

Enhancing the European Dimension of Higher Education: The European Higher Education Area Approach

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<https://doi.org/10.65158/JPZS8847>

| Abstract

The building of a European Dimension of higher education, a European approach to higher education built on shared values, is currently one of the priorities of the European Union (EU) to face the current global challenges. The EU contributes to its development through funding schemes and a common policy agenda, positioning itself as the main actor in this process. However, the European dimension is the result of a more complex path, where the Bologna Process and its related European Higher Education Area (EHEA) play a major role. In fact, the Bologna Process was the first initiative to bring together countries and key stakeholders, including the European Commission, and to launch a collectively approved vision and mission for European higher education. Since 1999, through its *Ministerial Communiqués* the Bologna Process has been contributing to include the European dimension in the daily practices of European higher education. This study investigates how, and in which policy domains, the EHEA, through its *Ministerial Communiqués*, contributes to the European dimension of higher education through an approach distinct from EU action. This policy analysis identifies five main policy domains through which the EHEA advances the European dimension: fundamental values, mobility, recognition, quality culture, and the social dimension. The findings demonstrate that the EHEA constitutes a distinct and influential framework shaping European higher education. Rather than merely complementing EU action, it provides the normative and institutional backbone of the European dimension and plays a co-primary role in its consolidation and evolution.

Keywords: European Dimension, Europeanisation, European Higher Education Area, European Union, Bologna Process, Higher Education¹

¹ Declaration of Authorship and Use of AI: I declare that I am the author of this essay, and that I carried out the work by myself. I acknowledge the use of ChatGPT to review the English grammar of my writing.

1. Introduction

Since the founding of the first European university, the University of Bologna, in 1088, higher education in Europe has traditionally been governed by nation-states². From the medieval period to contemporary Europe³, higher education has both reflected and reinforced national state-building processes⁴. Moreover, higher education institutions (HEIs) supplied the professional elites and the intellectual frameworks required by national administrations⁵. Yet reducing European higher education to a collection of national systems obscures the extent to which policy developments have also influenced higher education across borders⁶ and contributed to the emergence of a broader European space for higher education⁷. To fully grasp contemporary higher education in the European area, it is thus necessary to go beyond a national dimension and to focus on a broader scale: the European scale.

In the European context, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), a voluntary and intergovernmental initiative launched in 2010 to promote the harmonisation of higher education within the framework of the Bologna Process (BP)⁸, and the European Union (EU), a formal legal organisation at the supranational level beyond the field of higher education⁹, have each contributed to shaping European higher education along their own unique dimension: the European dimension. Referred to in the early *Ministerial communiqués*¹⁰, the strategic declarations of the BP and the EHEA, which progressively

² Neave, G., *The European Dimension in Higher Education: An Excursion into the Modern Use of Historical Analogues*. in Huisman, J., Maassen, P. A. M., Neave, G., (eds.), *Higher Education and the Nation State. The International Dimension of Higher Education*, Elsevier, Oxford, 2001, pp. 13-73.

³ de Wit, H., Altbach, P. G., *Internationalization in higher education: Global trends and recommendations for its future*. "Policy Reviews in Higher Education", Vol. 5, no. 1, 2021, pp. 28-46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322969.2020.1820898>. Stichweh, R., *The University as a World Organization*. In Mattei, P., Durmay, X., Mangez, E., et al., (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Education and Globalization*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2023, pp. 424-442, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197570685.013.46>. Tight, M., *Globalization and internationalization as frameworks for higher education research*. "Research Papers in Education", Vol. 36, no. 1, 2021, pp. 52-74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2019.1633560>.

⁴ Enders, J., *Higher education, internationalisation, and the nation-state: Recent developments and challenges to governance theory*. "Higher Education", no. 47, 2004, pp. 361-382. <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:HIGH.0000016461.98676.30>.

⁵ Chou, M.-H., Huisman, J., Lorenzo, M. P., *Regional cooperation in higher education*. in Lombaerde, P. D., (ed.), *Handbook of Regional Cooperation and Integration*, Edward Elgar Publishing, Northampton, 2024, pp. 266-288. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800373747.00020>; de Wit, H., Altbach, P. G., *Internationalization in higher education...*, cit.

⁶ Crăciun, D., *National Policies for Higher Education Internationalization: A Global Comparative Perspective*. in Curaj, A., Deca, L., Procopie, R., (eds.), *European Higher Education Area: The Impact of Past and Future Policies*, Springer, Cham, 2018, pp. 95-106. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-77407-7_7. Crăciun, D., *Systematizing national higher education internationalization strategies: Reconceptualizing a process*, PhD Thesis, Central European University, 2019. <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=440904> [last accessed 30 June 2026].

⁷ Brooks, R., Rensimer, L., *The European Universities Initiative and European spatial imaginaries*. "Globalisation, Societies and Education", Vol. 23, no. 3, 2023, pp. 752-765. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2023.2210515>. Marginson, S., *Space and scale in higher education: The glonacal agency heuristic revisited*. "Higher Education", Vol. 84, no. 6, 2022, pp. 1365-1395. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00955-0>.

⁸ Elken, M., Vukasovic, M., *Dynamics of voluntary coordination: Actors and networks in the Bologna Process*, in Chou, M.-H., Gornitzka, Å., (eds.), *Building the Knowledge Economy in Europe*. Edward Elgar Publishing, Northampton, 2014, pp.131-159. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781782545293.00011>. Rich, D., *The Bologna Process in European Higher Education*, in Peterson, P., Baker, E., McGaw, B., (eds.) *International Encyclopedia of Education*, Elsevier Science, Oxford, 2010, pp. 566-572 <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-044894-7.00848-4>.

⁹ Publications Office of the European Union, *Glossary: European Union (EU)*, Publications Office of the European Union, 15 September 2025, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=LEGISSUM:eu_union [last accessed 30 June 2026].

¹⁰ European Higher Education Area, *The Bologna Declaration of 19 June 1999: Joint declaration of the European Ministers of Education*, 19 June 1999, http://www.ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/1999_Bologna_Declaration_English_553028.pdf, [last accessed 30 June 2026]. European Higher Education Area, *TOWARDS THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA; Communiqué of the meeting of European Ministers in charge of Higher Education in Prague on May 19th 2001*, 19 May 2001, http://www.ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/2001_Prague_Communique_English_553442.pdf [last accessed 30 June 2026]. European Higher Education Area, *Realising the European Higher Education Area" Communiqué of the Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education in Berlin on 19 September 2003*, 19 September 2003, https://ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/2003_Berlin_Communique_English_577284.pdf [last accessed 30 June 2026].

updated and expanded their list of objectives¹¹, and in the early EU policies on higher education¹², the European dimension has remained a recurring element, more or less explicitly, in both academic and policy discourse. It made its most recent appearance in the latest EU higher education strategy¹³. More specifically, in the current higher education landscape, the European dimension constitutes a declared key objective of the EU to promote transnational cooperation as a clearly visible European approach¹⁴.

In this regard, the EU identified four flagship initiatives aimed at strengthening the European dimension of higher education: the European Universities Initiative (EUI), a legal status for the EUI alliances, a joint European degree, and the European Student Card Initiative¹⁵. Nevertheless, the contemporary European dimension should not be understood solely as an EU concept. Although the relevant strategy was issued by the EU, the EHEA plays an equally central role in reinforcing the European dimension, while doing so through its own distinctive approach. Indeed, the EU strategy explicitly acknowledges that it builds upon the transformative initiatives of the EHEA¹⁶. The European dimension should therefore be understood as the product of the combined contributions of both the EU and the EHEA, which share the objective of «promot[ing] synergies [...] in a fit-for-purpose and flexible manner»¹⁷.

Although the importance of synergies between the EU and the EHEA is emphasised, the EU policies do not provide specific indications as to how the EHEA contributes to the European dimension. Yet the EHEA advances a distinctive voluntary and collaborative approach that strengthens the European dimension through dynamics that differ from those of the EU and should therefore be analytically disentangled. Given that the EHEA's approach can be identified directly in its principal programmatic documents, namely the *Ministerial communiqués*¹⁸, this study is guided by the following research question: how, and in which policy domains, does the EHEA through its *Ministerial Communiqués* contribute to the European dimension of higher education through an approach distinct from EU action?

This article is situated within the broader literature on Europeanisation and governance in European higher education, which has extensively conceptualised the mechanisms through which European pressures shape national higher education systems¹⁹, and has mapped the multi-level, multi-actor

¹¹ Bergan, S., *The European Higher Education Area: A road to the future or at way's end?*, "Tuning Journal for Higher Education", Vol. 6, no. 2, 2019, pp. 23-49. [https://doi.org/10.18543/tjhe-6\(2\)-2019pp23-49](https://doi.org/10.18543/tjhe-6(2)-2019pp23-49).

¹² Adonnino, P., *A People's Europe: Reports from the ad hoc Committee*, Comité ad hoc 'Europe des citoyens', 29 June 1985, <https://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/en/historical/en/4659> [last accessed 30 June 2026]. Janne, H., *For a Community policy on education*, European Communities Commission, 1973, <http://aei.pitt.edu/5588/1/5588.pdf> [last accessed 30 June 2026]. Council of the European Communities, *On Measures for Developing the European Dimension in Higher Education*, "Official Journal of the European Union", C/336/27, 1992. Available on the EUR-Lex website of the European Union: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:41992X1219\(02\)&qid=1769782636724](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:41992X1219(02)&qid=1769782636724) [last accessed 30 June 2026].

¹³ Council of the European Union, *Council Recommendation of 5 April 2022 on Building Bridges for Effective European Higher Education Cooperation (Text with EEA Relevance)*, "Official Journal of the European Union", C/160/01, 2022, Available on the EUR-Lex website of the European Union: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022H0413\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022H0413(01)&from=EN) [last accessed 30 June 2026]. European Commission, *COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS on a European Strategy for Universities*, no. 16, 18 January 2022, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52022DC0016> [last accessed 30 June 2026].

¹⁴ European Commission, *COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION...*, cit.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Council of the European Union, *Council Recommendation of 5 April 2022...*, cit. European Commission, *COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION...*, cit.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Bergan, S., *The European Higher Education Area...*, cit.

¹⁹ Ibid. Vukasovic, M., *Change of higher education in response to European pressures: Conceptualization and operationalization of Europeanization of higher education*. "Higher Education", Vol. 66, no. 3, 2013, pp. 311-324. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-012-9606-4>.

and multi-issue character of EHEA governance²⁰. This literature, however, has primarily focused on governance processes and convergence dynamics, while the European dimension itself, the substantive content that these processes construct, diffuse, and institutionalise, has remained comparatively under-examined as an analytical object in its own right, despite its renewed prominence in the EU's most recent higher education strategy. Moreover, existing accounts tend to treat EU and EHEA action jointly, without systematically disentangling their contributions.

This article addresses both gaps. It adopts an original approach by treating the European dimension, a concept often invoked yet vaguely defined in current policy, as the primary analytical object, and by tracing systematically (i.e. across five policy domains identified in the EHEA's *Ministerial Communiqués*) how the EHEA constructs, diffuses, and institutionalises this dimension through mechanisms distinct from those of the EU. Such an analysis may be of value to both researchers and practitioners operating at the supranational or university level, enabling them to develop and implement initiatives in a more informed manner. In addition, the article contributes to unpacking the concept of the European dimension in policy, bridging theory and practice, and disentangling the contribution of the EHEA from that of the EU.

This article is structured as a policy analysis, using a descriptive method²¹ to examine the *Ministerial communiqués* of the EHEA to highlight their main policy domains and describe the related initiatives and instruments. The first two sections provide contextual and theoretical clarity, first by describing the role of the EHEA in higher education, and then by defining the European dimension and Europeanisation. The subsequent section constitutes the core of the article, in which the *Communiqués* are presented and analysed through their main policy domains (i.e. fundamental values of higher education, mobility, recognition, quality culture, and social dimension). The policy domains and the mechanisms of the EHEA are connected to the current literature and to the EU, underscoring potential overlaps and tensions. Finally, the conclusion summarises the findings and advances their implications for European higher education.

2. The Role and Structure of the EHEA in Higher Education

The EHEA is a voluntary and inter-governmental initiative, focused on the higher education sector²². It originated primarily in the *Sorbonne Declaration*, signed by four ministers of higher education²³, and it was officially declared as an objective of 29 countries through the signature in 1999 of the *Bologna Declaration*²⁴. The EHEA was officially launched in 2010 with the signature of the *Budapest-Vienna*

²⁰ Vukasovic, M., Jungblut, J., Chou, M.-H., et al., *Multi-level, Multi-actor and Multi-issue Dimensions of Governance of the European Higher Education Area, and Beyond*, in Curaj, A., Deca, L., Pricopie, R., (eds), *European Higher Education Area: The Impact of Past and Future Policies*, Springer, Cham, 2018, pp. 321-334. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-77407-7_20. Cornitzka, Å., Stensaker, B., *The dynamics of European regulatory regimes in higher education—Challenged prerogatives and evolutionary change*, "Policy and Society", Vol. 33, no. 3, 2014, pp. 177-188. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polsoc.2014.08.002>.

²¹ Creswell, J. W., Creswell, J. D., *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*, SAGE, Thousands Oaks, 2023.

²² Elken, M., Vukasovic, M., *Dynamics of voluntary coordination...*, cit. Rich, D., *The Bologna Process in European Higher Education...*, cit.

²³ European Higher Education Area, *Sorbonne Joint Declaration: Joint declaration on harmonisation of the architecture of the European higher education system*, 25 May 1998, http://www.ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/1998_Sorbonne/61/2/1998_Sorbonne_Declaration_English_552612.pdf [last accessed 30 June 2026].

²⁴ European Higher Education Area, *The Bologna Declaration...*, cit.

*Declaration*²⁵. Today it includes 47 full members²⁶, both within and beyond the EU, all of which agree to be parties to the European Cultural Convention (1955)²⁷ and to commit to the principles and objectives of the BP²⁸. Besides its full members, the EHEA also involves eight consultative members supporting follow-up work²⁹: Business Europe, the Council of Europe, Education International, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, the European Students Union, the European University Association, UNESCO and the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education³⁰.

The main goal of the EHEA is to promote and reinforce coordination in European higher education³¹. To do so, the EHEA regularly updates and expands its list of objectives through official declarations signed by all members, namely the *Ministerial Communiqués*, which usually set out the commitments of EHEA members every two years³². The *Communiqués* are the outcomes of the Ministerial Conferences, reporting on progress achieved and setting future objectives³³. Alongside the *Communiqués*, the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG), the executive body of the EHEA composed of 47 members and the European Commission, supports the implementation of the commitments set out in the *Communiqués*³⁴ and establishes the Working Groups, addressing specific topics of the EHEA³⁵. The Bologna Implementation Coordination Group complements this structure by focusing on three key commitments (i.e. qualification frameworks, the Lisbon Recognition Convention, and quality assurance) and the social dimension³⁶.

Implementation of the EHEA commitments is voluntary for each member, and it is articulated through multi-level and multi-actor coordination³⁷. The EHEA's main method of implementation is the *Open Method of Coordination (OMC)*³⁸, which fosters policy convergence through a voluntary, guidelines-driven, peer-learning and monitoring system³⁹. What is declared in the *Communiqués* and set by the BFUG at the supranational level is received and interpreted by its member states at the national level,

²⁵ European Higher Education Area, *Budapest-Vienna Declaration on the European Higher Education Area*, 12 March 2010, http://www.ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/Budapest_Vienna_Declaration_598640.pdf [last accessed 30 June 2026].

²⁶ Russian Federation and Belarus have been suspended since April 2022, due to the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

²⁷ Council of Europe, *European Cultural Convention*, "European Treaty Series", no. 18, 19 December 1954, <https://rm.coe.int/168006457e> [last accessed 30 June 2026].

²⁸ European Higher Education Area, *The European Higher Education Area (EHEA)*, 2026a, <http://www.ehea.info/page-the-bologna-follow-up-group> [last accessed 30 June 2026].

²⁹ European Higher Education Area, *TOWARDS THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA...*, cit.

³⁰ European Higher Education Area, *Consultative Members*, 2026b, <https://ehea.info/page-consultive-members> [last accessed 30 June 2026].

³¹ Vukasovic, M., *European-level policy dynamics in higher education*. in Zahariadis, N., Buonanno, L., (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of European Public Policy*, Routledge, London, 2017, pp. 373-379. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315682723-39>.

³² Bergan, S., *The European Higher Education Area...*, cit.

³³ European Higher Education Area, *Ministerial Declarations And Communiqués*, 2026c, <http://www.ehea.info/page-ministerial-declarations-and-communiques> [last accessed 30 June 2026].

³⁴ European Higher Education Area, *The European Higher...*, cit.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ European Higher Education Area, *Bologna Implementation Coordination Group*, 2026d, <https://ehea.info/working-group/bologna-implementation-coordination-group/> [last accessed 30 June 2026].

³⁷ Vukasovic, M., Jungblut, J., Chou, M-H., et al., *Multi-level, Multi-actor and...*, cit.

³⁸ Alexiadou, N., Fink-Hafner, D., Lange, B., *Policy Convergence through the Open Method of Coordination: Theoretical Reflections and Implementation in 'old' and 'new' National Contexts*, "European Educational Research Journal", Vol. 9, no. 3, 2010, pp. 345-358. <https://doi.org/10.2304/eej.2010.9.3.345>. Brøgger, K., *The rule of mimetic desire in higher education: Governing through naming, shaming and faming*, "British Journal of Sociology of Education", Vol. 37, no. 1, 2016, pp. 72-91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2015.1096191>.

³⁹ Alexiadou, N., Fink-Hafner, D., Lange, B., *Education Policy Convergence...*, cit. Brøgger, K., *The rule of mimetic...*, cit.

and by the HEIs at the subnational level⁴⁰. Even though the EHEA does not directly provide funding to promote its objectives, the OMC encourages members to compare themselves with and monitor one another, a process effectively described as «naming, shaming, and faming»⁴¹, and consequently to invest in initiatives aimed at harmonising their higher education systems according to the EHEA⁴².

The European Commission has been among the full members of the EHEA, since its inception and it is actively involved in its implementation⁴³. This involvement underscores the close link between the EHEA and the EU⁴⁴. Nonetheless, it is important to disentangle the two. The EU is a formal legal organisation composed of 27 member states regulated by EU Treaties and operating in the political and economic sphere at the supranational level⁴⁵, with higher education strategy forming part of a broader agenda. The EU has only a supporting competence in the field of higher education⁴⁶, meaning that can only support, coordinate or complement the action of its member states⁴⁷. While it shares the OMC with the EHEA⁴⁸, the EU, unlike the EHEA, relies heavily on comprehensive funding schemes, such as ERASMUS+⁴⁹ and Horizon Europe⁵⁰, which serve as pivotal drivers in encouraging HEIs and national governments to contribute the EU's policy objectives⁵¹. These differences position the EU as a distinct actor from the EHEA, as shown in Table 1, with which it nonetheless aims to foster and strengthen the European dimension of higher education.

⁴⁰ De Boer, H. F., Huisman, J., *Governance Trends in European Higher Education*, in Capano, G., Jarvis, D. S. L., (eds), *Convergence and Diversity in the Governance of Higher Education*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2020, pp. 333–354. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108669429.013>; Vukasovic, M., *European-level policy dynamics...*, cit.

⁴¹ Brøgger, K., *The rule of mimetic...*, cit.

⁴² European Education and Culture Executive Agency. Eurydice, *The European higher education area in 2024: Bologna process implementation report*, Publications Office of the European Union, Brussels, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.2797/351309>.

⁴³ European Education and Culture Executive Agency. Eurydice, *The European higher education...*, cit.

⁴⁴ European Commission. Directorate General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, *The EU in support of the Bologna process*, Publications Office of the European Union, Brussels, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.2766/3596>

⁴⁵ Publications Office of the European Union, *Glossary: European Union...*, cit.

⁴⁶ *Consolidated Versions of the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union*, "Official Journal of the European Union", C/83/01, 2010. Available on the EUR-Lex website of the European Union: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_2010.083.01.0001.01.ENG [last accessed 30 June 2026].

⁴⁷ Publications Office of the European Union, *Division of competences within the European Union*. Publications Office of the European Union, 24 February 2022. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/summary/division-of-competences-within-the-european-union.html> [last accessed 30 June 2026].

⁴⁸ Alexiadou, N., Fink-Hafner, D., Lange, B., *Education Policy Convergence...*, cit. Brøgger, K., *The rule of mimetic...*, cit.

⁴⁹ European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture. *Erasmus+ 2021-2027: Enriching lives, opening minds through the EU programme for education, training, youth and sport*. Publications Office of the European Union, Brussels, 2021. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/536>.

⁵⁰ European Commission. Directorate General for Research and Innovation, *Horizon Europe, the EU research and innovation programme (2021-27): For a green, healthy, digital and inclusive Europe*, Publications Office of the European Union, Brussels, 2021. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/052084>

⁵¹ Batory, A., Lindstrom, N., *The Power of the Purse: Supranational Entrepreneurship, Financial Incentives, and European Higher Education Policy*, "Governance", Vol. 24, no. 2, 2011, pp. 311-329. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0491.2011.01525.x>.

Table 1 - Comparison between EHEA and EU

	EHEA	EU
Legal status	Voluntary intergovernmental initiative.	Formal supranational organisation grounded in EU Treaties.
Membership	49 participating countries (47 full members after 2022 suspensions of Russia and Belarus); includes non-EU states.	27 EU member states.
Scope	Higher education.	Broader policy agenda.
Competence on higher education	Consensus-based coordination.	Supportive competence.
Implementation mechanisms	OMC: peer learning, peer pressure, voluntary benchmarks.	OMC; legally binding directives in adjacent policy areas; competitive funding programmes.
Key Drivers	Communiqués; BFUG, Working Groups; Bologna Implementation Coordination Group.	Strategies and Council Recommendations; funding programmes (Erasmus+, Horizon Europe) and flagship initiatives (EUI; European degree; Student Card).
Resources / leverage	No direct funding; relies on reputational and coordination effects.	Substantial funding capacity through EU programmes; can steer institutional priorities via calls and eligibility.
Relationship to each other	European Commission is a full EHEA member; EHEA provides normative backbone for EU initiatives.	EU builds on EHEA's transformative initiatives; EU strategy explicitly acknowledges EHEA co-primary role.

Source: developed by the author

3. European Dimension and Europeanisation in Higher Education

Through the combined contributions of the EHEA and the EU, European higher education has increasingly developed as a distinct entity within the global landscape⁵². Its key institutions (i.e. supranational bodies, nation-states, and HEIs) have reinterpreted and responded to broader phenomena such as globalisation⁵³, internationalisation⁵⁴, transnationalism⁵⁵, and regionalisation⁵⁶ through a specifically European lens. These phenomena are exemplified by initiatives such as the ERASMUS

⁵² de Wit, H., Altbach, P. G., *Internationalization in higher education...*, cit. Gornitzka, Å., *Bologna in Context: A horizontal perspective on the dynamics of governance sites for a Europe of Knowledge*, "European Journal of Education", Vol. 45, no. 4, 2010, pp. 535-548. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1465-3435.2010.01452.x>. Huisman, J., Adelman, C., Hsieh, C-C., Shams, F., et al., *Europe's Bologna Process and Its Impact on Global Higher Education*, in Deardorff, D., de Wit, H., Heyl, J., et al., *The SAGE Handbook of International Higher Education*, SAGE, New York, 2012, pp. 81-100, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452218397.n5>. Maassen, P., Musselin, C., *European Integration and the Europeanisation of Higher Education*, in Amaral, A., Neave, G., Musselin, C., et al., (eds), *European Integration and the Governance of Higher Education and Research*, Springer Netherlands., Dordrecht, 2009, pp. 3-14. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-9505-4_1. Neave, G., *The European Dimension...*, cit.

⁵³ de Wit, H., *Globalization and Internationalisation of Higher Education*, "RUSC. Universities and Knowledge Society Journal", n. 8(2), 2011, p. 77. <https://doi.org/10.7238/rusc.v8i2.1247>; Knight, J., *Higher Education in Turmoil The Changing World of Internationalization*, BRILL, Leiden, 2008.

⁵⁴ de Wit, H., Hunter, f., et al., *Internationalisation of higher education*, European Parliament, Brussels, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.2861/444393>.

⁵⁵ Wilkins, S., Huisman, J., *Transnational Education Redefined*, "International Higher Education", no. 121, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.6017/895b9e0d.4bf74947>

⁵⁶ Chou, M.-H., Huisman, J., Lorenzo, M. P., *Regional cooperation in higher education...*, cit.

mobility programme⁵⁷, European quality assurance⁵⁸, the recognition of qualifications⁵⁹, and the EUI⁶⁰. Europe is not merely a space where higher education processes unfold, but rather a context in which they intertwine with the set of formal and informal regulations, norms, and practices⁶¹ promoted and sustained by subnational, national and supranational entities.

Higher education in Europe has consequently developed a European dimension. The European Commission recently identified the European dimension as a strategic goal linked to transnational cooperation among HEIs⁶², vaguely defining it as «built on shared values»⁶³, and a «European approach»⁶⁴. For analytical purposes, a more precise definition is needed. Drawing on European studies⁶⁵, the European dimension is here understood as the set of formal and informal regulations, procedures, policy paradigms, daily practices, shared beliefs and norms that are first defined and consolidated by the EHEA and the EU and then incorporated into national policies and into HEIs.

The European dimension must be distinguished from Europeanisation. While the former embodies the substance of the «European approach»⁶⁷, the latter describes the process through which those characteristics are disseminated and embedded in national systems and institutional practices. Europeanisation, in Radaelli's⁶⁸ terms, captures the processes of construction, diffusion and institutionalisation, while the European dimension is what is being constructed, diffused and institutionalised.

In this analysis, the differentiation informs the analysis in two ways. First, each policy domain is analysed as a component of the European dimension (i.e., norms, shared beliefs, and instruments that constitute a European dimension in that domain). Second, the analysis explicitly traces mechanisms of Europeanisation: construction, diffusion, and institutionalisation. This operationalisation makes it possible to clarify analytically what is meant by the EHEA's approach as distinct from EU action. Distinctiveness is not a claim of complete separation of goals, but of meanings, modes and leverage used to reach those goals. The analysis therefore treats overlap and synergy as expected outcomes of co-primary governance rather than as evidence against differentiation.

⁵⁷ European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Erasmus+ 2021-2027..., cit.

⁵⁸ Gornitzka, Å., Stensaker, B., *The dynamics of European...*, cit.

⁵⁹ Yung-Chi Hou, A., Morse, R., Wang, W., *Recognition of academic qualifications in transnational higher education and challenges for recognizing a joint degree in Europe and Asia*. "Studies in Higher Education", Vol. 42, no. 7, 2017, pp. 1211-1228. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2015.1085010>.

⁶⁰ Felder-Stindt, A., Vukasovic, M., *Who you gonna call ... when developing a flagship initiative in an area of limited EU competence? A resource exchange perspective on the development of the European Universities Initiative (EUI)*. "Journal of European Integration", Vol. 48, no. 3, 2025, pp. 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2025.2498739>.

⁶¹ Radaelli, C. M., *Europeanisation: Solution or problem?*, "European Integration Online Papers (EIoP)", Vol. 8, no.16, 2004, pp. 1-23. <http://eiop.or.at/eiop/texte/2004-016a.htm>.

⁶² European Commission, *COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION...*, cit.

⁶³ *Ivi*, p.3.

⁶⁴ *Ivi*, p.4.

⁶⁵ Börzel, T. A., *Why noncompliance: The politics of law in the European Union*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.7298/jes0-sz72>.

⁶⁶ Börzel, T. A., Panke, D., 8. Europeanization, in Cini, M., Borragán, N. P-S., *European Union Politics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2022, pp. 112-123. <https://doi.org/10.1093/hepl/9780198862239.003.0008>. Radaelli, C. M., *Europeanisation: Solution or problem?*..., cit.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*.

⁶⁸ European Commission, *COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION...*, cit.

⁶⁹ Radaelli, C. M., *Europeanisation: Solution or problem?*..., cit.

4. Methodology

To understand the contribution of the EHEA to the European dimension, this article is structured as a policy analysis employing a descriptive method⁶⁹, organising the information into themes while using a limited analytical framework. This choice was made to provide a clearer overview of the EHEA's approach to fostering the European dimension. The policies examined are the publicly available *Communiqués* and their annexes, since they embody the set of norms, shared beliefs, and instruments⁷⁰, that shape the European dimension in the EHEA. More specifically, the contents of the most recent *Communiqué*, the *Tirana communiqué*⁷¹ will be the main object of the study, thereby enhancing the timeliness and relevance of the study for contemporary researchers and policymakers. Nevertheless, the *Bologna Declaration*⁷² and the other subsequent *Communiqués* issued since 2001 will be included in the analysis to show the historical development of the European dimension in the EHEA. The analysis proceeds in two steps. First, it frames the policies according to the main policy domains highlighted by the most recent EHEA policies⁷³. Second, for each domain it identifies the elements that constitute the European dimension (i.e. norms, shared beliefs, and instruments) and the Europeanisation mechanisms through which these elements are expected to be realised (i.e. construction, diffusion, and institutionalisation). The analysis ultimately connects EHEA commitments to the EU initiatives to clarify overlaps, divergences, and complementarities.

5. The EHEA Contribution to the European Dimension

The European dimension in the current higher education landscape is presented by the EU as a response to the evolving context shaping higher education, with the aim of enabling more effective transnational cooperation, promoting inclusiveness, responding to threats to academic and democratic values, adapting to changing skills needs, and enhancing the competitiveness of European higher education⁷⁴. Given the limited competences of both the EU and the EHEA, a degree of conceptual ambiguity surrounding the European dimension in current policies is perhaps inevitable. In the EU strategy it appears as «a visible expression of a European approach»⁷⁵ or as a dimension «built on shared values»⁷⁶. Furthermore, neither the EU's *Council recommendation on building bridges*⁷⁷, nor the most recent EHEA's *Communiqué*, the *Tirana Communiqué*⁷⁸, uses the term *European dimension* explicitly.

The ambiguity surrounding, or even the absence of, the concept should not lead to the immediate conclusion that the European dimension is not a genuine priority. On the contrary, the European dimension is a key objective, and it should be identified in the concrete measures advanced by policy.

⁶⁹ Creswell, J. W., Creswell, J. D., *Research design...*, cit.

⁷⁰ Radaelli, C. M., *Europeanisation: Solution or problem?...*, cit.

⁷¹ European Higher Education Area, *Tirana Communiqué*, 29-30 May 2024a, <https://eha.info/Immagini/Tirana-Communique.pdf> [last accessed 30 June 2026].

⁷² European Higher Education Area, *The Bologna Declaration...*, cit.

⁷³ European Higher Education Area, *Tirana Communiqué...*, cit.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ European Commission, *COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION...*, cit.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Council of the European Union, *Council Recommendation of 5 April 2022...*, cit.

⁷⁸ European Higher Education Area, *Tirana Communiqué...*, cit.

Since it provides concrete means that foster collaboration in European higher education, the EHEA is essential for the European dimension and gives the European dimension significance and means of implementation. These elements take shape in five main policy domains in the EHEA's *Tirana Communiqués*⁷⁹: fundamental values of higher education, mobility, recognition, quality culture, and the social dimension.

5.1 Fundamental Values of Higher Education

The EHEA delineates a set of fundamental values, which are presented as preconditions for achieving all the other objectives in European higher education⁸⁰. The fundamental values are academic freedom, academic integrity, institutional autonomy, participation of students and staff in higher education governance, public responsibility for, and public responsibility of higher education⁸¹. Fundamental values emerged as a response to the threats to academic freedom in the EHEA, and they initially appeared in the *Paris Communiqué*⁸², while an annex to the *Rome Communiqué* later stressed the importance of academic freedom⁸³. In the *Tirana Communiqué*⁸⁴ the fundamental values were foregrounded, thereby recognising the importance of responding to exogenous and endogenous threats to higher education⁸⁵.

The EHEA also created a monitoring framework for these values, the results of which are to be presented at the next Ministerial conference⁸⁶, based on a fit-for-purpose transnational policy tool⁸⁷. This monitoring framework represents a significant step. It transforms the fundamental values from aspirational declarations into verifiable commitments subject to peer scrutiny, thereby constituting an application of the OMC's naming and shaming mechanism. Whether this monitoring will reveal implementation gaps or compliance tensions remains to be seen when the results are published at the next Ministerial Conference.

Nevertheless, fundamental values assign the EHEA a primary role in shaping the European dimension in concrete terms. Through the definitions and associated instruments, they provide precise indications on how to build what Frame and Curylo called an *everyday Europeanhood*⁸⁸, a shared European approach

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid. European Higher Education Area, *Annex 1 to the Tirana Communiqué—EHEA STATEMENTS ON FUNDAMENTAL VALUES*, 29-30 May 2024b, <https://ehea.info/Immagini/ANNEX-1-EHEA-STATEMENTS-ON-FUNDAMENTAL-VALUES.pdf>. [last accessed 30 June 2026].

⁸² European Higher Education Area, *Paris Communiqué*, 25 May 2018, https://ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/2018_Paris/77/1/EHEAParis2018_Communique_final_952771.pdf [last accessed 30 June 2026].

⁸³ European Higher Education Area, *Rome Ministerial Communiqué*, 19 November 2020, https://www.ehea.info/Upload/Rome_Ministerial_Communique.pdf. [last accessed 30 June 2026].

⁸⁴ European Higher Education Area, *Tirana Communiqué...*, cit.

⁸⁵ Marini, G., Oleksiyenko, A., *Academic freedom in the re-imagined post-Humboldtian Europe*, "Higher Education Quarterly", Vol. 76, no. 3, 2022, pp. 513-520. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12405>. Oleksiyenko, A., *Is academic freedom feasible in the post-Soviet space of higher education?*, "Educational Philosophy and Theory", Vol. 53, no. 11, 2021, pp. 1116-1126. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1773799>. Oleksiyenko, A., Jackson, L., *Freedom of speech, freedom to teach, freedom to learn: The crisis of higher education in the post-truth era*, "Educational Philosophy and Theory", Vol. 53, no. 11, pp. 1057-1062. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1773800>.

⁸⁶ European Higher Education Area, *Tirana Communiqué...*, cit.

⁸⁷ Matei, L., Crăciun, D., Potapova, E., *The Emergence and Design of a Transnational Policy Tool: Monitoring the Fundamental Values of Higher Education in the European Higher Education Area*, in Curaj, A., Hâj, C. M., Pricopie, R., (eds), *European Higher Education Area 2030: Bridging Realities for Tomorrow's Higher Education*, Springer, Cham, 2025, pp. 43-449. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-75140-0_23.

⁸⁸ Frame, A., Curylo, B., *Bringing Erasmus home: The European universities initiative as an example of 'Everyday Europeanhood'*, "Journal of Contemporary European Studies", Vol. 32, no. 2, 2024, pp.334-349. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2022.2134986>.

enabled by policies and reinforced through the everyday practices of EHEA members and their HEIs. The values directly connect with the EU's objective of making HEIs a «lighthouse for a European way of life»⁸⁹, thereby giving this expression further substantive meaning, and providing a normative basis for transnational cooperation that extends beyond the EU and encompasses all 47 EHEA members.

5.2 Mobility

Fundamental values provide a baseline for cooperation among HEIs and, consequently, for mobility between the EHEA member countries. EHEA members commit to realising «seamless mobility of students and staff»⁹⁰, whether physical, virtual, or blended⁹¹ with the goal of achieving at least 20% of mobile students among EHEA's member countries⁹². What is peculiar about this domain, however, is not the target itself but the way in which its flagship instruments circulate between the EHEA and the EU. The EHEA provides structural instruments to reach this goal through close cooperation with the EU, with tools stemming from each actor and reinforcing the other's initiatives.

One of the most remarkable tools is the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), which creates a common system of reference for mobile learners and HEIs, based on defined learning outcomes and their associated workload⁹³. The ECTS did not originate within the EHEA; it was initially used for the implementation of the EU's ERASMUS programme⁹⁴. It was then adopted gradually through the *Communiqués*⁹⁵ as the reference system for the quantification of study workload and outcomes, culminating in the ECTS Users' Guide published in 2015⁹⁶. This development trajectory exemplifies how an idea from the EU can achieve its complete realisation through the EHEA, and underscores the close and collaborative dynamic between the EHEA and the EU, which often intertwine⁹⁷. Ideas from one actor can find their complete institutional realisation in the other, building a shared European approach to collaboration⁹⁸ and thus strengthening the European dimension.

The reverse dynamic, from the EHEA to the EU, can be observed in relation to the Qualification Framework of the EHEA⁹⁹, which delineated the three-cycle degree system (i.e. bachelor, master, and

⁸⁹ European Commission, *COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION...*, cit.

⁹⁰ European Higher Education Area, *Tirana Communiqué...*, cit.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ European Commission. Directorate General for Education and Culture, *ECTS users' guide 2015*, Publications Office of the European Union, Brussels, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.2766/87192>.

⁹⁴ European Economic Communities, (1987). Council Decision of 15 June 1987 Adopting the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (ERASMUS), available at Official Journal website, pp. 20-24. 1994. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A31987D0327>. [last accessed 30 June 2026].

⁹⁵ European Higher Education Area, *The Bologna Declaration...*, cit. European Higher Education Area, *TOWARDS THE EUROPEAN...*, cit. European Higher Education Area, *London Communiqué Towards the European Higher Education Area: Responding to challenges in a globalised world*, 18 May 2007, http://www.ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/2007_London_Communique_English_588697.pdf. [last accessed 30 June 2026]. European Higher Education Area, *Making the Most of Our Potential: Consolidating the European Higher Education Area: Bucharest Communiqué*, 27 April 2012, http://www.ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/Bucharest_Communique_2012_610673.pdf. [last accessed 30 June 2026]. European Higher Education Area, *Yerevan Communiqué*, 15 May 2015, http://www.ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/YerevanCommuniquéFinal_613707.pdf. [last accessed 30 June 2026].

⁹⁶ European Commission. Directorate General for Education and Culture, *ECTS users' guide...*, cit.

⁹⁷ Cino Pagliarello, M., *Ideas and European Education Policy, 1973-2020*, Springer, Cham, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-94094-2>. Corbett, A., *Universities and the Europe of Knowledge*, PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, London, 2005. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230286467>.

⁹⁸ European Commission (2022). *COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION...*, cit.

⁹⁹ European Higher Education Area. *Annex III - Overarching Framework of Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area*. European Higher Education Area, 2018. https://ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/EHEAParis2018_Communique_AppendixIII_952778.pdf.

doctorate) and the more recent short-cycle. This structure became the cornerstone on which the EU built its higher education architecture through the European Qualification Framework¹⁰⁰ and, together with the ECTS, provides the groundwork for synergies across other EU initiatives, such as the EU¹⁰¹ or the joint European degree¹⁰². Despite some persistent shortcomings in national implementation¹⁰³, the Qualification Framework of the EHEA plays a crucial role in standardising higher education qualifications across Europe, promoting mobility, and ensuring the quality and comparability of educational outcomes. Moreover, it sets a benchmark that expands beyond Europe, as declared in the *Global Policy Forum Statement*¹⁰⁴.

Mobility is the domain in which the entanglement between the EHEA and the EU is most visible, since it shows that neither actor completes its instruments alone. Taken together, ECTS and the Qualification Framework do not simply illustrate cooperation between the EHEA and the EU: they show that the European dimension in mobility is constructed through initiatives which origin and completion are distributed between the two entities, rather than residing permanently with either one.

5.3 Recognition

The ECTS and the EHEA Qualification Framework are linked to the policy domain of recognition, which further enables the European dimension by facilitating interoperability between countries and their HEIs, allowing academic qualifications to be compared and recognised between different higher education systems. Recognition has its roots in the European regional recognition convention, namely the Lisbon Recognition Convention¹⁰⁵, which delineated the principles of recognition of academic qualifications in the European area. The EHEA's most operationally significant instrument in this domain is the Diploma Supplement¹⁰⁶, a standardised supplement to the academic qualification. Recognition was further advanced through the *Communiqués*, with the *Bucharest Communiqué* proposing the idea of automatic recognition¹⁰⁷, defined as «the automatic right of an applicant holding a qualification of a certain level to be considered for entry to a programme of further study at the next level in any other EHEA-country (access)»¹⁰⁸. Automatic recognition is now a firm commitment of the EHEA members¹⁰⁹, and it is also supported by the EU¹¹⁰, as a means to facilitate the cross-border collaboration that lies at the core of the European dimension.

¹⁰⁰ Europass, *Description of the eight EQF levels*, 2026. <https://europa.eu/europass/en/description-eight-eqf-levels> [accessed 30 June 2026].

¹⁰¹ European Commission, *COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION...*, cit.

¹⁰² European Commission, Directorate General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, *Blueprint for a European degree: Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions*, Publications Office of the European Union, Brussels, 2024. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/496478>.

¹⁰³ European Education and Culture Executive Agency, Eurydice, *The European higher education...*, cit.

¹⁰⁴ European Higher Education Area, *Annex 3 to the Tirana Communiqué—GLOBAL POLICY FORUM STATEMENT*, 29-30 May 2024c. https://erasmusplus.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/tirana_global-policy-forum-statement_2_neo_here_en_ua.pdf [last accessed 30 June 2026].

¹⁰⁵ Council of Europe, *Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the European Region*, "Treaty Office", no.165, 11 April 1997. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=treaty-detail&treaty-num=165> [last accessed 30 June 2026].

¹⁰⁶ European Commission, *Diploma Supplement*, 18 June 2022. <https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/inclusive-and-connected-higher-education/diploma-supplement> [last accessed 30 June 2026].

¹⁰⁷ European Higher Education Area, *Making the Most...*, cit.

¹⁰⁸ European Higher Education Area, *Report by the EHEA Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition*, 14-15 May 2015b. http://www.ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/2015_Yerevan/72/3/EHEA_Pathfinder_Group_on_Automatic_Recognition_January_2015_613723.pdf [last accessed 30 June 2026].

¹⁰⁹ European Higher Education Area, *Tirana Communiqué...*, cit.

¹¹⁰ Council of the European Union, *Council Recommendation of 26 November 2018 on Promoting Automatic Mutual Recognition of Higher Education and Upper Secondary Education and Training Qualifications and the Outcomes of Learning Periods Abroad*, "Official Journal of the European Union", C/444/1, 2018. Available on the EUR-Lex website of the European Union: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1568891859235&uri=CELEX:32018H1210\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1568891859235&uri=CELEX:32018H1210(01)) [last accessed 30 June 2026].

Within this policy domain, the ENIC-NARIC network¹¹¹ is analytically relevant because it sustains diffusion and implementation. The ENIC-NARIC centres are nationally-based and support recognition practices by producing guidance (e.g., the EAR Manual) and sharing information and tools that help credential evaluators apply comparable procedures¹¹². Moreover, national databases and networks for automatic recognition exemplify how EHEA commitments can translate into operational tools, sometimes with EU co-funding and third-party implementation¹¹³, underscoring the potential benefits of multi-actor governance¹¹⁴.

Nevertheless, the extent to which such arrangements lead to coherent or fragmented implementation across national contexts remains an important issue for their institutionalisation. Where this peer-based, voluntary infrastructure is strong, automatic recognition functions in practice; where it is weak, the entitlement remains formally declared but substantively unrealised. Recognition thus illustrates, more clearly than any other domain, the trade-off built into the EHEA's voluntary, consensus-based method: it is precisely the absence of legally binding instruments that allows the EHEA to declare a right as ambitious as automatic recognition, and it is the same absence that leaves its institutionalisation uneven across EHEA members.

5.4 Quality Culture

Mobility and recognition are underpinned by a robust quality infrastructure¹¹⁵, constructed through a collaborative approach involving different independent entities and referred to in the Tirana Communiqué as «quality culture»¹¹⁶. More than a merely technical framework, quality culture functions as a mechanism through which the European dimension is embedded in higher education governance and institutional practice. Its most impactful instrument is the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*¹¹⁷, developed by EHEA members and selected consultative members¹¹⁸, adopted in the 2005 *Bergen Communiqué*¹¹⁹, and published in its current form in 2015¹²⁰. The ESG derive much of their influence interpretive flexibility: their openness and deliberate ambiguity¹²¹ facilitated convergence across higher education systems without requiring complete

¹¹¹ ENIC-NARIC Networks, *About the ENIC-NARIC networks*, ENIC-NARIC Networks, 2026. <https://www.enic-naric.net/> [last accessed 30 June 2026].

¹¹² Nuffic, *EAR manual 2023*, 2023. https://www.nuffic.nl/sites/default/files/2023-08/1.%20EAR%20Manual%202023_2nd%20edition.pdf [last accessed 30 June 2026].

¹¹³ Automatic Recognition Database Italia, *ARDI - Automatic Recognition Database Italia*, 2026, <https://ardi.cimea.it/en>. [last accessed 30 June 2026]; Swedish Council for Higher Education, *Qualifications Assessment Tool*, 2026. <https://www.uhr.se/en/start/recognition-of-foreign-qualifications/qualifications-assessment-tool/> [last accessed 30 June 2026]. MAREN, MAREN Project, 2026. <https://marenetwork.info/maren-project/> [last accessed 30 June 2026].

¹¹⁴ Vukasovic, M., Jungblut, J., Chou, M.-H., et al., *Multi-level, Multi-actor and Multi-issue ...*, cit.

¹¹⁵ Grek, S., Russell, I., *Beyond Bologna? Infrastructuring quality in European higher education*, "European Educational Research Journal", Vol. 23, no. 2, 2024, pp. 215- 236. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14749041231170518>.

¹¹⁶ European Higher Education Area, *Tirana Communiqué...*, cit.

¹¹⁷ Bergan, S., *The European Higher Education...*, cit.

¹¹⁸ European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, European Students' Union, European University Association, European Association of Institutions in Higher Education, *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*, 2015. https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf [accessed 30 June 2026].

¹¹⁹ European Higher Education Area, *The European Higher Education Area—Achieving the Goals Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education*, 20 May 2005. http://www.ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/2005_Bergen_Communique_english_580520.pdf [last accessed 30 June 2026].

¹²⁰ European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, European Students' Union, European University Association, European Association of Institutions in Higher Education, *Standards and Guidelines...*, cit.

¹²¹ Brøgger, K., Madsen, M., *An affirmative-diffractive re-reading of the policy instrumentation approach through agential realism and the accreditation instrument*, "Journal of Education Policy", Vol. 37, no. 6, 2022, pp. 925-943. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2021.1938239>. Gornitzka, Å., Stensaker, B. *The dynamics of European...*, cit.

procedural uniformity¹²². The trade-off is a risk of inconsistency in how quality assurance has been implemented across national contexts. Even so, the ESG have been central to the construction of a European quality infrastructure extending both within and beyond the EHEA¹²³. Their implementation might be seen as one of the main reasons for the use of the term quality culture, which shows how the European dimension not only takes the form of practical instruments but also leads to a transformative change with a long-term impact on daily practices.

The ESG have also enabled the development of an environment in which the European dimension is operationalised through a set of interconnected initiatives. The European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), established in 2007 in connection with the *London Communiqué*¹²⁴ and co-funded by the EU¹²⁵, is particularly significant because it provides a supranational register of quality assurance agencies that apply the ESG in the evaluation of HEIs, programmes, and courses. In doing so, EQAR strengthens transparency, supports mutual trust, and reduces the informational asymmetries that might otherwise hinder cross-border cooperation. Furthermore, the ESG informed the development of the *European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes*, which established a common framework for the quality assurance of inter-institutional programmes. This is analytically important because it illustrates how broad guidelines can be translated into specific instruments capable of facilitating institutional cooperation across national legislation.

Taken together, these initiatives have created a quality environment conducive to the consolidation of the European dimension. In this context, quality culture gives practical and institutional expression to what might otherwise remain an abstract aspiration, as it translates shared European objectives into concrete norms, procedures, and evaluative expectations. The effects of this quality infrastructure extend beyond individual states and HEIs and directly shape the conditions under which broader European policy initiatives can emerge. Indeed, pivotal EU initiatives such as EUI¹²⁶ and the European degree¹²⁷ depend to a considerable extent on the pre-existing quality infrastructure developed within the EHEA¹²⁸. The significance of this infrastructure therefore lies not only in its regulatory function, but also in its constitutive role in making deeper forms of the European dimension in higher education both credible and operationally feasible.

5.5 Social Dimension

If fundamental values establish the EHEA's normative claims, the social dimension is where those claims are tested against lived reality. The social dimension links the EHEA to all other policy domains, particularly fundamental values, and to the EU's broader objective of positioning European higher education as a vehicle for realising «a European way of life»¹²⁹. Specifically, the EHEA promotes equality, inclusion, and accessibility as core principles of higher education¹³⁰. In 2020, it articulated a set of principles intended

¹²² Bergan, S., *The European Higher Education Area...*, cit.

¹²³ Grek, S., Russell, I., *Beyond Bologna? Infrastructuring...*, cit.

¹²⁴ European Higher Education Area, *Towards the European...*, cit.

¹²⁵ European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), *Essential info*, 2026. <https://www.eqar.eu/qa-results/find-out-more/essential-info/> [last accessed 30 June 2026].

¹²⁶ European Commission, *COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION...*, cit.

¹²⁷ European Commission, Directorate General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, *Blueprint for a European...*, cit.

¹²⁸ Grek, S., Russell, I., *Beyond Bologna? Infrastructuring...*, cit.

¹²⁹ European Commission, *COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION...*, cit.

¹³⁰ European Higher Education Area, *Rome Ministerial Communiqué...*, cit. European Higher Education Area, *Tirana Communiqué...*, cit.

to guide implementation within the strategies of national higher education systems and HEIs¹³¹, and these were subsequently reaffirmed in the *Tirana Communiqué*¹³², with greater emphasis placed on student well-being, access, and equality. The social dimension therefore reflects the EHEA's attempt to respond to global challenges affecting higher education by addressing structural barriers to student participation and success¹³³.

The prominence given to students as the principal beneficiaries of the social dimension is analytically significant because it illustrates a unique feature of the EHEA's approach to Europeanisation. The European dimension operates not only at the national and organisational levels but also at the level of individual experience and participation. By addressing global challenges such as accessibility, the EHEA positions individuals as both beneficiaries and agents of what Frame and Curyło define as everyday Europeanhood¹³⁴, that is, a lived expression of the European dimension. In this respect, the social dimension contributes not merely to policy coordination, but also to the cultivation of student cohesion across the EHEA by fostering a space grounded in shared values and beliefs. The European dimension, through the social dimension of the EHEA, thus extends to the everyday lived realities of its individual members.

Nevertheless, the social dimension also reveals some of the most persistent implementation challenges within the EHEA. The gap between the aspirational commitments enshrined in the *Communiqués* and measurable progress on equity and inclusion is documented in Bologna implementation reports¹³⁵. The EHEA's reliance on the OMC, without financial leverage, means that addressing deep structural inequalities in access and participation depends on the political will and financial capacity of individual members, which varies considerably. Consequently, the social dimension potentially risks being overwhelmed by other priorities driven mostly by a neoliberal approach¹³⁶.

6. Conclusions

This analysis demonstrates that the EHEA is not a complementary actor to the EU, but a co-primary architect of the European dimension of higher education, providing its normative and institutional backbone across five interlocking policy domains: fundamental values, mobility, recognition, quality culture, and the social dimension. This role rests on an approach distinct from that of the EU in three specific ways: a voluntary and consensus-based method, as opposed to the EU's funding leverage and, in adjacent areas, legally binding instruments; an exclusive focus on higher education, as opposed to the EU's broader policy agenda; and a primacy in establishing the structural instruments, qualification frameworks, quality assurance standards, recognition tools, on which subsequent EU initiatives have been built. Across all five domains, the same Europeanisation logic recurs: the *Communiqués* construct

¹³¹ European Higher Education Area, *Rome Ministerial Communiqué...*, cit.

¹³² European Higher Education Area, *Tirana Communiqué...*, cit.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Frame, A., Curyło, B., *Bringing Erasmus home...*, cit.

¹³⁵ European Education and Culture Executive Agency. Eurydice, *The European higher education...*, cit.

¹³⁶ Bamberger, A., Morris, P., Yemini, M., *Neoliberalism, internationalisation and higher education: Connections, contradictions and alternatives*. "Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education", Vol. 40, no. 2, 2019, pp. 203-216. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2019.1569879>

normative indications and instruments, the OMC diffuses them through peer learning and peer pressure, and EHEA governance, together with national authorities and HEIs, institutionalises them in everyday practice.

This pattern of mutual borrowing (i.e. the EHEA originating the Qualification Framework later absorbed into the EU's own framework, the EU's ECTS being fully institutionalised only through the *Communiqués*, and third actors such as ENIC-NARIC sustaining implementation across both) does not undermine the EHEA's distinctiveness. On the contrary, it is precisely this capacity to generate the instruments on which EU initiatives subsequently rely that substantiates the claim of a co-primary, rather than merely complementary, role. By systematically disentangling these dynamics across policy domains, rather than treating the European dimension as an EU-centred or undifferentiated process, this article extends the literature on Europeanisation and governance in the EHEA with an analytical systematic account of how, and through which mechanisms, the European dimension is specifically advanced by the EHEA.

These findings carry three implications for European higher education governance. First, the EHEA's co-primary role challenges the common assumption that the EU is the principal architect of the European dimension. Recognising the EHEA as a normative backbone, rather than a complementary structure, should inform how future EU-EHEA collaboration is designed. The risk of duplication, however, is real: if the EU's flagship initiatives (i.e. the EUI, the European degree) proceed without adequate alignment with the EHEA's pre-existing instruments, they may fragment rather than reinforce the European dimension. Proactive coordination at the policy design stage, rather than retrospective alignment, is therefore advisable.

Second, the legitimacy of European higher education governance partly derives from the EHEA's inclusive and voluntary architecture, through which 47 members, including non-EU states, commit to shared norms without legal compulsion. This legitimacy would be weakened if EU initiatives were perceived as circumventing or replacing EHEA-developed standards, particularly by non-EU members who lack a voice in EU policy processes; future governance arrangements should remain attentive to this dimension.

Third, the analysis reveals a persistent tension between the EHEA's normative ambition and its implementation capacity, most visibly in the social dimension, where structural inequalities in access and participation persist despite long-standing commitments. Because the EHEA depends on the OMC without financial leverage, addressing this tension may require either stronger financial coordination mechanisms or more targeted peer-support arrangements within the BFUG.

This analysis has examined the EHEA's contribution to the European dimension as it emerges from its own programmatic documents, hence more extensions would deepen this account. Future research could examine whether the European dimension promoted by the EHEA and that advanced by the EU constitute the same evolving concept, or whether the two are progressively diverging in specific cases. It would also be valuable to trace how the EHEA's Europeanisation mechanisms operate within EU-led initiatives themselves, such as the EUI alliances, where EHEA-derived instruments and EU funding intersect most directly. Finally, the EUI and HEIs might be studied from an institutional perspective to examine how the European dimension could be shaped from the bottom through new logics, dynamics

and initiatives. What this analysis suggests, in any case, is that any account of the European dimension that overlooks the EHEA's normative and institutional role risks mistaking a co-primary architect for a secondary one.

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