universities Initiative, but rather a large spread. Only a few journals have published more than one article (Table 3), among which, together with journals dedicated eminently to education, the journal *Sustainability* is particularly noteworthy:

[Table 3 near here]

Each of the different parameters (areas, categories of status, and topics) was analysed to see if it could be applicable to each article. There are articles that deal with various matters and hence the final sum of categories does not come to 100%. Firstly, a study was made of the main areas upon which the different articles were based. Out of the total of 54 articles, there are three of

them in which none of the five areas is mentioned. Therefore, almost 91% of the articles studied deal with a single area. It is observed that most articles (40.74%) deal with area three, international competitiveness of European higher education, and therefore with aspects such as skills and good practices that foster excellence and employability, taking up 40.7% of the total and almost 50% of those addressing a single area. There are 15 (27.7%) publications that deal with the ideas of strategic partnership and mobility of European universities, addressing areas such as collaboration between universities and comparative studies. There were 11 (20.37%) that talked about the connection of the university with its social impact and social development goals (SDGs). In three cases (5.5%) there are other areas discussed, and finally, in only one of the articles located (1.85%) is the European Universities Initiative discussed and thus directly related to alliances between universities. Therefore, more than 80% of the articles talk about areas two and/or three, indicating that they are the ones of most interest, while areas one and five are only of interest (i.e. the article talks about them) in fewer than 10% the of articles reviewed.

In the categories of status section, the possibility that the articles talked about three categories (namely: the academics themselves, the students, and the administrative staff and managers) was investigated in order to determine which of the three categories within university communication enjoyed most attention from the authors.

Two articles do not talk about any category. Of the remaining 52, there are those that talk about a single category and others that mix them within their content. Thus, it is seen that when the articles talk about academics, 12 focus mainly on teaching, six on their research, and six on aspects related to management, from the academics' point of view. When the articles mention students, most (20 publications) investigate their learning possibilities, eight into their ability to move between universities, and only five focus on their employability. As for talking about administrative staff and managers, above all they mention pure administration or management (in 14 publications) and on eight occasions they talk of international mobility of administration and services staff. In other words, almost 40% of the articles deal with the category "academics", and more than half talk about "Students".

It is worth noting that this initiative is just beginning. So much is this the case that only one of the articles expressly mention the concept of EUI, while the other 53 publications do not. It is to be expected that over time the initiative will mature conceptually and there will be more express mentions of it observed.

On the other hand, 24 of the 54 articles focus their research on a single country, while 30 publications look at several countries. Authors should therefore be encouraged to be ambitious and investigate further to provide evidence of several countries, especially on a topic that is intended precisely to foster collaboration between European nations.

As for the methodology and objectives of the publications looking into the concept of the European Universities Initiative, 35 publications are cross-cutting (that is, they touch on several scientific disciplines), whereas in 19 cases they concentrate on one single area of knowledge. Many publications (22 articles) use a qualitative method in their research, with surveys predominating (14 times), followed by interviews and focus groups (7), one using the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) as its essential qualitative research techniques, while on 18 occasions a quantitative method was used, and 10 articles are separated here as literature reviews.

A summary of the results can be seen below (Fig. 2).

[Figure 2] Scoping review data on European Universities Initiative literature.

Discussion

After analysing this new university model through research action in one alliance and the published research related to all the European Universities Initiative composed of 44 alliances, it has been observed that one distinctive aspect of this initiative is that the Agora is no longer

the physically tangible Agora of an institution. On the contrary, it is formed by a space of multiple nodes connecting different European campuses and enabling students to map out their educational path thanks to the virtual and physical mobility that characterises this new concept of academic institution. The model, which we propose to call *EuroAgora Digital University* (EDU), is a space for innovation, learning and cooperation in which bureaucratic barriers between countries are removed. In the 21st century, the raw material for social and economic progress is training for citizens, and therefore the best way to cooperate is via European management of innovation and knowledge. To this end, a classification of European Universities is proposed. The term *European* to refer to this new model of higher education is too vague because all the member countries' universities are European insofar as they are in European territory. Therefore, the concept of *EuroAgora Digital University* (EDU) is put forward, defining the new university Agora as a European space (with degree qualifications and projects shared between countries) and a digital one (in hybrid and online format). We propose the creation of two categories for which universities can opt:

- *EuroAgora Digital Universities* (EDU): this is proposed to include universities that are part of one or more European alliances (European Universities Initiative).
- *Emerging EuroAgora Digital Universities* (Emerging EDU): These are academic institutions that, though not part of a EUI alliance, provide international degrees in collaboration with at least three countries, are part of international research projects, give teaching in different official languages of the European Union both physically and online, and connect their goals with the Sustainable Development Goals. Therefore, emerging EDU meet the EuroAgora Universities' characteristics and would be ready and willing to become part of one of the alliances.

It is proposed that an external international evaluation agency should monitor this ranking of universities in such a way that each institution may specialize in an area or aspect where it considers that it can be more useful to society and be able to tangibly report the outcome of their work done. The evaluation agency will help to regulate the learning outcomes of the micro-qualifications to assess the students' skills that in the EDUs call micro-credentials. Micro-credentials are the bricks that the EDUs need to cement Europe together.

The EuroAgora Digital University (EDU) emerges as a transformative model. Bridging the divide between traditional campus boundaries and the digital realm, EDU signifies a paradigm shift towards a dynamic educational network. This interconnected system fosters a seamless exchange of knowledge and innovation, transcending geographical constraints and bureaucratic impediments, thus crafting a novel agora for the digital age.

Conclusions

The EUI's innovative approach to fostering European unity through educational collaboration presents a forward-looking model that challenges traditional boundaries and promotes a shared vision for the continent's educational future. As we conclude our work on the EUI, it is imperative to acknowledge the EUI potential in sculpting a cohesive educational framework for Europe. By facilitating a confluence of diverse academic institutions under a unified digital umbrella, EUI stands as a beacon of integrated learning and cooperation, poised to catalyze the intellectual synergy essential for addressing the multifaceted challenges of the 21st century. As we consider the implications of our findings, it becomes clear that the EUI represents a significant step towards achieving a more integrated European Higher Education Area and serves as an underpinning for policy reform and innovation in the global educational arena. This study contributes to helping policymakers understand the necessity of adaptive,

collaborative policy frameworks to address the evolving challenges and opportunities within higher education, ensuring a resilient and cohesive educational future for Europe and beyond.

Given the scarcity of studies published in this regard, there is a need to increase research on the EUI. Despite this lack of literature, this study and the documentation reviewed to carry it out have enabled the authors to compile a series of weaknesses and opportunities for a comparative study between European universities, allowing various lines of research to be proposed (O2).

Firstly, a high number of "European studies" have been detected whose sample only includes a single university. Therefore, (I) a greater number of comparative analyses between different countries and university alliances are necessary to identify good practices and enable them to be transferred to other alliances and universities. Table 3 is a good starting point, providing various approaches that may be of interest for comparisons between universities.

The results show the lack of relevant scientific literature on the European Universities Initiative, and the necessity to develop research that comprehends different countries. (O1). The study into *European Universities Initiative: How Universities May Contribute to a More Sustainable Society* offers an approach to assess good practices by means of an *Analytical Hierarchical Process* (AHP), which classifies the good practices employed by the alliances based on innovation, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, and replicability. Despite the small number of studies on the EUI, the scoping review has enabled us to gather approaches to measuring various university practices (Table 4). We have briefly summarised each of the approaches since we consider them useful for future comparative studies between universities.

[Table 4]

TITLE	AUTHORS	APPROACH	MEASURES
European Universities Initiative: How Universities May Contribute to a More Sustainable Society	Arnaldo Valdés & Gómez Comendador	*Analytical Hierarchical Process* (AHP)	Good practices employed by alliances (innovation, effectiveness, sustainability and replicability)
Towards a European framework for community engagement in higher education – a case study analysis of European universities	O'Brien, Ćulum Ilić, Veidemane, Dusi, Farnell & Šćukanec Schmidt	TEFCE Framework	Engagement in higher education (teaching and learning; research: service and knowledge exchange; students; staff; management policies and management engagement)
Is the global reporting initiative suitable to account for university social responsibility? Evidence from European institutions	Amiano Bonatxea Gutiérrez-Goiria, Vazquez-De Francisco & Sianes	Global Reporting Initiative (GRI)	To report University Social Responsibility (USR)
Understanding the Athena SWAN award scheme for gender equality as a complex social intervention in a complex system: analysis of Silver award action plans in a comparative European perspective	Kalpazidou Schmidt, Ovseiko, Henderson & Kiparoglou.	Athena SWAN	Good practices of gender equality at higher education (representation, progression and success)
The skill of learning to learn at university. Proposal for a theoretical model	Gargallo-López, Pérez-Pérez, Giménez-Beut & Portillo-Poblador	AaA [LtL] Model	Skills for learning-to-learn (cognitive, macrocognitive, affective-cognitive, social/relational and ethical dimensions).

Arnaldo-Valdés and Gómez-Comendador (2022) underline the importance of the university's connection with society, showing it is necessary (II) to measure the social impact of alliances in the local, national and international community. Toledo-Lara (2020) emphasises the complexity involved in (III) harmonising the university doctoral systems in the European Higher Education Area. Meanwhile, Brooks (2019) highlights the (IV) lack of homogenisation in the mobility of European students. These are just a few examples of the challenge faced by the EUI in harmonising not only educational content, but also mobility and the definition of a doctoral student and their consideration as a student, employee or researcher. On carrying out this study, the authors verified the lack of knowledge among colleagues and students about the EUI. This fact, together with the low academic output, lead us to propose (V) studies to analyse communication about the alliances and (VI) brand recognition of the alliances within the universities included in it. Table 5 shows the main challenges that have been detected in each of the three categories of status:

[Table 5 near here]

Furthermore, great interest is seen in the studies related to students in which their learning capacities are addressed (Hall et al., 2023). When publications deal with academics, they focus on their teaching work in half of them (12 out of 24), but not so much on research or

management due to the complexity involved in the collaboration between universities in different countries.

As regards the etymology (O3), Arnaldo-Valdés and Gómez Comendador (2022) locate the seed of the EUI in Civic Universities (CivUs), a term they use to define European alliances. The term CivUs was coined by Boyle in 1996 and refers to the role of universities in the societies where they exist. For the etymological proposal, a wide disparity of terms has been found, making communication of this initiative very complicated: European University, Supercampus, Civic Universities, European Universities Initiatives, European Alliances… The lack of terminology to clearly express the new approach makes it difficult to build a space for exchange and common reflection on this new experience. This could hinder the success of the initiative, which is fundamental in the process of European construction because it encourages three aspects that are fundamental for the future of the European construction process:

(1) Mobility of talent between countries (as happened for centuries on the Santiago Way) so as to create a shared space to exchange knowledge.

(2) It should be based on collaborative management of resources (as occurred in the European Coal and Steel Community ECSC).

(3) It should enable training for future European leaders (as international business schools have been doing).

The EuroAgora Digital University (EDU) emerges as a transformative model. Bridging the divide between traditional campus boundaries and the digital realm, EDU signifies a paradigm shift towards a dynamic educational network. This interconnected system fosters a seamless exchange of knowledge and innovation, transcending geographical constraints and bureaucratic impediments, thus crafting a novel agora for the digital age.

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Table 1. Classification for the publications: five areas, three categories, and eight topics.

5 Areas	1. European Universities Initiative
	2. Comparison Between Universities
	3. International Competitiveness, excellence and employability of European Higher Education

	4. Connection of the University with its social impact (SDG objectives)		
	5. Others		
3 Categories of status	1. Academics	2. Students	3. Administrative Staff or Managers
8 Topics	1.1 Research 1.2 Teaching 1.3 Management	2.1 Learning 2.2 International Mobility 3.3 Employability	3.1 International Mobility 3.2 Management

Source: the authors

Table 2. Main objectives for each one of the ENHANCE Alliance targets

Target	Objectives	Tools Implemented
STUDENTS **Current and future ones**	Students are the most important target of the project. Their involvement was key for the success of the Erasmus Programme	Instagram and Training Programs and Language Exchange Activities
DECISION MAKERS **People with the power to make strategic decisions (Policy, Industry, Universities)**	Decision makers (specially policy makers) were key for the success of the Erasmus programme in the 80's	Linkedin and face-to-face meetings
EDUCATIONAL COMMUNITY **Administrative staff, lecturers and researchers**	The Ph.D. students are key because are the future workforce of the Alliance. The involvement of the rest of the educational community is a critical point for the success of the project because they lack incentives inside their institutions.	Institutional Webs, training events and exchange weeks.
PARTNERS and STAKEHOLDERS **Public and private**	Identify strategic partners and trust with them through the involvement in the big events that they are supporting.	Participation in events like COP26 (Glasgow), Valencia WDC 2022, or the scientific hub Falling Walls in Berlin.
MEDIA **Press, radio, TV**	Media should spread the message that social innovation is the common language of Europe in all the different languages of the Alliance **Mission**	Twitter and press releases are good tools specially when they relate to global events.

Source: the authors

Table 3. Scientific journals that publish most about the EUI

JOURNAL TITLE	NUMBER OF PUBLICATIONS	SAMPLE SHARE
European Educational Research Journal	2	4%
Information Technologies and Learning Tools	2	4%
REDU. Revista de Docencia Universitaria	2	4%
The Education and science journal	2	4%
Revista española de educación comparada	3	6%
Sustainability	4	7%
Other journals	39	71%

Source: The authors.

Table 4. Research approaches concerning the EUI

TITLE	AUTHORS	APPROACH	MEASURES
European Universities Initiative: How Universities May Contribute to a More Sustainable Society	Arnaldo Valdés & Gómez Comendador	*Analytical Hierarchical Process* (AHP)	Good practices employed by alliances (innovation, effectiveness, sustainability and replicability)
Towards a European framework for community engagement in higher education – a case study analysis of European universities	O'Brien, Ćulum Ilić, Veidemane, Dusi, Farnell & Šćukanec Schmidt	TEFCE Framework	Engagement in higher education (teaching and learning; research: service and knowledge exchange; students; staff; management policies and management engagement)
Is the global reporting initiative suitable to account for university social responsibility? Evidence from European institutions	Amiano Bonatxea,Gutiérrez-Goiria, Vazquez-De Francisco & Sianes	Global Reporting Initiative (GRI)	To report University Social Responsibility (USR)
Understanding the Athena SWAN award scheme for gender equality as a complex social intervention in a complex system: analysis of Silver award action plans in a comparative European perspective	Kalpazidou Schmidt, Ovseiko, Henderson & Kiparoglou.	Athena SWAN	Good practices of gender equality at higher education (representation, progression and success)
The skill of learning to learn at university. Proposal for a theoretical model	Gargallo-López, Pérez-Pérez, Giménez-Beut & Portillo-Poblador	AaA [LtL] Model	Skills for learning-to-learn (cognitive, macrocognitive, affective-cognitive, social/relational and ethical dimensions).

Source: the authors.

Table 5. Classification for the publications: 5 areas, 3 categories, and 8 topics.

1. Academics	1.1 Lack of comparative research between countries
	1.2 Lack of measurement of social impact of research
2. Students	2.1 Homogenisation in mobility around European countries
	2.2 Harmonising university doctoral systems
3. Administrative Staff or Managers	3.1 Internal and external communication and branding about the alliances

Source: the authors

Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart of selection process.
Source: Page M.J. et al. The PRISMA 2020 statement: an updated guideline for reporting

Identification of studies via databases and registers

Identification

4.386 records identified from searching databases → Records removed *before screening*: (n = 1.999)

Screening

Records screened (n = 2.387) → Records excluded (n = 2.113)

Reports assessed for eligibility (n = 274) → Reports excluded:
Focus on COVID-19 (n = 80)
Other areas (n = 36)
Focus on an specific area (n = 49)
Other reasons (n=55)

Included

54 studies included in scoping review

systematic reviews. BMJ 2021;372:n71. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n71

Figure 2. Scoping review data on European Universities Initiative literature.
Source: The authors
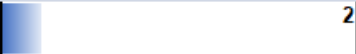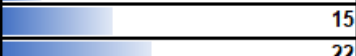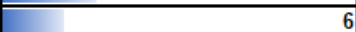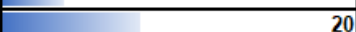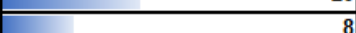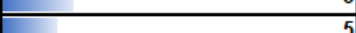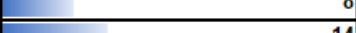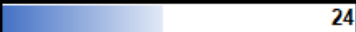
AREAS	Area 1	EUI or alliances between universities		2
	Area 2	Comparison between universities		15
	Area 3	International competitiveness, excellence and employability of european higher education		22
	Area 4	Connection of the university with its social impact (SDG objectives)		11
	Area 5	Others		3
CATEGORIES OF STATUS	1. Scholars	1.1 Scholars - Research		6
		1.2 Scholars - Teaching		12
		1.3 Scholars - Management		6
	2. Students	2.1 Students - Learning		20
		2.2 Students - International Mobility		8
		2.3 Students - Employability		5
	3. Staff or managers	3.1 Staff - International mobility		8
		3.2 Staff - Management		14
MENTION TO EUI	YES			1
	NO			53
ONE OR MORE COUNTRIES MENTIONED	One country			24
	More than one country			30
OBJECTIVES	One area of knowledge			19
	Transversal			35
METHODOLOGIES	Literature review			10
	Qualitative			22
	Quantitative			18
	Mixed of 3			6

Figure captions:
- Fig. 1. PRISMA flowchart of selection process.
- Fig. 2. Scoping review data on European Universities Initiative literature.