



European higher education policy as a *plastique palimpseste*: understanding national visions for the European Universities Initiative

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Abstract

Since 2019, the European Union has set out on the endeavour to create ‘European Universities’ through its latest flagship higher education programme, the European Universities Initiative. These ‘European Universities’ are transnational university alliances that have been given the ambitious task to ‘transform the higher education landscape in the European Union’. European Union institutions, member states, and these ‘European Universities’ have different visions and understandings of what this transformation implies and what direction it could take. This paper offers a novel conceptual framework, *plastique palimpsestes*, to explore how different and entangled national institutional contexts, historical perspectives, and higher education policy priorities configure the development of the European Universities Initiative. This study investigates the first two pilot phases of the European Universities Initiative through the analysis of policy documents and 70 semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders at national and European level involved in the development of the initiative. This inquiry aims to provide an empirical and conceptual contribution to interdisciplinary scholarship in higher education, public policy, and European studies.

Keywords Higher education · University alliances · European universities · European Universities Initiative · Palimpsests · European Commission · Member states

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Introduction

Since its launch, the European Universities Initiative (EUI) has become a flagship programme of the European Commission's higher education strategy. 'European Universities' are transnational alliances of higher education institutions located throughout the entire European Union and Erasmus+ participating countries. Since 2019, the initiative has grown from 17 alliances in 2019 to 65 in 2025, including nearly 600 European higher education institutions (roughly 10% of the higher education landscape). Like other important developments in European higher education, the development of the European Universities Initiative has also given rise to a 'new field of study' (Manzoni, 2023). Scholars have explored the origin of the initiative and what brought higher education institutions together to establish themselves as alliances (Charret & Chankseliani, 2023; Lambrechts et al., 2023; Stensaker et al., 2023). Through its attempts to trigger new types of transnational cooperation, the initiative has presented possibilities for renewing integration processes in European (higher) education and novel understandings of the European (higher) education space (Brooks & Rensimer, 2023; Cino Pagliarello, 2022; Gunn, 2020; Hartzell et al., 2023; Marques & Graf, 2024). Finally, the alliances have been tasked to find solutions to European and global societal challenges, whilst many legal and financial obstacles remain in the way for them to become sustainable and fully operation on the long run (Frame & Curyło, 2022; Maassen et al., 2022; Martín Bautista-Cerro et al., 2023; Pina Stranger et al., 2023). The EUI has continuously displayed the ambitious objectives of 'transforming higher education' and creating 'transnational alliances that will become the universities of the future' (European Commission, 2020, 2022). Unsurprisingly, these statements have been understood differently by EU member states who have different interpretations of what this initiative means for the future developments of EU of higher education. Through a novel conceptual framework, *plastique palimpsestes*, this paper explores the following research question: How do different national institutional contexts, institutional perspectives, and higher education policy priorities configure the development of the European Universities Initiative?

Palimpsests and policy layering

A palimpsest is 'a parchment or other writing surface on which the original text has been effaced or partially erased, and then overwritten by another' (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024b). Each new layer in a palimpsest does not replace the previous ones. The layers of palimpsests co-exist as multiple temporalities. The concept has been used across disciplines: anthropology (West, 2020), archaeology (Bailey, 2007), literary studies (Okello & Duran, 2021), or social policy (Colmenares-Roa et al., 2022). In policy studies, Carter (2012) draws on palimpsests to complement Balbo's (2005) 'policy as patchwork' by incorporating a temporal dimension. While thinking about policy two dimensionally through the metaphor of the patchwork offers the possibility to understand how a variety of policy initiatives and programmes are assembled, adding a third, temporal dimension shows how 'new policy overwrites or imbricates existing practice' (Carter, 2012, p. 424). Patchworks only give the possibility to think about the juxtaposition of policy, while palimpsests divulge the 'entanglement' of policy.

While policy entanglement may not be at the heart of most of the literature on the crafting of policy and the overall policymaking process, the multilayered nature of policy has been explored. Policy layering usually takes place when it becomes too inefficient to erase an old policy and where it is more useful to simply build or ‘layer’ a new policy on top of it (Myles & Pierson, 2001; Pierson, 1994; Streeck & Thelen, 2005). Layering usually involves revising or modifying an existing set of policies through this new layer. There is a tendency for policymakers to replace to ‘add new’ policies rather than getting rid of ‘the old’ (Schickler, 2001, p. 15). The new elements added progressively transform and end up replacing the old policy as the former policy continuously occupies less and less space. Policy dismantling is the ‘reduction’ or ‘diminution’ of policies that leaves some traces behind it (Jordan et al., 2013, p. 795). The public policy literature focuses a lot on policymaking processes and the crafting of new policy, but not much attention is paid to how previous policies are replaced or thrown out. While literature on EU policy does discuss policy dismantling to some extent, it tends to focus on dismantling as a reaction to the financial crisis and more widely environmental policies (Gravey & Jordan, 2016; Gravey & Moore, 2018; Pollex, 2022). It is widely absent from the literature on higher education policymaking in the European Union. We argue that the concept of palimpsests is not merely a metaphor but a conceptual framework with which we can examine the overlapping and evolving layers of European higher education policy. In this sense, palimpsests are not just an artistic form but a way of understanding how policies—such as the Bologna Process, the Lisbon Strategy, and the European Universities Initiative—interact over time, shaping the higher education landscape without fully erasing previous reforms. By highlighting the entangled and iterative nature of policy evolution, we extend the existing literature on policy layering and dismantling.

As a conceptual framework, palimpsests can be used understand the involuted nature of EU policies as a complement to multi-characteristic governance frameworks (multi-level, multi-actor, multi-issue, multi-space), which give the possibility to discuss how a variety of actors negotiate policies locally, nationally, regionally, and globally (Levi-Faur, 2011; Marks, 2021; Piattoni, 2010; Vukasovic et al., 2018). Involution can have a variety of meanings, in a variety of disciplines such as anatomy, physiology mathematics, or biology, some which may appear as pejorative: ‘complicated’, ‘intricate’, ‘turning inwards’. We define involution as ‘an entangled condition’ (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024a). We believe that comparative and international higher education literature has a responsibility to develop and experiment with new concepts that can grasp understudied comparative dynamics in (higher) education policymaking (Antonucci, 2014; Bleiklie, 2014; Oleksiyenko et al., 2021; Rose & Mackenzie, 1991; Seeber, 2020).

We offer the palimpsest frameworks as a way to analyse the developments in European higher education policy: Erasmus, the Bologna Process, the Lisbon Strategy, the European Universities Initiative. These different developments and components make up the palimpsest like layers on a mural, which have appeared and continue to appear at different moments in time, sometimes partially erased but never fully replaced. These layers influence one another, and the appearance of a new layer does not mean the disappearance of a previous one. Previous research tends to present the evolution of European higher education as a series of successive stages regulated by the evolution of EU treaties and interwoven by ‘major events and changing political climate’ (Corbett, 2005, p. 9). We argue that the appearance of novel higher education policies is so entangled with past policy developments that it is difficult to clearly discern the full range of influences and roles of what might otherwise appear as key stages in the history of the policymaking process.

The palimpsest recognises that ‘the act of washing, scrapping and writing over a pre-existing text on a parchment never completely erases the text that came before resulting in the ‘traces of former alterations [bleeding] into the forefront’ (Okello & Duran, 2021, p. 2). This resonates with policies being a layered phenomenon that are usually dismantled and replaced but often leaving a trace behind them (Schickler, 2001; Streeck & Thelen, 2005). In the crafting of a new European higher education policy like the European Universities Initiative, past developments in European higher education have not been replaced and continue having a major influence on current development. The whole panel of Erasmus + programmes and agreements, Bologna Follow Up Group meetings, and developments through the European Higher Education Area and European Research Area are just some of the examples of long-standing initiatives that have not only shaped but continue having an influence on the European Universities Initiative. Novel European higher education initiatives are also entangled with the roles, decisions, and historical positions of member states in shaping higher education policy. These pre-existing European and national policies continue co-existing with and fuel the EUI, in a way that they ‘bleed into the forefront’ (Okello & Duran, 2021, p. 2). Furthermore, palimpsests ‘involve the accumulation and transformation of successive and partially preserved activities, in such a way that the resulting totality is different from and greater than the sum of the individual constituents’ (Bailey, 2007, p. 203). The European Universities Initiative is made up of these ‘successive and partially preserved’ policies at a national and European level. This also reveals policymaking processes as ‘messy and iterative, with each policy issue connected to multiple other policy issues’ (Brandsma et al., 2023, p. 1361).

Policy as a *plastique palimpseste*

Scholarship making use of the concept of palimpsests to understand policy refers to its most common version: the textual palimpsest, traditionally a parchment that has been seemingly endlessly re-written on top of. For this paper, we refer to a more visual tool: *plastique palimpsestes*¹. We argue that the policy palimpsest is not textual, and it is *plastique*. In textual palimpsests, the texts are heterogeneous due to their various temporalities and perhaps different characters such as different alphabets. *Plastique palimpsestes* are made up of heterogeneous materials that have been superimposed, torn, re-written, or redrawn over multiple periods of time. Jacques Villeglé’s lacerated posters (see Fig. 1) are examples of *plastique palimpsestes*. In Villeglé’s work, ‘the poster is a potpourri of signs more complex than the letter alone (even though it appears in the form of printed characters) incomparably loaded with cultural elements but mixed to the point of illegibility of an unpredictable *plastique palimpseste*’ (Labelle-Rojoux, 2008, p. 41). Just as Villeglé’s lacerated posters reveal layers of past messages, European higher education policy is similarly shaped by prior reforms that are not entirely erased but instead continue to influence new developments. The superimposed and torn nature of these artistic works mirrors the policy entanglement in the European Universities Initiative, where national priorities, institutional traditions, and EU-level objectives coexist in a constantly shifting landscape.

¹ We use the French *plastique palimpseste* as it refers to the French *arts plastiques*, although the term plastic arts exists in English is less common than its French form and could cause confusion. Plastic arts refers to ‘the art of shaping or modelling; an art or craft involving this, as pottery, sculpture, etc.’; (also) any art form that represents three-dimensional forms, as painting, etc.’ (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024c).



Fig. 1 Jacques Villeglé, Rue Lafayette/d'Hauteville, avril 1988, affiches lacérées marouflées sur toile, 235×185 cm photo: François Poivret. Courtesy Galerie GP & N Vallois et Fonds de dotation Villeglé

Plastique palimpsestes are a valuable conceptual framework through which to examine the development of European higher education policies, such as the European Universities Initiative. This is because the intricate, layered nature of palimpsests mirrors the complex interplay of policies at both European and national levels within the field of higher education. Just as all the layers of a mural coexist and contribute to the resulting involuted surface, European and national policies persistently interact and influence the formation of the

EU. This article delves into how the divergent visions of EU member states, Spain, and Denmark shape the trajectory of an EU-led higher education initiative.

Plastique palimpsestes are not only made up of text. They are also composed of a multiplicity of other materials: photographs, drawings, paintings, graffiti, splashes of spray-paint, advertisements. In one of the works from his lacerated posters, *Rue Lafayette/Hauteville, avril 1988* (Fig. 1), Villeglé chooses a portion of the posters of a street's walls that he cuts out and transfers to a canvas. While the wall of the street may be covered by all of the materials described above, Villeglé chooses a section which is only made up of printed posters—promotional posters for entertainment venues in Paris, concerts, film screenings, theatre plays or political flyers for an upcoming election. The fact that *plastique palimpsestes* are made up of heterogeneous materials also gives the possibility to draw a continuity between the different materials that are found across the different layers. In EU education policy, this is all the different components that can be found that make up the policy: member states, EU institutions, HEIs, university alliances, Erasmus partnerships, Erasmus Mundus, European Excellence Initiative, knowledge alliances, university networks, national conferences of rectors, research collaborations, EU research projects, student unions, etc.

The layers of a *Plastique palimpsestes* are immensely variable in how they have survived across time. The layers can be readable, illegible, covered, torn, erased, and faded. The condition of these layers plays a role in the reconfiguration of the new whole. It reveals that the palimpsest is not just a story of erasures and superimpositions but also of tears. In Fig. 1, an archaeological process trying to identify the source of each of the torn posters is impossible. However, it is possible to look at how each component interacts with one another through superimpositions and tears, with some aspects of each fragment more readable or identifiable than others. Other parts of the palimpsest offer a glimpse of torn posters that have become blue, grey, red, or yellow colour palettes that give the whole a consistency despite not having a visible meaning. Finally, the whitish trail left by the tear marks offers a recurrent pattern found throughout the entire work as an almost independent entity despite being the result of pre-existing materials. In the shaping of a European higher education policy, questions can be asked about the condition of pre-existing policies at national and European level. For this specific paper, we focus on the national histories, visions, and contexts as the different layers that have shaped the development of an EU (higher) education initiative. Each position may be in a different condition based on the relationship between national and EU policy priorities or on the weight of each member state. While 'plastique palimpsestes' are derived from an artistic concept, we apply it to policy processes, where different layers of policy reform coexist, overlap, and shape one another over time. The framework serves both as an analytical tool for tracing these interactions and as a visual analogy for the entanglement of national and European policies in higher education.

Methodology

This paper relies on semi structured interviews and document analysis that were conducted as part of a larger doctoral research project on the European Universities Initiative. Overall, the first author conducted 70 semi-structured interviews as part of their doctoral research. The study participants included 4 European policymakers, 8 national policymakers, 31 alliance coordinators, 15 local administrators working on the development of the alliances,

and 10 students. Data were collected at a unique time for the development of the initiative, which had taken its first steps and was now structuring its future direction for the coming years. Interviews were conducted between October 2021 and October 2022 at the time of the publication of the European Commission's *European Strategy for Universities (2022)*, the Council's *Recommendation on effective European higher education co-operation (2022)* and whilst the first wave of alliances was responding to the second EUI call (2021). These developments all sparked a lot of reactions, reflecting the different and at times conflicting visions of the Europeanization of higher education amongst participating stakeholders at all levels: HEI, alliances, national governments, and European institutions.

This paper is a sub-section of the original study for which 44 interviews were extracted and analysed based on their relevance to the cases selected: interviews with the coordinators of six alliances with Danish partners, coordinators of 17 alliances with Spanish partners, and coordinators of two alliances led by a Spanish HEI. The larger study these data come from also examined in depth two alliances with Spanish and Danish partners, during which interviews were conducted with the senior university leadership and local administrators in charge of developing the alliances as well as students in partner HEIs (see Tables 1 and 2). We have chosen a single case study design of the European Universities Initiative with two EU member states (Spain and Denmark) as embedded units of analysis (Fig. 2) in order to investigate this contemporary phenomenon whose boundary with its context is not 'clearly evident' (Yin, 2003, p. 31). Additionally, there is a natural dialogue between a case study design and *plastique palimpsests* as a conceptual framework. With his lacerated posters, Villeglé considered that his role as an artist should 'be limited to selecting posters according to intentions or circumstances, choosing their format and deciding on their framing' (Francblin, 2008, p. 31). Through a similar approach as researchers, we choose a specific aspect of the phenomenon under study that will be magnified. The magnification process of the *plastique palimpseste* is guided by our research question and design. It is important for us to understand, what it is we are transferring onto our own canvas, which context, case(s), and unit(s) of analysis (Fig. 2).

Spain and Denmark were chosen as the two countries for case studies because they were frequently mentioned during interviews by various stakeholders due to their distinct approaches to the development of the European Universities Initiative. The cases have national higher education systems of contrasting sizes, and their approach to the Europeanisation of higher education is characterised by their differing interpretations of the purpose of the EUI. Specifically, coordinators of alliances that partnered with

Table 1 Interviews with participants from Danish institutions participating in the European Universities Initiative

	Participant(s) position(s)	Institution(s)
National policymaker	1 national policymaker	Ministry of Higher Education and Science
In depth alliance with Danish HEI as partner	1 alliance senior administrator in partner HEI	In-depth Alliance 1
Alliances with Danish HEI as partner	6 alliance coordinators (out of a total of 7 alliances selected with Danish HEIs as partners)	ECIU, EPICUR, AURORA, Circle U, ERUA, EuroTeq

Table 2 Interviews with participants from Spanish institutions participating in the European Universities Initiative

	Participant(s) position(s)	Institution(s)
National policymaker	1 national policymaker	Ministry of Universities
In-depth alliance(s) with Spanish HEI as partner	1 alliance senior administrator and 1 student in partner HEI	In-depth Alliance 1
	1 senior manager, 1 alliance senior administrator, and 1 student in partner HEI	In-depth Alliance 2
Alliances with Spanish HEI as coordinator	2 coordinators (out of a total of 11 alliances selected with Spanish HEIs as coordinators)	ARQUS, CHARM-EU
Alliances with Spanish HEI as partner	17 alliance coordinators (out of a total of 34 alliances selected with Spanish HEIs as Partners)	CIVICA, CIVIS, ECIU, EDUC, EU-CONEXUS, EUGLOH, UNA EUROPA, UNITEI, YUFE, AURORA, EC2U, ENHANCE, EURECA Pro, eut + , NeurotechEU, T4E, UNIC

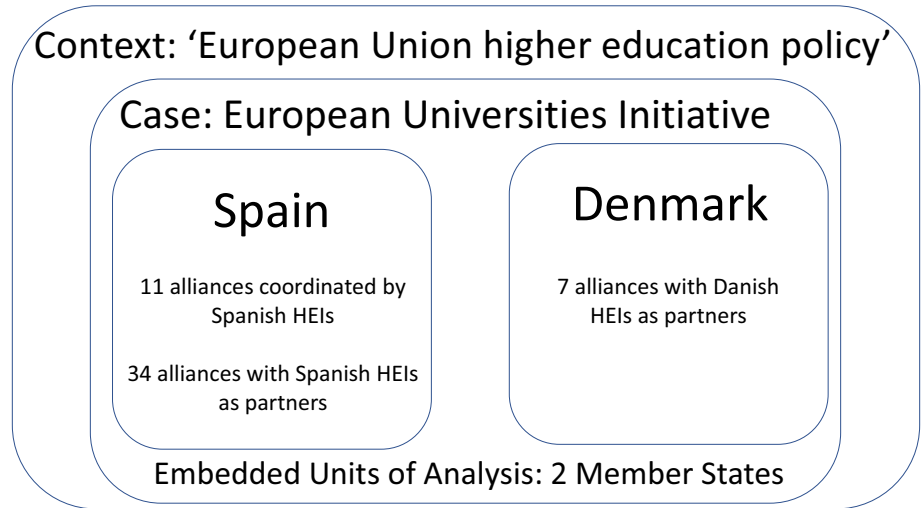


Fig. 2 Embedded single case study of the European Universities Initiative (adapted from Yin, 2003:40)

Danish institutions frequently cited Denmark's engagement with the scheme as 'a real problem' (Pseudomysed Alliance 8). There are eight public universities in Denmark, seven of which initially participated in selected alliances. In the co-construction phase of the initiative that preceded its deployment, the Danish Ministry expressed support of the initiative and manifested a desire for it be conceived as a programme of excellence that promoted links between the best universities in Europe and fostered synergies between research and education. Danish institutions participating in the initiative have not received any complementary national funding from the ministry, and no legal changes were expected at the time of our interviews.

In contrast, Spain was usually referred to as a supportive country that had adapted its legal framework to facilitate the transnational cooperation necessary for the development of the alliances. Spain is a much larger higher education system with 50 public universities, 37 of which are participating in selected alliances. The Spanish Ministry conceived the initiative as needing to be as inclusive as possible so that most of its public universities could take part to avoid creating a two-tier higher education system within the country. Spanish institutions participating in selected alliances all received complementary funding, and legal changes have been made to facilitate cooperation.

While other member states sometimes embody these characteristics more acutely, Spain and Denmark were the two member states that had some of the strongest discourses regarding their vision on three key components appearing on this novel layer of European higher education: support for the initiative (funding, legal changes, etc.), philosophy for the initiative (excellence vs. inclusion), role of past European higher education developments (Bologna Process, European Higher Education Area).

Furthermore, European and national policymakers pointed us in the direction of policy documents that dealt with the development of the initiative which complemented our initial document corpus, originally largely composed of EU level policy documents: Spanish Royal Decrees, Danish policy agreements, and Ministerial communications. These documents brought a greater understanding of both national contexts and complemented participants' comments on the different national political stances that are contributing to the

development of the initiative. EU level policy documents were used to outline the development of the initiative and its strategic goals in preparation of the interviews.

Interviews and documents were analysed thematically based on the different levels of the research question on how Denmark and Spain have different understandings of the purpose of the EUI, what its place should be in regard to pre-existing European higher education initiatives such as the Bologna Process and European Higher Education Area and the different forms of support they are providing to their national HEIs participating in the initiative. In reporting, the names of the alliances have been pseudonymised using numerical identifiers and only revealing the generic position of the interviewee.

Entangled visions, national contexts, and positions on the development of the European Universities Initiative

One of the first debates that emerged between member states when defining the objectives of the initiative reflected ‘a classical debate in European affairs, since it is found in all policy discussion: the typical debate between Inclusion and Excellence’ (French Presidency of the EU Council policymaker). The main question was whether to concentrate funding on the ‘best universities’ or on making sure that each ‘European University’ had a significant number of partners located throughout Europe. Our interviews revealed that in the initial meetings between the commission and member states, Poland and Lithuania insisted on geographical balance. The Netherlands and Finland wanted to open the initiative to the whole range of HEIs and not just research-intensive universities, opening the door to universities of applied sciences. Spain wanted to make sure most of its universities would be included in the alliances. France and Denmark on the other hand were much more focused on making sure that only the best universities of the EU would be selected to create an excellence-based higher education programme. A policymaker summed up the fact that what was finally agreed upon was ‘let’s take the best, but let’s make sure no one is left aside’, therefore attempting to create a careful blend between inclusion and quality.

Each new layer in a *plastique palimpseste* is the result of national histories and contexts which reveal the stance of member states regarding the development of the initiative. A Spanish policymaker who justified the Spanish ‘widening’ stance saying that like Germany, France, or Italy, Spain is a country with many universities. The representative explained that the geographical balance criteria for the initiative privileges countries with a smaller number of universities, as it makes it easier for their entire ‘system to be in European Universities’. It is true that public universities are widely represented within alliances in countries with ‘smaller’ public HE systems such as the Netherlands (12 out of 14), Portugal (9 out of 13), and Sweden (12 out of 15). Spain has a total of 89 HEIs (Estadística De Universidades, Centros Y Titulaciones, 2023). Thirty-seven out of the 50 public universities in Spain are participating in the EUI, 7 out of the 39 private institutions, and 1 private education foundation. Following the publication of the results of the latest EUI call in July 2023, 44 Spanish HEIs are participating in 42 of the 50 alliances. Eleven alliances are coordinated by Spanish HEIs, making it the third country to be most active in the initiative after Germany and France. The policymaker explained that the issue facing Spain is that since there are a limited number of alliances, they do not know if all their public universities will have the opportunity to be included in the alliances. The Spanish Ministry of Universities would like to avoid creating a two-tier system between their national universities, with some that have received the EUI ‘quality label’, and other that would be considered ‘second class’. Spain pushed for the EUI to not only involve ‘big’ universities, considering

that it should not only be ‘the best universities that can apply for this type of projects’. The Spanish position emphasises the fact that quality can come out of an inclusive policy. Although a big university will have more resources and ‘means to do things (...) it does not replace a good idea’.

Denmark has eight public universities (Ministry of Higher Education & Science, 2023). Since the launch of the EUI in 2019, 7 out of the 8 public universities in Denmark have been associated with an alliance, and 1 of the 8 Danish University Colleges is also a member of an alliance. The original Danish position was much more excellence driven considering the initiative as an opportunity to ‘increase the quality of both the research and higher education at the top of the European food chain of universities. However, in the first discussion with other member states as part of the working group set up by the commission, Denmark saw ‘a very strong emphasis on highlighting the widening perspective’. Danish policymakers regretted that the commission had ‘a shift in focus over the years. [The Commission] started with a more nuanced approach when it came to quality and widening’. In the past years, the commission has shifted to a ‘clear widening agenda, even pushing harder than that some member states were’.

This development is clearly reflected in the latest ‘European Universities’ call through which the European Commission has conditioned funding on the expansion of the alliances to increase the amount of HEIs involved in the EUI and attain a wider geographical distribution (Education & Culture Executive Agency, 2021, p. 9). We look at this incentive for expansion through two alliances with both have Danish and Spanish partners. EuroTeq could have chosen to consolidate itself and remain with its 6 members selected as part of the previous call and receive a maximum grant of €6.48 m. However, EuroTeq chose to expand from 6 to 8 members, receiving a grant of €12.80 m. If EuroTeq had gone even one step further and chosen to have 9 full partners, it could have received up to €14.40 m (Education & Culture Executive Agency, 2021, p. 23). AURORA already had 9 members participating in its alliance from the first call. Alliances of 9 or more members receive the maximum of €14.40 m to consolidate themselves without a requirement of further expansion. Alliances have widely gone along with this expansion strategy despite expressing some resistance (see Table 3). A Danish policymaker explained that this move towards expansion did not have a ‘very strong backing from the member states’, but the commission felt they ‘could decide on the final model and then they did’. The policymaker explained that if the commission was not more ‘accommodating in hearing the voices of the member states’ and if the political level feels it is ‘pushed too hard and can’t accept that, there will be a backlash’. This reveals something about the condition of each of the components found on the palimpsest. To add an additional layer on the plastique palimpseste of European higher education, the commission may only grant member states a faint space, where their voice can appear teared or partially erased in favour of a larger component: its own vision for the initiative.

Despite the Spanish Ministry being supportive of a ‘widening’ development of the EUI, financially incentivising alliances to expand was met cautiously by certain alliances with Spanish partners. A coordinator (Alliance 2) said that for them, the idea of incentivising alliances to have a minimum of nine partners to receive the maximum amount is ‘ridiculous’. The coordinator felt that the funding system ‘penalises alliances that are being very intensive and concrete in getting somewhere and then moving to the next steps of upscaling and expanding their offer to be actually as inclusive as possible’. An alliance coordinator (Alliance 13) explained that the alliances ‘that do not wish to expand yet because they feel it is too early or because it does not correspond to their model, will find themselves in a chronical crisis of underfunding’. The coordinator also explained that the financial

Table 3 Expansion of the alliances

	Name of alliance	Members' 1st call	Members' 2nd call
1st wave	UNA Europa	7	9
	4EU +	6	6
	ARQUS	7	8
	CHARMEU-EU	5	8
	CIVICA	7	9
	CIVIS	8	9
	EU CONNEXUS	6	9
	ECIU	11	12
	EDUC	6	8
	EPICUR	8	9
	EUGLOH	5	9
	eu4art	4	N/A
	EUTOPIA	6	9
	FORTHEM	7	9
	SEA-EU	6	9
	UNITE!	7	9
	YUFE	8	8
2nd wave	ATHENA	7	N/A
	AURORA	9	9
	Circle U	7	8
	E3UDRES2	6	10
	EC2U	7	8
	EELISA	9	9
	ENGAGE.EU	7	9
	ENHANCE	7	9
	ENLIGHT	9	9
	ERUA	5	8
	EUNICE	7	10
	EuniWell	7	9
	EURECA-PRO	7	9
	EuroTeQ	6	8
	eut +	8	8
	FilmEU	4	8
	INVEST	5	7
	NeurotechEU	8	8
	RUN-EU	8	8
	T4E	7	10
ULYSSEUS	6	8	
UNIC	8	10	
UNITA	6	10	
UNIVERSEH	5	7	

incentive remained modest regarding what was expected of the alliances as welcoming new members and bringing up to speed requires a lot of work and the development of new tools which will lead to more expenses.

The Spanish position regarding the way forward to adopt with the EUI appears much more visibly upon this new layer, whereas the Danish vision appears somewhat eclipsed. We found that this contrast was extremely visible when comparing the Spanish and Danish cases, as opposed to other member states. However, rather than presenting the Spanish Ministry as supportive and seeing Denmark as resistant, it may be more appropriate to witness that the initiative does not meet the current Danish preoccupations for the development of higher education in Denmark. A representative from a Danish HEI explained that 'The European agenda is actually not very big in Denmark, which is a huge problem'. A Danish policymaker confirmed this stance saying that the EUI 'is not something that that has had really much of an impact on the whole national policy discussions'. Discussions between Danish HEIs and the ministry have been focused on other topics such as 'significant reforms under way in terms of trying to shift study places from outside the big four cities to more regional parts of Denmark to the smaller cities'. Despite these conflicting visions, our interview with the ministry revealed that Denmark initially 'saw a lot of potential' in the initiative as the original discussions focused on fostering better synergies between research and education which was a discussion at the national level in Denmark as well'. Denmark also appreciated the bottom-up nature of the initiative believing that it would be a way to avoid 'a European setting or dictating the nature of the higher education institutions and programmes', instead giving the choice to the institutions themselves. The ministry also saw it as way to 'raise the bar for the top European universities especially in the light of Brexit'.

Should the European Universities Initiative move beyond or alongside the Bologna process and European Higher Education Area?

Robertson et al. (2022) see the development of the EUI alliances as 'a different kind of strategy for the commission aimed at overcoming what it saw as the slow pace of the Bologna Process; the purpose of these European Universities is to accelerate deeper and more ambitious forms of cooperation amongst universities in Europe' (p.73). This was reflected in our interviews with a coordinator of an alliance led by a Spanish HEI, saying that the higher education 'sector needed a new stimulus because 'Erasmus had become routine, and Bologna wasn't working'. Member states, however, had various visions of what should be the role of the Bologna Process and European Higher Education Area now that the EUI has been launched and grown so quickly: co-exist alongside it or replace it? Within our palimpsest, it raises the issue of what space is granted to previous European higher education developments on this new layer.

A Spanish policymaker mentioned that other member states considered that some of the 'developments proposed [as part of the EUI] were already there with the European Higher Education Area'. Some of these past developments pierce through to this new layer. However, contact between the Spanish ministry and HEIs participating in alliances revealed that universities considered that the European Higher Education Area was 'not being applied correctly or it was not enough'. The Spanish Ministry explained that the Bologna Process did not offer HEIs the opportunity to express when they 'are encountering problems or they want to develop new ideas or new projects (...) because sometimes there are conflicts with national legislations'. Spain sees in the EUI an opportunity that did not exist with the

Bologna Process for universities and national Ministries to jointly identify the obstacles to transnational cooperation and what could be done to adapt the national legal framework to facilitate this cooperation. It is therefore not sufficient for old layers to transpire through this novel layer, and new components need to be added for the European Universities Initiative to develop efficiently.

The Danish Ministry sees the EUI as a way for the commission to ‘push forward with a stronger EU narrative in terms of higher education’ and to be responsible for the ‘the agenda setting for the EU rather than the Bologna process’. A Danish policymaker explained they felt the EUI had the risk of ‘making the Bologna process redundant’ and ultimately ‘kill it off’. The ministry feared that they would be to not be able to allocate resources to the Bologna Process and the EUI at the same time. The Danish position considers that there are strengths in the Bologna Process, such as its ‘multilateral set up’ and the fact that it gives member countries the possibility ‘to engage in new initiatives which are not as binding as they would be in the EU setting’. A Danish representative revealed a concern that a stronger focus on the EUI could lead to a move away from the learning-based policymaking processes that have characterised the Bologna Process. These processes give ‘more time to countries’ to implement new initiatives ‘on their own accord’. With the EUI, the Danish policymaker felt that the commission sometimes moves ‘more quickly than the alliances and member states’ in the development of its policies and risks losing national political support. Denmark was the member state we researched that had the strongest commitment to the previous governance mechanisms enabled by Bologna and showed the most reticence towards a new speedier process for the implementation of European education policies. It also reveals Denmark’s concerns of seeing these higher education policymaking structures be dismantled and progressively replaced by the European Universities Initiative.

Different types of support to guarantee the stability and sustainability of the European Universities Initiative

The type of support member states bring to the alliances created through the European Universities Initiative are contrasting but involuted layers on the plastique palimpseste. The alliances can be supported by their national authorities in a variety of way, through the following: financial support, legal support, political support, or moral support. These different types of support characterise the possibilities and potentials of success for the development of the alliances, and their co-existence within this novel layer of European higher education is what crafts this initiative.

Funding

The Spanish government sees the EUI as having ‘strategic value for Spain’ and that ‘a public interest of indisputable importance can be deduced’ from the development of the EUI alliances (Ministerio de las Universidades, 2022, pp. 159838, 159840). Spain sees participation in the EUI as beneficial to the development of its national territory by building ‘a multicultural and multilingual space in the European Union which recognises in an equal manner mountain, rural and cross-border areas’ (Ministerio de las Universidades, 2022, p. 159840). The launch of the European Universities Initiative in 2019 has been accompanied by a series of royal decrees intended to facilitate the participation of Spanish HEIs in the EUI. These decrees have mostly concerned granting Spanish HEIs participating in alliances

complementary national funding to the European grant in all different phases of the EUI calls (Ministerio de las Universidades, 2019, 2021, 2022). HEIs who are participating in an alliance for the first time and have never yet received national funding receive the highest amount of funding, with HEIs coordinating a new alliance receiving more (278,571.36€) than those that are 'only' partner within an alliance (223,660.74€). HEIs who have already received national funding continue to receive complementary funds, albeit less, with HEIs coordinating a 'long-standing' alliance equally receive more (182,919.93€) than those who are 'only' partner within an alliance (146,864.66€). In our interviews, representatives of Spanish HEIs who were either coordinators or partners in an alliance tended to consider that the funding, although useful, was not sufficient (Alliances 8, 16, 22). A coordinator (Alliance 22) pointed out that 'it's not just having national funding; it's how that national funding is organised on the conditions for its use'. Although the Spanish co-funding was under the level of other countries, such as France, it has the advantage of being able to be 'devoted entirely to the alliance's work plan with no restrictions. The coordinator gave the example of a German university that had to use the funding for other activities than the funding received from Europe to avoid double funding. This led the German HEI to have to practically write a parallel work plan'. However, another representative of Spanish HEI participating in an alliance said that the issue is that the funding must go to the actions, programmes, and workplan led by the alliances, whereas they would require more practical financial support for specific sectors such as human resources or IT. The local administrator explained that these expenses are more difficult to justify as they are 'not as sexy. Research is sexy, especially things that have to do with circular economy, renewable energies. Everybody is talking about renewable energy, circular economy nowadays. So those things are very attractive. But saying, we need half a million euros for IT is more difficult'.

The Danish Ministry does not provide any targeted national funding (Directorate-General for Education et al., 2023). When asked about the reason for this, a Danish policymaker explained that this had to do with the structure of the higher education funding system in Denmark. Denmark provides its HEIs with 'base funding' and it is then 'up to the institutions themselves to prioritise what projects that they wish to use their funding for'. The Danish ministry therefore considers that there is an 'assumption is that they already have funding in place that they can use' for the purpose of the alliances and 'there is a reluctance to set specific funding for specific projects in terms of our funding system in general'. There is a desire from the ministry to keep this funding system 'intact'. The policymaker justified this by saying that this is a funding system that Denmark also shares with other Nordic countries, and this had been a topic between them. However, despite sharing similarities in their funding systems, unlike Denmark, Sweden and Finland offer 'fixed amount' of funding to national HEIs participating in alliances (Directorate-General for Education et al., 2023, p. 42).

Modification of national legislation

In Spain, royal decrees have been published to modify national legislation and facilitate the participation of Spanish HEIs in the transnational activities of the EUI alliances. One of these decrees seeks to give Spanish HEIs the possibility to establish joint degrees at European level, by creating an exception for Spanish HEIs participating in the European Universities Initiative. The decree establishes that any Spanish HEI participating in an alliance trying to set up a joint degree will be authorised to be evaluated by another national quality agency (if it is registered in the European Register of Agencies of Quality Assurance in

Higher Education) (Ministerio de las Universidades, 2021, p. 119566). When asked about what motivated the Spanish government to be flexible with its legislation and facilitate the creation of European degrees, a Spanish policymaker told us that they believed it could push member states to implement the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes but also could create more internationally recognised degrees.

A local coordinator (Alliance 16) explained that for the development of this royal decree, alliances were given the opportunity to give some input on its development. Alliances made demands such as the introduction of micro-credentials or challenge-based learning and the Ministry ‘changed the legal framework according to their needs at the moment’. The coordinator said that this openness to change was ‘something really new’. Although the Spanish government was always open in the past ‘to amend the legal framework to make things easier’ in programmes such as Erasmus Mundus, ‘it took many years, and it was not easy’. With the EUI the government understood they had ‘to be flexible’.

Denmark on the other hand, has been more reluctant to adapt national legislation. A representative from an alliance with a Danish partner explained that ‘Denmark is a real problem’ with its new laws geared towards decreasing the number of international students. Multiple alliances referred to a recent political agreement that seeks to limit the intake of European Union/European Economic Area (EU/EEA) students. In recent years, the Danish Ministry of higher education and science has observed an increase of in the expenses of the state educational grant (SU) from ‘migrant workers from EU/EEA countries’ (Uddannelses- og Forskningsministeriet, 2021, p. 1). These EU/EEA students usually complete degrees in English in Danish Universities. At the same time, the ministry considers that it is ‘not fair that such a large proportion’ EU/EEA students take advantage of the SU to come in Denmark but go home as soon as their degree is over, thereby not giving back to the Danish economy (Uddannelses-og Forskningsministeriet, 2018, p. 5). This has led the Danish government to sign a political agreement to close a significant amount of English language degree programmes and offer them instead in Danish. A coordinator mentioned that these developments are the ‘opposite of what [they] are trying to reach’ as an alliance. Additionally, the lack of openness to modify national legislation to accept virtual mobility and micro credentials has made it difficult for Danish HEIs to continue participating in the initiative. The coordinator explained that when an HEI is finding it difficult to dialogue with their national government about ‘removing some legal barriers for more seamless transnational cooperation’, the alliance goes through the European Commission who in turn lobbies directly with the national government in question. The coordinator added that although the commission cannot force a member state in a given direction, ‘the pressure sure does help’.

This reluctance from the Danish government to adapt national legislation to facilitate transnational cooperation between Danish HEIs and their counterparts throughout the EU has led Danish HEIs from two different alliances (ECIU and ERUA), to not stay on as full partners as part of the latest EUI call (European Commission, 2022, 2023). Aalborg university (ECIU alliance) changed its status from full partner of the alliance to associated member for the following reasons:

Funding Aalborg has not received any complementary national funding to support the development of the alliance. The budget must come from the existing resources allocated to the university, which has decreased. There is also limited possibilities for the HEI to look for other sources of funding.

Micro-credentials These are not accepted and cannot be included in existing study programmes.

Difficulty with internationalisation Danish universities have been asked to reduce the enrolment of students by 10% in the coming years. This had a cost and an impact on the enrolment of international students.

Mobility Danish HEIs have been asked to achieve a balance in mobility of students between the number of incoming and outgoing students. This became difficult as virtual mobility is not accepted.

Discussion and conclusion

Plastique palimpsestes serve as a unique and insightful conceptual framework through which the diverse national contexts, historical narratives, and visions related to the EUI are examined, whilst at the same time offering additional reflections on the literature on policy layering and dismantling. By deploying *plastique palimpsestes* as a conceptual framework, we address the EUI as layered torn posters on an immense mural in which each member state inscribes its distinctive imprint on the initiative's overarching narrative. This creative approach allows us to explore how the historical experiences and contemporary perspectives of member states result in distinct interpretations of the EUI's purpose and direction. Much like the layers of a *plastique palimpseste*, where old posters are torn, superimposed and entangled with new ones, our analysis unveils how national interests and preferences are layered upon a common European higher education initiative. Through this conceptual framework, we uncover the complexities of the EUI's development, offering a picture of how different national histories and priorities contribute to the evolving narrative of European higher education. This unique perspective aids in our comprehension of the initiative's varied interpretations and, ultimately, its future trajectory. We explained that Denmark imagined the initiative as a programme of excellence to strengthen the best universities in the European Union. Spain on the other hand hoped the initiative would be as inclusive as possible and that most Spanish HEIs would be able to take part. Additionally, Spain sees the EUI as a public interest programme whereas Denmark considers it does not address its current national priorities in terms of higher education. Furthermore, Spain believed that the EUI should build on top of the Bologna Process and European Higher Education Area and find new ways to fix some of the persisting issues HEIs are facing with transnational cooperation. Conversely, Denmark called to not dismantle the policymaking processes of the Bologna Process and warned that it might not survive the development of the EUI due to the lack of national resources to take part in both programmes. These different positions can difficultly be reconciled under a single programme which has led some member states to be less satisfied with its development. As the evolution of the initiative corresponds more to Spain's initial vision, it has provided more legal and financial support to national HEIs participating in EUI alliances than Denmark that has remained more cautious.

During the presentation of the conceptual uses of palimpsests to complement the existing literature on policy layering and policy dismantling, we explained that palimpsests offer the possibility to explore an additional feature in the policymaking process: involution. The vision and position and member states remain key to the development

of European higher education policy. The breadth of a novel higher education strategy embodied by the European Universities Initiative is accompanied by a series of contradictory and often conflicting perspectives from member states and the European Commission on how to build its educational future. The way in which member states understand the development of this initiative conditions their support which remains essential to the successful development of the alliances. The debates that arose from these different understandings are what have crafted this novel policy development. However, the contrasting national visions, histories, and contexts reveal the European Universities Initiative as an involuted phenomenon like a palimpsest. It is not just about replacing past policies, are building on top of them, but taking in all the contradictory logics of member states, the wider higher education sector, and EU institutions in making this initiative a long-term success. We chose Spain and Denmark not only because they display different perspectives on the initiative, but also because both their visions englobe contrasting philosophical, financial, legal, and political visions of the initiative all at once. Comparisons with other member states also offer points of contrast but usually always present some sort of alignment on at least one of these aspects.

Our exploration of the rich palimpsest of perspectives within the EUI has practical implications for the European higher education landscape. The contrasting views of member states, exemplified by Spain's drive for inclusivity and Denmark's pursuit of excellence, hold significant implications for the EUI's future. Firstly, the differing policy priorities of member states may prompt changes in how funding is allocated and how the initiative is structured. The growing emphasis on geographical inclusion, driven by Spain's approach, might require increased financial support to ensure that universities from across the EU can participate equitably. Conversely, Denmark's focus on quality may lead to discussions about selection criteria and how funding is distributed, potentially reshaping the concept of "excellence" in European higher education. These differing viewpoints also highlight the need for transparent and flexible policymaking to accommodate these contrasting visions while maintaining a unified EUI framework. It is likely that the EUI will need to adapt by offering financial incentives for alliances to expand or promoting greater flexibility in national legislation to facilitate cross-border collaboration. Ultimately, our findings point to the importance of comprehensive dialogue and negotiation amongst policymakers to harness this diversity of perspectives, shaping the EUI's evolution. By understanding these implications, the initiative can evolve as a dynamic and inclusive force in European higher education, fostering collaboration while accommodating the varied national contexts and priorities of member states.

Author contribution Antonin Charret: data collection, data analysis, development of conceptual framework, writing, revision. Alis Oancea: supervision and revision. Maia Chankseliani: supervision and revision.

Data Availability Data cannot be made publicly available.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate This research was approved by the University of Oxford's Ethics Committee (Central University Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference: CIA-21–25). All participants were sent an information sheet and signed a consent form approved by the University of Oxford's Ethics Committee.

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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