

# **The orchestration of a sustainable development agenda in the European Higher Education Area**

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## **Abstract**

### Purpose

This article asks how the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has orchestrated a sustainable development (SD) agenda in its international policy since 2020.

### Design/methodology/approach

By drawing on theoretical ideas around policy orchestration as a key UN governing strategy and applying them to the analysis of the progression of the SD agenda in the EHEA, the article conducts a thematic analysis of six recent key EHEA international policy documents and 19 interviews with key Bologna stakeholders in France, Germany and Italy.

### Findings

The resultant analysis uncovers three overarching key themes that show: (1) the EHEA has the capacity to mitigate pitfalls in the UN's SD agenda; (2) some weaknesses of the UN's orchestration of SD are translated into weaknesses in the EHEA's formulation of its SD agenda; and (3) the further development of an SD agenda as an essential direction of EHEA's work. The article then goes on to discuss how EHEA policies only mention SD discourse, omit concrete plans for its implementation, and keep the very meaning of SD ambiguous throughout international policy documents.

### Originality

We offer three original recommendations that the EHEA should adopt in an attempt to mitigate the issues raised in the run-up to its 2030 deadline for implementing its policies: the EHEA should develop an explicit definition of SD; recognise the Euro-centredness of EHEA policies and open them up to other voices; and cite academic research when developing policy documents.

**Key words:** Sustainable Development, European Higher Education Area, United Nations, higher education, policy orchestration, soft governance

## **1. Introduction**

Over the past couple of decades, the United Nations (UN) has been orchestrating the improvement of life around the globe through two interconnected stages of its centrepiece development agenda:

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The MDGs officially commenced in 2001 and ran until 2015, when they were superseded by the SDGs, which are due to be realised by 2030. While sustainable development was only one of the Goals in the MDG project (Goal 7, which was focused on ensuring environmental sustainability) (UN, 2022), it became an umbrella mission of the SDG project, as its name reveals – ‘*Sustainable Development Goals*’. UN’s soft governance of international policy has been taking place through policy orchestration, or in other words, the facilitation of the implementation of tasks to and across various policy ‘orchestrated networks’ (Viola, 2015, p. 24). Viola (2015) further explains that these networks have one or more focal or nodal institutions that ‘orchestrate’ – that is, lead through facilitation. Education has been emerging as a key tool in supporting the implementation of the UN’s SDGs worldwide (Kushnir and Nunes, 2022). Our interest, in this article, therefore, lies in the area of education – specifically higher education (HE).

The Bologna Process has been the largest and most influential HE project whose influence has been felt beyond Europe – in other regions including Southeast Asia, Latin America and Africa (Eta and Mngo, 2021). It has aimed at making HE systems comparable and cohesive in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) since 1998, and currently includes 47 active member-countries (EHEA, 2022a). The idea of sustainable development (SD) is not new in the EHEA. Back in 2001, Prague Ministerial Communique of the EHEA adopted the goal for the European Union (EHEA, 2001) to become “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of *sustainable* economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion” (European Council, 2000, added emphasis). This goal followed the Lisbon Council in 2000, when it was originally set specifically for the EU. EHEA’s eventual expansion to non-EU countries effectively made this goal relevant to the whole of the EHEA – albeit not without tensions related to reconciling EHEA’s territory, which spreads far beyond the EU – and the European identity was promoted across the vast EHEA (Kushnir, 2020).

This focus on sustainable economic growth back in the day was, arguably, the beginning of the development of an aspect of EHEA’s sustainable development mission. Literature about EHEA policy-making on SD on the international level is strikingly scarce, with only a handful of studies published pre-2020 explicitly exploring the topic. It is, therefore, inevitable that the focus of our research is on exploring the SD agenda in the EHEA, — particularly given the UN’s increasing efforts to orchestrate SD policy-making globally (Kushnir and Nunes, 2022) and the consultative member status of its agency UNESCO in the EHEA (EHEA, 2022b). This article addresses the aforementioned gap in the literature on the EHEA’s SD agenda following the new 2030 EHEA development deadline announced at Rome Ministerial Conference in 2020 (EHEA, 2020a).

This article argues that the weaknesses of the UN’s SDG project’s initial orchestration of SD are somewhat mitigated in the EHEA. This is due to the EHEA’s emergence as a productive policy network for extending the UN’s orchestration of SD, as well as EHEA’s appealing to HE as a powerful tool in its SD orchestration process. Furthermore, it is argued that the discourse about SD has been tagged along in the recent EHEA policy, showcasing how the EHEA adopts UN’s aim to facilitate SD. This effectively positions the EHEA as an extension of the UN’s orchestrated policy network for the implementation of its SDGs. The mere insertion of the SD discourse with limited explanations for its operationalisation makes it unsurprising that the EHEA’s policy remains ambiguous and lacks clarity. This is partly a result of gaps in the formulation of the SD agenda on the UN level. Such gaps include, for instance, a lack of a clear definition of SD, vague explanations of the SDG’s targets and indicators, and lack of focus on HE especially on goal 4 which deals with quality education (Heleta and Bagus, 2020; Hummels and Argyrou, 2021). A further development of the SD agenda is also emerging as an essential direction of EHEA’s future work.

The above argument is unfolded below, relying on the theoretical ideas around policy orchestration, the empirical data from six key international policy documents, 19 in-depth interviews with key

Bologna stakeholders, and their thematic analyses. The analysis of EHEA's orchestration and its recognition as a part of the UN's orchestrated network is an innovative way of applying the policy orchestration approach to the analysis of international policy-making, which constitutes this article's prime contribution to knowledge. In addition to its theoretical significance, the article expands the scope of a very limited body of literature about SD in the EHEA by providing a recent analysis of its SD agenda.

## **2. Theoretical approach: policy orchestration**

This article draws on the theoretical ideas around policy orchestration as a key UN governing strategy and applies them to the analysis of the progression of the SD agenda in the EHEA, where education has been emerging as a key policy-making tool. Weiss (2018, p. 1) argues that 'The UN system was born plural and decentralised and was never intended to approximate a formal world government'. Indeed, the UN is an omnipresent world leader in SD, relying on soft governance in facilitating the implementation of the SDGs.

Soft governance is a popular term used to characterise modern international policy-making, distinct from more traditional centralised legislative ways of governing. Soft governance is characterised by voluntary participation in policy initiatives and the absence of punishment for the failure to abide by the commonly agreed commitments (Delfani, 2013). Nevertheless, the ultimate coercive power of soft governance – related, for instance, to countries' peer-pressure – is often 'as powerful as direct control mechanisms' (Hudson, 2011, p. 671).

Various organisations on the international policy-making level govern their projects in their own unique ways, which could all possibly be classed as soft governance. Abbott *et al.* (2016) distinguish policy delegation and policy orchestration as examples of soft governance. However, the authors make this distinction predominantly for analytical purposes. In practice, these two ways of governing overlap. Delegation is based on the principal-target actor relationship, while orchestration is based on a more fluid orchestrator-intermediary-target actor relationship (Abbott *et al.*, 2016). Policy orchestration has been emerging as a potent governance mechanism due to the development and expansion of what Viola (2015, p. 24) calls 'orchestrated networks'. As explained earlier, such networks include one or more focal institutions which orchestrate (i.e. lead through facilitation).

According to Weiss (2018), the UN (orchestrated) network includes three major elements: (1) the First UN: the UN institutional framework of its member states; (2) the Second UN: the secretary-general along the international civil service, not dependent upon the member states of the UN; and (3) the Third UN: NGOs, experts, corporate executives, academics, media representatives, etc. These three elements constitute an interconnected network which also extends its cooperation with other institutions within the members states of the UN, positioning the UN as 'the orchestrator of orchestrators' (Bernstein, 2017, p. 214).

Given that the actors within the UN orchestrated network for implementing the SDGs are essentially volunteers, the orchestrator (UN) can only appeal to its soft power when orchestrating common guidelines for implementation. That is, none of the UN's actors can be prescriptive about what other actors should do. While this results in opportunities for new creative and productive work that promote the SD agenda, it also presents challenges related to the vagueness of the meanings of policy initiatives and avenues for their implementation (Bernstein, 2017). Additionally, when the actors in the UN orchestrated network cannot engage in direct regulation of key policy ideas, they may rely on

other organisations – public or private – which can contribute to the same process and share similar aspirations (Abbott and Bernstein, 2015).

Although the UN are successfully orchestrating a shared design of the SDGs by seeking input from governments, civil societies and individuals who responded to the My World Survey (Gellers, 2016), the SDGs do have pitfalls in other respects. First and foremost, the exact meaning of the shared definition of SD is yet to be developed (Hummels and Argyrou, 2021), as detailed in the next section. Additionally, the explanations of the SDGs targets and indicators are broad, and thus vague. Moreover, related policies and funding provisions for their implementation are not always clear (Assefa *et al.*, 2017; Jacob, 2017), and Indigenous peoples are often side-lined in the SDG policy implementation process (Johnson and Mbah, 2021). There is also a lack of focus on HE in the SDGs, particularly in the education-related Goal 4 ‘Quality Education’, which hinders the progress of developing countries (Mbah *et al.*, 2022).

The EHEA, which is also reliant on soft governance in its influence (Kushnir, 2020), has UNESCO, UN’s agency, as one of its consultative members (EHEA, 2022b). This fact is illustrative of UN’s foot in EHEA’s decision-making. This extension of the soft power or soft governance of UN’s orchestrated network in the EHEA is, arguably, an example of what Bernstein (2017) refers to as the third element of the UN network, or the Third UN, which includes other organisations, networks, and expert groups that are not directly related to the UN. This is particularly important for the further discussion of our findings in this article, as well as for compensating for the lack of focus on HE in the original framing of the SDGs (Heleta and Bagus, 2020). Looking at the role of HE in the EHEA in constructing an SD agenda is crucial, given Annan-Diab and Molinari’s (2017) hypothesis of the EHEA as a growing central role of education in global SD.

### **3. ‘Sustainable development’ as a concept, and a glimpse into EHEA’s pre-2020 work on sustainable development**

The literature review below unpacks the concepts of ‘sustainable development’ and appraises a limited body of prior research on SD work in the EHEA.

#### ***3.1 The paradox of the concept ‘sustainable development’: a panacea to word problems and vagueness around meaning***

SD has undoubtedly gained huge momentum in recent years. The SDGs were adopted in 2015 with the umbrella aim of fostering SD globally. The first steps towards their implementation were accompanied with events that reinforced their importance and urgency. For example, multiple devastating global natural disasters (e.g. wild fires and floods), the panoply of international responses related to zero-carbon targets, and environmental activists’ civil disobedience (e.g. blockading roads to stop oil) (Telleria and Garcia-Arias, 2022). While the gravity SD has recently gained may be novel, its aims are not new. Keiner (2005, p. 1) states that the idea of SD can be traced back to 1713 ‘when Carlowitz edited the first book on forest sciences’, arguing that timber should be used with caution as its importance would become equal to daily food for humankind. The UN has been a key player in promoting SD in our recent history. The UN General Assembly established a Commission in 1983, which started an important investigation into the world’s challenges in the 1980s (SDGs, 2021). The Commission was later renamed as the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) and is also often referred to as the Brundtland Commission (Hummels and Argyrou, 2021). In 1987, this Commission provided an important explanation of SD – that it is not ‘a fixed state of harmony, but rather a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development, and institutional change are made consistent with future

as well as present needs' (WCED, 1987, p. 25). While this explanation of SD was at an 'infant' stage, it was already evident that SD was slowly moving to the forefront of international policy-making. For example, SD was explicitly acknowledged as one of the most pressing areas that needed to be addressed in international policy-making at the UN Earth Summit in 1992 (Chichilnisky, 2012).

The meaning of SD has been 'evolving' (X6 – anonymised for review, p. 5), and the concept has remained contested because of the efforts of the multitude of interest groups attempting to define, contextualise or steer an SD agenda in their preferred direction. Interestingly, the 'proponents of sustainable development differ in their emphases on what is to be sustained, what is to be developed, how to link environment and development, and for how long a time' (Parris and Kates, 2003, p. 559). These authors list twelve defining aspects of SD, including, for instance, the Environmental Sustainability Index, the Wellbeing Index, etc. The plethora of such aspects and shifting ideas in thinking about the environment and international development have contributed to the ambiguity of the meaning of SD (Elliott, 2012).

On top of the changing context in which the ideas around SD have been growing, Hummels and Argyrou (2021, p. 2) see the ambiguity of WCED's vision of SD, cited above, as the culprit of the desecration of what they call 'planetary boundaries' in our recent past. They cite the examples of: climate change, the lack of natural resources and societal inequalities, etc. Hummels and Argyrou (2021) explain that the ambiguity of the term 'SD' is a result of the inherent paradox related to its integral components, such as economic growth, human development and environmental protection. The authors use the analysis of a range of definitions of SD to call for a revised definition, which gives sustainable entrepreneurship a central position in SD. They define SD as the development which 'allows the pursuit of economic growth but requires compliance with the planetary boundaries. A potential way out of the tragedy is offered by sustainable entrepreneurship that promotes economic growth while intends to overcome sustainability related challenges through the creation and distribution of solutions' (Hummels and Argyrou, 2021, p. 1). This revised definition of SD has, arguably, placed environmental protection at the centre of the SD debate about the paradoxes of combining SD's three components (environmental, social, and economic). The new definition of SD clarifies that the other two components could progress only as long as there is 'compliance with the planetary boundaries' (Hummels and Argyrou's, 2021: 1).

Hummels and Argyrou's (2021) discussion illustrates the applicability of the updated definition of SD in practice, in the case of one company. Nevertheless, the orchestration power of the UN network, the EHEA (which is arguably emerging as one of the focal points of the UN network), has the potential to orchestrate this way of seeing and implementing SD globally, including within the EHEA.

### **3.2. Prior research on EHEA's potential to promote SD**

Curaj *et al.* (2020a, p. xxxvii) state that 'as human history demonstrates, there is no sustainable progress, even in times of crisis, without education and research'. Other authors in Curaj *et al.*'s (2020) edited book on the challenges in the EHEA for post-2020 mention SD when discussing the various issues in today's HE (in general) and in the EHEA (in particular). For example, Fredman (2020) advocates for the strong potential HE has in making our society sustainable – although they acknowledge challenges in achieving this due to the pace of HE commercialisation. Similarly, de Wit and Deca (2020) mention carbon-neutral internationalisation as one of the goals for the further development of growing international connection in HE.

There is only a handful of studies that explicitly focus on the analysis of the links between the idea of sustainable development and the EHEA mission and policy. Puente *et al.* (2020, p. 1) focus on quality assurance specifically in assessment in universities in the EHEA and call for the need to include the focus on sustainability 'as a determining factor in the university context due to its great relevance in the training of future professionals'. Despite acknowledging the relevance and need for more focus

on SD in teaching in HE, a recent study by Janssens *et al.* (2022) found little support for what they call real ‘transformative learning’ – that is, learning for SD in quality assurance frameworks in the EHEA countries. The framework of the UK was an exception as it includes a guide on education for SD, and some – although lower – support also exists in the frameworks in Ukraine, Estonia, Holy See, Romania, Sweden and Switzerland.

Some older studies were also preoccupied with establishing what students should learn in universities across the EHEA to support SD in the world and how to integrate teaching about this in the EHEA quality assurance system. For example, Segalàs *et al.* (2009) and Galkute (2014) both imply that the EHEA has played a role in promoting the idea that SD is important and should be taught in HE. Segalàs *et al.* (2009) found that while the classification of competencies related to SD were similar across different universities in the EHEA, exact and shared definitions of these competences remained an underdeveloped area. In her Lithuanian case study, Galkute (2014, p. 114) explains that the national quality assurance in HE, promoted through EHEA policy, started integrating some aspects related to SD. However, this is a sensitive area, ‘reflecting both the relationship between the state and higher education institutions (HEIs) and between their autonomy and responsibility for societal transformation’.

Another publication which focuses explicitly on promoting sustainable development through HE in the EHEA is by Fadeeva and Galkute (2012). Although it is simply an opinion essay, it is an incredibly prophetic piece of thinking. Its authors’ wisely notice the link that should be established between the EHEA’s Bologna Process and the UN’s sustainable development agenda at the time – the United Nations (UN) Decade (2005–2014) of Education for Sustainable Development. The authors describe the principles of SD education ‘as a value-orientation, a holistic approach, reflexivity and achieving transformation provide a learning philosophy and a strategy relevant to emerging qualities of the postmodern society’ (Fadeeva and Galkute, 2012, p. 91). Indeed, the link between EHEA’s Bologna agenda and UN SD agenda has become stronger in EHEA’s international policy-making, as the findings section below explicates.

It is also worth noting that in addition to the above limited body of literature directly relevant to the focus of the empirical study that this article reports about, there is a plethora of studies which appeal to the idea of SD in HE and only mention the EHEA and its Bologna Process as a contextual feature in passing, without reviewing the detail of how SD fits with EHEA’s Bologna agenda (e.g., English and Mayo, 2019; Albareda-Tiana *et al.*, 2020). Clearly, there is only a handful of empirical studies that are explicitly related to SD in the EHEA. However, these studies are focused mainly on what universities across the EHEA should teach about SD to promote SD and do not explore EHEA SD policy development. This is important particularly, given that practical work to make campuses and HE curricula more sustainable has been taking place. This is evidenced by the inclusion of many universities that belong to the EHEA countries into UI GreenMetric (2023) ranking in World Universities Rankings.

#### **4. Methodology:**

The gaps in our knowledge outlined above prompted us to address the following overarching question: *How has a sustainable development agenda been orchestrated in the EHEA international policy since 2020?* By the EHEA international policy we mean the policy which is produced on the international level of the EHEA which is then taken up by the signatory states to implement. The focus on 2020 and beyond is justified by the fact that the new 2030 deadline for the development of the EHEA was set in 2020.

The search for the answers to the above relied on two data sources. The first comprises six key international policy documents (see Appendix). Because the new 2030 deadline for the development of the EHEA was set in 2020 and data collection took place in 2022, documents issued between 2020-2022 were selected to capture the developments of the SD agenda in the EHEA international policy discourse. Initially, seven key documents issued between 2020 and 2022 were identified searching the EHEA website but only six of them returned results following the search for an SD-related rhetoric, using the search-terms: sustainable, sustainability, sustainably, SDG, carbon-neutral, carbon-free, green, carbon, and zero. The choice of the first four search terms (i.e., sustainable, sustainability, sustainably, SDG) was dictated by their broad meaning with regard to SD. The emphasis on the environmental component of SD in the remaining five search words (i.e., carbon-neutral, carbon-free, green, carbon, and zero) is due to Hummels and Argyrou's (2021: 1) recent revised definition of SD. As explained earlier in this article, Hummels and Argyrou's (2021: 1) recent search to clarify SD's vague definition which is conventionally understood in relation to its three components (environmental, social, and economic) has resulted in proposing the term 'sustainable entrepreneurship'. It has, arguably, placed environmental protection at the centre of the SD debate, as the other two components could progress only as long as there is 'compliance with the planetary boundaries' (Hummels and Argyrou's, 2021: 1). The choice of the search terms reflected the need to re-establish the centrality of the environmental component of SD in the pursuit of its other aspects.

The second data source comprised in-depth semi-structured interviews with key Bologna stakeholders in Italy (n=7, coded in the analysis section as A1-A7), Germany (n=8, coded as B1-B8) and France (n=4, coded as C1-C4) (see Data Access Statement) who reflect on the international aspect of the EHEA, related to SD. These interviews were conducted in 2022 in the framework of a larger project focused on the political motivations of the memberships of EHEA's founding countries (France, Germany, Italy and the UK) in the EHEA presently. The focus on France, Germany and Italy was motivated by the fact that unlike in the case of the UK (Kushnir and Brooks, 2022), national stakeholders in these three countries continue driving a lot of the international developments in the EHEA, albeit with a lot more decision-sharing responsibilities, given the territorial scope of the EHEA. Given that the EHEA is an international forum managed by its representatives from the signatory states (e.g., in the form of the Bologna Follow-up Group), interviews with key stakeholders from three influential countries in the EHEA, which have been driving its development since its inception, were deemed as having potential to reveal how a sustainable development agenda has been orchestrated in the international policy of the EHEA as a whole.

A thematic analysis of the two data sets was conducted, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six key phases for qualitative analysis: familiarisation, coding, 'searching' for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finally, writing up the analysis. The first two phases – familiarisation and coding – were applied separately to the policy documents and interview transcripts. Similar data segments were grouped to identify and record patterns related to the orchestration of an SD agenda (e.g., 35 codes such as the 'role of HE in SD' or 'sustainability in HE equals social cohesion' were identified in the policy documents). The multiplicity of the codes from the policy documents and the interview transcripts formed the basis of the next two phases – searching for and reviewing the themes – which was also done separately for both data sets. These two phases yielded indicative patterns of themes, albeit there were many of them for both policy documents and interviews, and overlaps were becoming evident. The analysis of the two data sets merged in the remaining two phases. During the phase focused on defining and naming the themes, we relied on theoretical ideas around policy orchestration as a key mechanism of the work of the UN's policy network. We restructured and merged the themes from both data sets and established lateral and hierarchical relationships amongst them. As a result, three key themes with important sub-elements were

identified: (1) EHEA's capacity to mitigate pitfalls in UN's SD agenda; (2) the weaknesses of UN's orchestration of SD are translated into weaknesses in EHEA's formulation of its SD agenda; and (3) further development of an SD agenda as an essential direction of EHEA's work. These themes are a product of thematic patterns that emerged from the analysis of the interviews and policy documents, also informed by the theoretical ideas around policy orchestration in the UN's policy network. The last phase of weaving the analytic narrative with the illustrative data extracts formed the structure and foundation of the next section.

## **5. Findings and discussion: the orchestration of a sustainable development agenda in the recent EHEA international policy**

The three key themes around the orchestration of an SD agenda in the EHEA international policy since 2020 are detailed below in the respective sub-sections. Relevant key findings are discussed in light of the available theoretical and empirical literature on UN governance and the conceptualisation of SD, as well as the limited prior research about EHEA's potential to promote SD.

### ***5.1. EHEA's capacity to mitigate pitfalls in the UN's SD agenda***

This section will explore the theme *EHEA's capacity to mitigate pitfalls in the UN's SD agenda*, which arose from the analysis of the international policy documents and the in-depth semi-structured interviews with Bologna stakeholders. The main pitfalls of the UN's SD agenda are evident from the review of the relevant theoretical and empirical literature presented earlier. To remind, one such key weakness lies in the vague conceptualisation of SD as a term. Hummels and Argyrou (2021) explain that this ambiguity results, in part, from the paradox inherent in the combination of SD's components: economic, social and environmental. This vagueness also stems, according to the authors, from the ambiguity of the original WCED's vision of SD which has also recently led to the violation of the 'planetary boundaries' (Hummels and Argyrou, 2021: 2). The other key pitfall of the UN's SD agenda was evident in the theoretical literature on UN governance through 'soft' mechanisms (Bernstein, 2017). This literature also explains the weaknesses in UN's orchestration of funding provision for the implementation of the SDGs, inclusion of marginalised voices in the relevant policy-making processes and specifying the role of HE in the SDGs which hinders the progress of developing countries (Jacob, 2017). The focus below will be on the two key sub-elements of the theme *EHEA's capacity to mitigate pitfalls in the UN's SD agenda*. These sub-elements are related to the idea that the EHEA is a productive policy network for extending the UN's orchestration of SD; and that HE has been emerging as a tool for EHEA's orchestration of an SD agenda.

#### *The EHEA as a productive policy network for extending the UN's orchestration of SD*

We theorise that the EHEA is a productive policy network of extending the UN's orchestration of SD because it appears to be a structured framework for policy-making through meetings and discussions. It also offers a unique network for bringing the HE community together, establishes connections between other countries that aid in the implementation of the SDGs, and puts in place networks to implement the SD agenda.

Our analysis found that while the EHEA is coordinated through soft governance, it has more structured arrangements for policy-making through meetings and discussion. For example, during the interviews, a key Bologna stakeholder said:

'The Bologna Process is a structured framework... They have meetings at least two to three times a year. They have the working groups. It's something quite committing... I don't think there is



something comparable at the international, especially at the global level [of the UN] with that' (A2 – a representative from a key Bologna stakeholder in Italy).

The 'structured framework' described here could go some way in mitigating the pitfalls in the UN's SD agenda. As previously noted, the UN rely on soft governance to facilitate the implementation of the SDGs (Bernstein, 2017). The committed and regular meetings described above could, therefore, enhance the UN's currently vague avenues for SD implementation. Through these meetings, the EHEA can offer a unique network for bringing the HE community together, unlike the UN and its agencies, for example, UNESCO. Indeed, a representative from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research in Germany (B1) notes:

'...what I also find very important is the dialogue that we have [in the EHEA]. We meet every year twice, sometimes three times, at least in the pre-Corona times... that could also be in UNESCO, but very often there, you don't meet with your colleagues in the higher education department, but with your colleagues in the foreign policy. They are different people, and not so much the people who really want to change the [HE] systems'.

While there is not currently any literature on orchestration in the EHEA, the above extract clearly shows that the EHEA has started to emerge as an extension of the UN's orchestrated network for the implementation of the SDGs. Here, the EHEA's orchestration is a part of what Viola (2015, p. 24) refers to as the UN's 'orchestrated network'. The UN include numerous focal institutions to orchestrate the SDGs. Including EHEA's orchestration as part of the UN's orchestrated network is a novel way of applying the policy orchestration approach.

Another way in which the EHEA has the capacity to mitigate the pitfalls in the UN's SD agenda is through the EHEA's internationalisation agenda. This agenda encourages cooperation between the EHEA's signatory countries and countries beyond the EHEA:

'I think the realisation might be that science doesn't end and education doesn't end at the European door, basically. You have to engage the global world as well' (B3, a representative of a student organisation in Germany)

Such 'paths for global collaboration' between the EHEA and 'other countries and macroregions' are meant to be achieved 'through the exchange of knowledge and cooperation, with the aim of addressing overarching issues more effectively, such as achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals by 2030' (EHEA, 2021a, p. 15). The EHEA facilitate this through their Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue, which is tasked with the organisation of the 2024 Global Policy Forum and Statement, as well as other appropriate events (EHEA, 2021a, p. 15), to engage with the global world.

As shown in their policy documents, the EHEA develop their network to implement the SD agenda in various ways. Firstly, it appears that one of the EHEA's key strategies is to appeal to research. For example, the EHEA's signatories call for the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) 'to work closely with the European Research Area and Innovation Committee (ERAC) to enhance synergies and alignment between education and research and innovation policies' (EHEA 2020a, p. 7). This is, in part, a call for the BFUG and ERAC to collaboratively contribute to achieving the SDGs.

A second of the EHEA's key strategies is the organisation of events that could serve as consultation platforms. These seminars, workshops and hearings involve the HE community, and aid the implementation of the SDGs (EHEA, 2020a). Thirdly, the EHEA draw on shared decision- and policy-making to support the implementation of the SDGs. Because their implementation cannot be separated from creating 'decent working conditions and a manageable teaching workload as well as

attractive tenure opportunities’, this approach involves HE teaching staff in particular, who must themselves be supported by the EHEA if they are to support the SDGs (EHEA, 2020b, p. 4). Fourthly, the EHEA formed an ‘Ad Hoc Task Force’ to implement the SD agenda and increase the synergy between the EHEA, the HE Dimension of the European Education Area, and the European Research Area (EHEA, 2021a, p. 21). During May – December 2021, the force was tasked with elaborating a proposal for advancing strengthened cooperation on the specific topics identified by the Ministers in the Rome Communique, including ‘research-based learning, guaranteeing academic and scientific freedom, and contributing to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals’ (EHEA, 2021a, p. 22). These four related key strategies emphasise how, by establishing its own networks to implement the SDGs, the EHEA positions itself as a productive policy platform for extending the UN’s orchestration of SD. The various groups mentioned here also complement the European Council’s (2000) aim of making EU ‘the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of *sustainable* economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion’ (European Council, 2000, added emphasis). As noted, the EHEA eventually expanded, developing the SD agenda and making the SDGs relevant to non-EU countries. In doing so, the EHEA have been able to engage the global world. Moreover, the above strategies emphasise the EHEA’s construction of the SD agenda as a crucial and growing central role of education in global SD. That said, the meaning of ‘sustainable development’ in the EHEA’s SD discourse is particularly weak. Indeed, the ambiguity surrounding the definition and implementation of SD will be discussed further later in this section.

#### *HE as a tool for EHEA’s orchestration of a sustainable development agenda*

As well as being a productive policy network for helping the UN to orchestrate the implementation of the SDGs, we argue that HE is a unique tool for the EHEA’s orchestration of its developing SD agenda. HE is explicitly constructed in the international EHEA policy documents as vital for achieving the SDGs. For example, one policy document states that one of its objectives is to gain a greater awareness of the various roles HE has in achieving the SDGs (EHEA, 2021b). Further, HEIs are shown to be mediators in delivering SD as a means to deal with interlocking crises, such as climate change and rapidly exhausting resources:

‘We commit to continue and step up our investment in education, to ensure that higher education institutions have appropriate funding to develop solutions for the current crisis, post crisis recovery, and generally, the transition into green, sustainable and resilient economies and societies’ (EHEA, 2020a, p. 3).

As noted by Curaj *et al.* (2020a, p. xxxvii), there is no sustainable progress in times of crises without education and research. This is also emphasised by the EHEA (2020a, p. 4), who state that HEIs have the potential to ‘drive major change’ by improving the knowledge, skills and competencies of students and society to contribute to ‘sustainability, environmental protection and other crucial objectives’. Here, as HE is shown to be a crucial tool for orchestrating the SD agenda, the EHEA emphasise its capacity to mitigate pitfalls in the UN’s SD agenda. During ‘the current crisis’ and ‘post crisis recovery’ (EHEA, 2020a, p. 3), HEIs mediate the delivery of SD as a way to deal with crises – the EHEA ensure that HEIs have the appropriate funding to ‘develop solutions’ and ‘transition into green, sustainable and resilient economies and societies’ (EHEA, 2020a, p. 3).

#### ***5.2. The weaknesses of the UN’s orchestration of SD are translated into weaknesses in EHEA’s formulation of its SD agenda***

Despite EHEA's capacity to help mitigate the pitfalls in the UN's SD agenda, it would be naïve to assume that the EHEA could be the panacea to all the weaknesses of the UN's SD agenda. In fact, some of the weaknesses related particularly to how the SD agenda is formulated on the UN level are translated into weaknesses in EHEA's formulation of its SD agenda – another theme that arose from the analysis of the policy documents and interviews. This section will illustrate two major aspects of this problem: how the EHEA tend to tag along the UN's SD policy discourse in its own policy discourse; and the overall ambiguity of the meaning of SD in EHEA policy.

#### *The EHEA tagging along the UN's SD policy discourse*

Analysis of the interviews with stakeholders revealed that it appears that the UN's SDGs are tagged along with the EHEA's SD policy discourse. That is, EHEA's SD policy discourse often tends to simply mention the SDGs, seemingly for the sake of adding to the documents, without actually trying to implement the UN's SD agenda. For example, a representative from the Erasmus+ National Agency in Germany (B6) said that they sometimes 'force' themselves to put the SDGs in the documents by writing 'what we are doing is also in line with SDG 7, 8, 9, 5, or something like that'. This mere inclusion of the SDGs increases the observed vagueness of the SDG targets, their related policies, and their funding provisions (Hummels and Argyrou, 2021). Excluding detail about what the SD rhetoric in the EHEA policy documents actually means, therefore, perpetuates the ambiguity around what the idea of 'SD' actually means. This is further illustrated in the following section.

#### *The ambiguity of the meaning of SD in EHEA policy*

As previously noted, the meaning of SD in EHEA policy is vague. Indeed, 'sustainable' has developed into a buzzword that is seemingly described and employed variously in the international policy documents. For instance, when it is used in the contexts of developing a 'sustainable Europe' (EHEA, 2020a, p. 4), or with reference to the 'sustainable funding' that public authorities should provide to HE institutions (EHEA, 2020b, p. 6), the meaning of term 'sustainable' is never clarified.

Moreover, while sustainability is positioned as a 'crucial objective' that HE institutions have the potential to contribute to, it is apparently distinct from 'environmental protection': 'Higher education institutions have the potential to drive major change – improving the knowledge, skills and competences of students and society to contribute to sustainability, environmental protection and other crucial objectives' (EHEA, 2020a, p. 4). Again, what this 'sustainability' constitutes is not explicated.

Elsewhere, sustainability seems to be understood as related to 'social cohesion'. For example, EHEA (2022a: 8) states the commitment 'building a more closely connected and sustainable higher education community, which fosters inclusion, communication, cooperation, and solidarity, essential for the relevance and excellence of the future EHEA'.

The terms 'sustainable' and 'cohesive' are often mentioned alongside each other. While 'cohesion' is also not explicitly defined, its definition can only be gathered from the above quote. The link between sustainability and cohesion is not new in recent EHEA documentation. Of course, social dimension has been one of the priorities in the EHEA, albeit how concrete its meaning is has also been problematised (Holford, 2014) and social dimension is not the focus of the current three Bologna Implementation Coordination Groups (EHEA, 2022a). The link between sustainability and cohesion must be a trend preserved from the 2001 Prague Ministerial Communiqué (EHEA, 2001) which adopted at the time the goal from the Lisbon Strategy (European Council, 2000) for the EU knowledge-based economy to become 'capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social

cohesion’ However, as mentioned earlier, EHEA’s inclusion of non-EU countries later resulted in extending the relevance of this goal to the whole of the EHEA.

### ***5.3. Further development of an SD agenda as an essential direction of the EHEA’s work***

This final section explores how SD was framed as an essential direction of the EHEA’s work – the third prominent theme that emerged from the analysis of the policy documents and interviews. In particular, the analysis made it clear that SD is emerging as a key future direction of the EHEA’s work, although the lack of exact avenues for implementing this SD agenda is evident. We end this section by making recommendations for the next EHEA ministerial meetings to consider consolidating the EHEA’s SD agenda.

#### *SD as a key future direction of the EHEA’s work*

Analysis of the policy documents revealed that the SDGs are often seen as ‘overarching issues’ that the EHEA should address (EHEA, 2021a, p. 15). This was further emphasised by a representative of a student organisation in France (C4) that emphasised the importance of focusing on SD:

‘I think that the European project is made to answer the great issues that our generations will meet... green transition, sustainable development are the main issues we are taking into account. The Europeanisation of higher education has no meaning if it is not made to work on sustainable development. Climate change, global warming, I think, are top priorities when implementing the Bologna Process. It has no meaning to exist otherwise, if it is not to answer the main issues our generation will meet’

That said, as previously discussed, what constitutes sustainable development is variously employed but never explicitly defined in policy documents, which is a gap yet to be addressed to facilitate any relevant positive change in practice that results from EHEA’s policy. Given this gap, our next sub-theme below does not come as a surprise. However, before moving on to its discussion, it is important to emphasise that the SD as a key future direction of the EHEA’s work seems to have emerged as a replacement of the goal for making the EHEA the most attractive knowledge-based economy in the world. This goal dominated the list of EHEA’s priorities particularly at its earlier stages of development (Kushnir, 2020), before the international discourse of, for instance UN’s SD agenda, started entering the rhetoric of European identity building and European attractiveness. While those earlier explicit priorities for fortifying the European idea may be seen as promoting Euro-centredness in the construction of the EHEA policy and the positionality of the EHEA in the world, there is no evidence to suggest that this has actually changed. There is also no evidence to suggest that the voices of different communities of the world are part of this debate, including Indigenous communities.

#### *Exact avenues for implementing an SD agenda are missing*

Our analysis shows that there are no concrete presentations of avenues for SD to be implemented as an emerging key future direction in the EHEA. This sub-theme is rather unique as it was generated based on the silences in the policy documents, not what was said. As such, we offer some recommendations to help strengthen the EHEA’s SD agenda at the next EHEA ministerial conference (with the next one being scheduled for 2024) as well as at any EHEA events that take place in-between the ministerial conferences, and particularly for the work of the Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue. These recommendations have been devised based on the findings we have presented in this article.

Firstly, we recommend that the EHEA develop an explicit definition of SD. This will eradicate the ambiguity surrounding the meaning of the terms 'SD' and, in particular, 'sustainable' which is often used to describe other nouns. Such a definition will allow the UN's SDGs to become more clearly related to the SD agenda in the EHEA and help the EHEA better orchestrate their implementation across its policy network. Hummels and Argyrou's (2021) recent attempt to relate SD to sustainable entrepreneurship, cited above, could be a starting point in working out EHEA's definition of SD. Secondly, the aim of societal cohesiveness, which is interlinked with SD in recent EHEA documentation, could be achieved by recognising (1) the dominance of the Euro-centredness in the construction of the EHEA policy and (2) the importance of including global Indigenous knowledges in the EHEA SD policy discourse which have been historically excluded from the Euro-centric contexts (Johnson and Mbah, 2021). Indigenous knowledge could be included by mentioning and incorporating Indigenous voices in the creation of the EHEA's SD agenda (for example, the Sami Indigenous community in Finland). Lastly, we recommend including academic research as a source of information for developing policy documents in a more explicit manner. This is because the policy document analysis did not directly cite relevant research. This may be a primary reason for missing out on, for instance, a more concrete definition of SD which has been debated in the literature. Including academic research as a source of information for developing EHEA policy documents could be done by citing academic sources and by creating another stakeholder in the EHEA that would represent the academics who research relevant topics.

## **6. Conclusion**

This article has argued that SD discourse has been tagged along in recent EHEA policy – that is, SD is often simply mentioned without any plans for its concrete implementation. Our findings indicate that through their adoption of the UN's SD facilitation aims, the EHEA is effectively positioned as an extension of the UN's orchestrated policy network for the implementation of the SDGs. Moreover, the seemingly purposeless insertions of SD discourse in EHEA policy contribute to the observed vagueness surrounding SD, as the policy documents offer no exact definitions or plans for the operationalisation of the SDGs within the EHEA. This ambiguity results, in part, from gaps in the formation of the SD agenda of the UN level itself. Nevertheless, we also argue that the weaknesses of the initial orchestration of SD through the UN's SDG project are somewhat mitigated – or, attempted to be mitigated – by the EHEA through their appeal to HE as a powerful tool in the orchestration process and EHEA policy actors' sense of responsibility for orchestrating the SD agenda through their fairly structured network of policy actors. Lastly, we make three recommendations that could be implemented to better consolidate the EHEA's SD agenda. These suggest that the EHEA should (1) develop an explicit definition of SD to eliminate ambiguity; (2) recognise the dominance of Euro-centredness in EHEA policy that celebrates Western knowledge and excludes Indigenous knowledge systems, and in doing so, incorporate Indigenous knowledge in SD policy discourse; and (3) develop a direct avenue for academic research to be included to inform the development of EHEA policy documents related to SD. Making these changes will allow SD discourse to become better understood and more meaningfully implemented in the EHEA. Further research into how an SD agenda continues developing is essential to inspire and inform further relevant evidence-based policy-making.

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## Ethical Approval

The overarching research design of the project that served as a foundation for this article was informed by BERA (2018) Research Ethics Guidelines, and data collection followed a favourable ethics decision (Ref: KUSHNIR 2021/414) from the Schools of Business, Law and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (BLSS REC) at Nottingham Trent University.

## Data Availability Statement:

The dataset with interview transcripts, generated and analysed during the current study, is available in the Research Data Archive of Nottingham Trent University, at <https://doi.org/10.17631/RD-2022-0001-DDOC>

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#### **Appendix: EHEA international policy documents that were analysed**

1. EHEA, 2020a. Rome Ministerial Communique. Available at [http://www.ehea.info/Upload/Rome\\_Ministerial\\_Communique.pdf](http://www.ehea.info/Upload/Rome_Ministerial_Communique.pdf) (accessed 2 November 2022)
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5. EHEA, 2021b. Terms of Reference of the Working Group on Global Policy Dialogue. Available at [http://www.ehea.info/Upload/CG\\_GPD\\_PT\\_AD\\_TORs%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.ehea.info/Upload/CG_GPD_PT_AD_TORs%20(2).pdf) (accessed 2 November 2022)
6. EHEA, 2022d. Draft workplan for discussion at the Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue meeting on 13 January 2022. Available at <http://www.ehea.info/Upload/First%20Draft%20Workplan%20CGGPD%5B43977%5D.pdf> (accessed 2 November 2022)