Article

Reframing the European Higher Education Agenda through an "EU-as-Empire" Perspective: Toward Decolonial and Pluriversal Futures

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Abstract

This article examines the European Union's (EU) higher education initiatives, particularly Erasmus+ and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), through an "EU-as-empire" perspective, revealing how policies framed as cooperation and modernization often reproduce normative imperialism and soft colonialism. While promoting compatibility, transferability, mobility, and exchange, these frameworks embed Eurocentric epistemologies, hierarchical governance, and conditionalities that privilege EU states, marginalizing peripheral and non-EU partners. Participation typically requires alignment with pre-set European norms, sustaining a civilizing logic under the guise of partnership. Such asymmetries consolidate the EU's position as a soft hegemon in the global knowledge economy. Adopting a decolonial perspective, the article calls for pluriversal approaches grounded in reciprocal norm-setting, equitable resource distribution, and recognition of diverse knowledge systems. In doing so, it challenges prevailing narratives of EU benevolence in education and outlines pathways toward more just, pluralistic forms of transnational collaboration.

The EU's Educational Hegemony

The European Union (EU) has long positioned itself as a paradigmatic soft power in the global order, crafting an international image grounded in human rights, democratic governance, social solidarity, and a commitment to shared economic prosperity. These ideals are consolidated under what EU institutions frequently describe as the "European social model" (European Union, 2018), a normative framework that fuses economic integration with welfare-oriented policies, political liberalism, and an ethos of social cohesion. While such values are publicly presented as universal and inclusive, they are inextricably tied to European histories of modernity, Enlightenment rationality, and colonial expansion, histories that have privileged particular ways of knowing and organizing society (Mignolo, 2011; Sousa Santos, 2014).

Within this broader architecture of normative power, integrated educational initiatives have emerged as a critical arm of EU influence. These initiatives are not only policy instruments, but also vehicles for the diffusion of cultural values and epistemological norms. The Erasmus+ Programme, now in its fourth decade, exemplifies this dual function, as its remit extends beyond student and staff mobility to encompass capacity-building partnerships, policy reform projects, and cross-sector collaborations. Through Erasmus+, participating institutions and individuals gain access to networks, resources, and symbolic capital that often facilitate longer-term alignment with EU educational and cultural agendas. Similarly, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), initiated and constructed through the Bologna Process since 1999, has restructured higher education across Europe and beyond by harmonizing degree cycles, credit systems, and quality assurance frameworks (Curaj et al., 2025; Gauttam et al., 2024). These changes have extended beyond the EU member states, as they have been actively promoted in non-EU contexts, from the Western Balkans to Central Asia, under the banner of educational modernization and internationalization (Salajan & jules, 2025; Zgaga, 2006).

Nonetheless, embedded within these structures are hierarchical governance arrangements that privilege certain actors over others. Decision-making authority, project coordination, and financial control often reside with institutions in EU member states, while peripheral or external partners are positioned as recipients rather than co-creators of policy and practice. This reflects what Keukeleire and Delreux (2022) describe as the EU's "remaining 'echoes of empire' and memories of European

suppression and aggression" (p. 51) in its external relations, where power radiates from the center, reinforcing asymmetries in capacity, voice, and influence. Participation in such initiatives frequently depends on adherence to policy frameworks, conventions, and charters that enshrine a particular vision of European identity and belonging. The European Cultural Convention, for instance, celebrates a shared cultural heritage that is articulated in Eurocentric terms, privileging narratives rooted in Western modernity. Compliance with these normative frameworks can be understood through the lens of soft colonialism, a form of asymmetric influence whereby a dominant political entity exerts control not through direct rule but via the shaping of political, cultural, and educational norms (Hamamoto, 2006; Wachman, 2009).

Unlike classical colonialism, which relied on territorial conquest and overt political domination, soft colonialism operates through more subtle mechanisms, such as the conditional allocation of funding, the imposition of standardized governance models, and the symbolic prestige associated with alignment to "Europe." In the context of EU educational policy, this translates into the reproduction of epistemic hierarchies, where knowledge systems grounded in European histories and ontologies are positioned as universal benchmarks against which all others are measured (Takayama et al., 2017). Erasmus+, the EHEA, and other EU educational instruments operate within global political economies that reward mobility, credentialing, and cultural capital in ways that privilege the already privileged. For institutions in the EU, participation consolidates access to resources and policy influence, while for partners in the EU's neighborhood or Global South, it may yield opportunities but often on terms that require conformity to external norms and priorities benefitting the EU (Salajan et al., 2024). This dynamic mirrors what Stein and da Silva (2020) identify as the "coloniality of internationalization" (p. 553), wherein initiatives framed as cooperative development perpetuate systemic inequities in the distribution of knowledge, agency and voice.

The tiered partnership structures embedded in EU programs exemplify this phenomenon. Consortia often operate on a formal hierarchy: lead institutions based in the EU exercise strategic and administrative control, while partners from the EU's immediate neighborhood may hold associate or regional coordinator roles. In turn, more distant partners, particularly from the Global South, are positioned as implementers or beneficiaries. The distribution of funding reflects this hierarchy, with core partners receiving more substantial and flexible allocations, while peripheral partners may be limited to tightly prescribed project activities (Gstöhl & Phinnemore, 2019; Lambrechts et al., 2024). This structural design reinforces dependency relationships, constraining the scope for genuine co-creation and the

incorporation of non-European epistemologies. From a decolonial perspective, the signing of conventions, adherence to charters, and alignment with EU-defined quality standards function as "normative gatekeeping" (Ramos, 2024) which serves not only to guarantee consistency across projects but also to ensure that participation reinforces the EU's own geopolitical and cultural agendas. For non-EU partners, especially those in the Global South, this can amount to a coercive proposition, as they seek access to resources, networks, and prestige in exchange for the adoption, public performance or acquiescence, of European norms. For instance, in her analysis of Europe's normative power influence in Latin America via its EHEA initiatives, Figueroa (2010) notes that the "'European Bologna language' implies a Eurocentric discourse that recognises few other contexts or any worldview outside those of Europe itself" (p. 254), and that in the particular cases of Chile and Mexico "it has imposed deep scientific and technological changes in the development of skills first to create knowledge, then to manage, spread and use them" (p. 255). Similarly, invoking European normative influence and colonial legacies, Alemu (2019) observes that in the African context, in their drive to enact higher education reforms "some African countries and higher education institutions were either persuaded or forced to follow the example of the Bologna Process in harmonizing national higher education systems" (p. 122). EHEA concepts, such as harmonization, quality assurance and ECTS were implemented with questionable results, even though "conferences, seminars and other forums were organized under the presence of European Bologna Process experts to hear the principles from the horse's mouth" (p. 122).

In engaging in a thought experiment, this study adopts an "EU-as-empire" lens (Behr & Stivachtis, 2016; Salajan, 2026), to examine how these practices can be viewed as part of a broader strategy of normative expansion, in which the EU consolidates its position in the global knowledge economy by exporting its governance model(s) and educational script(s). This strategy operates not only to extend influence but also to reinforce Europe's self-conception as a center of epistemic authority, a position historically constructed through the colonial appropriation, devaluation and marginalization of other ways of knowing (Mignolo, 2011; Smith, 2021). The imperial logic underpinning these processes is further illuminated when placed in the context of pluriversal thinking, reflecting approaches that reject Western epistemologies' universalist claims, and advocating instead for a multiplicity of coexisting worlds and knowledge systems (Escobar, 2018). From this perspective, the EU's educational initiatives, albeit often framed in the language of mutual benefit, modernization, and international cooperation, risk entrenching a monocultural epistemic order that marginalizes alternative ontologies. By privileging certain metrics of success (e.g., employability, competitiveness, mobility) and certain forms of

knowledge production (e.g., peer-reviewed journal articles in English), these programs implicitly devalue other forms of educational practice and knowledge transmission that are rooted in local contexts and histories.

In employing the "EU-as-empire" framework this article problematizes not only the overt structures of governance and funding but also the underlying epistemic assumptions that shape what counts as legitimate knowledge, valuable partnership, and successful collaboration. The analysis asks whether the EU's integrated educational programs can ever be vehicles for genuine pluriversal engagement or whether their very design is predicated on sustaining European centrality in the global educational landscape. By critically examining the tension between the rhetoric of equitable partnership and the realities of hierarchical governance, this work contributes to ongoing debates in Comparative and International Education (CIE) about decolonizing the field. It aligns with calls from scholars such as Takayama, Sriprakash, and Connell (2017), Sousa Santos (2014), and Assié-Lumumba (2017) to decenter Eurocentric frameworks, embrace epistemic justice, and create space for co-creation grounded in relational accountability. In so doing, it challenges CIE researchers and policymakers to recognize the ways in which ostensibly benign initiatives can perpetuate the very hierarchies they purport to dismantle.

The EU's Normative Imperialism

Over the past two decades, a growing body of scholarship has disrupted the EU's carefully cultivated image of a benign, altruistic, and exceptional international actor. While the EU often frames itself as a moral power that uniquely fuses economic integration with human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, critical scholarship has questioned whether these ideals function not only as aspirational values but also as mechanisms of influence that reinforce asymmetrical relationships between the EU and those within its orbit (Bengtsson & Elgström, 2011; Holden, 2025). This "EU-as-empire" debate does not suggest that the Union engages in territorial conquest, resource plundering and extraction, or overtly coercive military interventions in the style of nineteenth-century imperial powers. Rather, it explores how the EU exerts a form of *normative imperialism*, that is, the projection of its rules, standards, and epistemic frameworks onto others, often under the banner of cooperation, modernization, or partnership (Behr & Stivachtis, 2016; Pänke, 2015; Zielonka, 2016). This is a mode of governance in which formal sovereignty is preserved, but the parameters of political and economic life are shaped by

the dominant power, in this case, the EU, through a mixture of incentives, conditionalities, and institutional embedding.

The meaning of the term "empire" in contemporary English is often relayed through stories of conquest and subjugation, as in its common usage it evokes images of standing armies, overseas colonies, and violently imposed hierarchies. However, as Zielonka (2016) notes, this view is too narrow to capture the variety of imperial forms that have existed historically and may still exist today. Empires, he argues, can operate through fluctuating territorial arrangements, complex networks of influence, and multi-layered hierarchies that blur the lines between voluntary alignment and structural dependence. By returning to the Latin *imperium*, Behr (2016) offers a broader reading of empire as not only "command" and "authority" but also "protection," "responsibility," and "patronage" (p. 33). This framing allows for the possibility of a *benevolent empire* whose expansion and integration are justified in moral terms. In this interpretation, the EU's foreign and neighborhood policies, its enlargement strategy, and its emphasis on the "European social model" could be construed as the outward projection of a particular vision of liberal modernity, universalist in aspiration, but inevitably rooted in European historical trajectories and epistemologies. Colás (2007) captures this sentiment in describing the EU as a "different kind of empire" (p. 178) that claims legitimacy through its normative agenda rather than through the threat of force. Yet, the absence of overt coercion does not negate the asymmetry of power relations embedded in the EU's engagements, as its soft power celebrated in mainstream accounts can also serve as the velvet glove for an iron hand of structural dominance.

The enlargement process after the collapse of communism in 1989 offers a particularly revealing case in this regard. For Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, joining the EU promised economic revival, democratic consolidation, and geopolitical security. For the pre-existing Western European EU member states, enlargement promised new markets, extended influence, and the consolidation of a "Europe whole and free" (Dębski & Hamilton, 2019) under EU leadership. However, this integration was never simply a matter of mutual exchange, as post-communist states entered accession negotiations from positions of profound economic and institutional weakness (Pasimeni, 2024), with collapsed industries, fragile democratic institutions, and deep social dislocation. The EU's response through massive capital infusions, infrastructural investments, and policy support was tied to strict reform requirements. CEE countries were pressed to privatize state industries, liberalize trade, reform public administration, and align domestic laws with the EU legislation (Bohle, 2016; Tang, 2017). These requirements were framed as necessary modernization steps, but they also reflected a Western European model of governance and

economy, with little space for alternative development paths rooted in local contexts or epistemologies. In decolonial terms, this resembles what Mignolo (2011) and Sousa Santos (2014) call the "coloniality of power" or the imposition of a singular modernity as the only viable route to progress, coupled with the marginalization or erasure of alternative knowledge systems. While not territorially colonial, this dynamic mirrors historical "civilizing missions" (Stivachtis, 2018, p. 91) in which the metropole defined the terms of development and integration.

The EU's use of *political conditionality*, defined by Schimmelfennig and Scholtz (2010) as the requirement that candidate states meet specific democratic, legal, and economic standards as conditions for accession is central to this process. Nicolaidis and Fisher Onar (2016) go further, framing this as "governing at a distance" (p. 123) whereby the EU reshapes domestic policies and institutions without direct administrative control, translating into an imperial technique par excellence. The body of EU legislation known as the *acquis communautaire* (Böhmelt & Freyburg, 2012) and consisting of 35 chapters of law and regulation covering everything from trade to education, which candidates must adopt in full before joining embodies this dynamic. Nonetheless, candidate countries have no formal role in shaping these rules during the negotiation process, with the case of Turkey, recognized as a candidate state in 1995, illustrating this asymmetry. Although the EU has placed Turkey's accession process on hold over otherwise legitimate political and human rights concerns, this action reveals the EU's discretionary power to withhold integration even after decades of alignment efforts (Schramm, 2025).

The asymmetries do not end with accession. Bulgaria and Romania's 2007 entry was accompanied by the unprecedented Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM), designed to address perceived deficiencies in judicial independence and anti-corruption measures (Wahl, 2023). This mechanism, applied only to these two states, lasted for sixteen years, reinforcing their image as incomplete or conditional members and also delayed their accession to the Schengen Area. Despite meeting technical requirements as early as 2011 (Pingen, 2024), both countries faced repeated vetoes from other member states, often justified with vague references to corruption or migration concerns. Such treatment aligns with Zielonka's (2008) observation that the EU acts imperially by maintaining a differentiated hierarchy of membership benefits, offering access selectively and conditionally.

These practices resonate with Pänke's (2015) notion of "normative imperialism," in which the EU uses its political, economic, and symbolic capital to impose its preferred norms globally. Unlike military

conquest, this operates through soft colonialism, namely the shaping of partners' policies, economies, and cultural orientations in ways that align with EU priorities, without formally undermining their sovereignty (Hamamoto, 2006; Wachman, 2009). Behr (2007) explicitly likens the EU's enlargement approach to the colonial-era "standard of civilization" (p. 254) where dominant powers sought to "raise" peripheral societies to their own political and economic levels. In the EU's case, CEE countries were positioned as needing to "catch up" to Western norms, echoing the civilizer–civilizee logic that Stivachtis (2018) identifies in post-accession monitoring mechanisms. Within Europe, the East and Southeast have long been cast as "less European," "less modern," or "closer to the Orient" (Neumann, 1999; Todorova, 2009). These constructions legitimize economic arrangements that integrate the periphery into the EU economy as sources of cheap labor, investment opportunities, and resource extraction, while reserving high-value sectors and decision-making authority for the core. In education, similar hierarchies emerge in the Bologna Process, which standardizes degree structures, credit systems, and quality assurance according to Western European models. While marketed as fostering mobility and mutual recognition, this harmonization often marginalizes local academic traditions and non-Western epistemologies (Hartmann, 2008; Kwiek, 2004; Schriewer, 2009).

From a decolonial and pluriversal perspective (Assié-Lumumba, 2017; Escobar, 2018), the EU's challenge is to move beyond this civilizing logic. Genuine partnership would require co-creating integration frameworks with candidate and peripheral states, rather than imposing pre-defined norms and standards (Salajan, 2026). This would mean recognizing and valuing alternative governance models, educational traditions, and development paths as equally legitimate, an approach that would shift the EU from a hierarchical empire toward a network of equals. Such a transformation would also require rethinking the acquis as a living, revisable framework co-authored by all members, dismantling post-accession mechanisms that entrench second-class membership, and adopting funding and policy tools that redistribute benefits more equitably across the Union. In short, a pluriversal Europe would abandon the civilizing mission in favor of relational accountability and epistemic justice.

The "EU-as-empire" debate forces a critical reassessment of the Union's self-image as a purely benevolent actor. It reveals how the EU's soft power, political conditionality, and integration frameworks can operate as tools of normative imperialism, reproducing hierarchies both within Europe and in its external relations. While materially different from the empires of the past, the EU's governance of its peripheries often echoes their civilizing logics, substituting legal harmonization and funding conditionalities for military conquest. For CIE, this analysis underscores the importance of

interrogating not only the explicit policies of integration but also the epistemic assumptions that underwrite them. A truly decolonial approach to EU partnerships would demand a radical reimagining of integration as co-creation, not assimilation, a shift that could begin to reconcile the EU's normative ambitions with its stated commitments to equality, diversity, and mutual respect.

Educational Integration as Normative Empire-Building

The European Union (EU) has positioned education, and higher education in particular, not only as a sectoral policy area, but also as a strategic platform for the projection of its values, norms, and identity both within its borders and far beyond them. Along with financial, trade, and diplomatic instruments, the EU deploys a sophisticated array of educational policies and programs that function as levers of normative power. Among these, the EHEA and the Erasmus+ Programme stand out as flagship initiatives. These frameworks bind together EU and non-EU countries in varying degrees of cooperation, in what Telle, Chiocchetti, and Laffan (2025) refer to as *external differentiated integration*. While framed as voluntary and mutually beneficial, participation is invariably structured with the EU, and specifically the European Commission, at the center, managing, coordinating, and financing much of the process. Notably, education was not part of the EU's original treaty-based competences. Over time, however, the European institutions have expanded their jurisdiction through what Garben (2019) calls *competence creep*, that is, the incremental acquisition of policy influence in domains not explicitly conferred in the founding treaties. This gradual consolidation of educational governance has allowed the EU to extend influence across its borders, shaping the policies of non-member states through the institutional architecture of the EHEA and other related initiatives.

The European Higher Education Area

Seen through an "EU-as-empire" lens, the integration of European higher education reveals the Union's broader imperial logic of extending influence through regulatory convergence, normative power, and the institutionalization of shared governance structures. The pivotal moment came with the Sorbonne Declaration of 1998, signed by France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom, which set the stage for the structural harmonization of higher education (Neave & Maassen, 2007). This was quickly followed by the Bologna Declaration of 1999, involving ministers from 29 countries, including EU members, candidate states, and EFTA participants, formally launching the Bologna Process. This regulatory framework pursued three interlinked objectives: a) ensuring the comparability of degrees; b) instituting

a standardized two-cycle structure, and c) implementing the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) to facilitate mobility (Zgaga, 2019).

Importantly, the Bologna Process embedded a "European dimension" in education, an idea drawn from EU policy discourse and designed to move beyond technical alignment toward a shared vision of European integration. Over two decades, the EHEA has expanded to 48 countries, with the European Commission as the principal coordinating actor. As Zgaga (2006) observed, this growth has been accompanied by an "external dimension," actively exporting the European model of higher education governance to other world regions, whether through direct policy transfer or emulation (Klemenčič, 2019). The EHEA's accession requirements reinforce its normative character, since membership in this governing structure is contingent on adherence to the European Cultural Convention (ECC) of 1954, a Council of Europe treaty enshrining commitments to a shared European cultural heritage (Salajan & jules, 2025). Thus, the ECC is framed as "a policy of common action designed to safeguard and encourage the development of European culture" (Council of Europe, 1954, p. 1). This prerequisite, while framed as an affirmation of shared values, also serves as a gatekeeping mechanism, ensuring ideological alignment before policy integration.

EHEA stocktaking reports routinely celebrate the project as a space "based on trust, cooperation and respect for the diversity of cultures" (EHEA, 2010, para. 4), describing it as a "unique cooperation" (EHEA, 2020, p. 3). Yet, as decolonial scholars note (Smith, 2021; Sousa Santos, 2014), such discourses of diversity often mask a process of epistemic homogenization. Regulatory convergence requires adopting the Bologna framework, which is rooted in Western European academic traditions. This soft colonialism, characterized by rule without formal rule, ensures that unity is engineered through institutional alignment and normative power, rather than arising organically from pluralistic co-creation. From this perspective, the EHEA functions as a geopolitical formation akin to an "educational empire" (Youngblood Henderson, 2009, p. 10). Its expansion consolidates the EU's ideological and institutional foundations while binding diverse educational systems into a common governance logic. While participation brings benefits, it also demands compliance with a model whose origins, priorities, and underlying assumptions remain anchored in the epistemic center of Western Europe (Zahavi & Friedman, 2019).

Erasmus+

If the EHEA represents the structural dimension of the EU's educational empire, Erasmus+ is its most visible and celebrated instrument. Launched in 1987 as the "EuRopean Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students," Erasmus+ has evolved into a global program for education, training, youth, and sport with more than 15 million participants, including students, faculty, and staff having engaged in mobility experiences under its aegis. The 2021-2027 program cycle commands a budget of €26.2 billion, nearly double its 2014-2020 allocation (European Commission, 2024a). Official priorities include "social inclusion, the green and digital transitions, and promoting young people's participation in democratic life" (European Commission, 2024b, n.p.). However, hiding under these aspirations lies a coherent strategic function, that is, shaping a transnational intellectual and cultural space aligned with the EU's socio-political vision (Becker & Salajan, 2024).

Given its geographical differentiation, Erasmus+ can be visualized through Wallerstein's (2000) world-systems perspective as composed of the following unmistakable hierarchical division:

- *Core:* The 27 EU member states enjoy full benefits, legislative input, and agenda-setting power.
- *Semi-periphery:* Third countries associated with the Erasmus+ Programme, including EFTA members, candidate states, and Eastern/Southern Neighbourhood partners, have full participation rights but no role in decision-making.
- *Periphery:* Third countries not associated to the Erasmus+ Programme are grouped into 14 regions and may participate under restrictive criteria, sometimes as recipients of official development assistance (European Commission, n.d.; European Union, 2021).

This stratification embeds the EU's priorities into the global knowledge economy, as mobility flows, funding allocations, and decision-making authority all reflect the structural asymmetries of this imperial arrangement. The imperial undertones occasionally surface at inopportune times in diplomatic discourse as well. For instance, the EU ambassador to Kenya, while promoting Erasmus+, encouraged recipients to "identify the linkages of interest to you" while assuring that "we will… do what is best suited for the EU" (Waruru, 2024, n.p.). This remark underscores that even in cooperative contexts, program design ultimately serves EU interests.

Erasmus+ also intersects with the colonial residues of certain member states' histories. This is illustrated for example in França, Alves, and Padilla's (2018) study of Portugal's international student mobility policies, which reveal how Lusophone ties, rooted in colonial history, are leveraged within the Erasmus+ framework to attract students from Angola, Cabo Verde, and Brazil. This strategy, they argue, is grounded in "neo-colonial logics" (França et al., 2018, p. 335) that combine claims of shared heritage and language with selective migration and education policies. Such practices highlight the EU's

complicity in perpetuating colonial patterns through educational policy. As Madge, Raghuram, and Noxolo (2009) observe, "education is also a site where legacies of colonialism and the contemporary processes of globalisation intersect" (p. 37). This intersection extends beyond former colonies to all contexts where the EU uses education to embed its epistemic and normative frameworks, often under the guise of development or partnership.

Another dimension of Erasmus+ as an imperial instrument is its role in identity formation. Gjolleshi (2023) found that Albanian students developed a stronger European identity alongside their national identity after participating in Erasmus+. Similar results emerged in Salajan and Chiper's (2012) work on Romanian students, and in Oborune's (2015) survey of over 12,000 participants from 37 countries. While such outcomes may be celebrated as fostering cohesion, they also align with what Noureddine (2016) calls "self-aggrandizing rhetoric" that amounts to "a form of cultural imperialism" (p. 117), since embedding a common European identity within mobility participants, reinforces EU's normative power abroad. As Carmel and Paul (2022) note, these narratives of unity can obscure the Union's entanglement with "projects of colonial domination" (p. 101).

From a decolonial perspective, this process risks displacing or subordinating other identities and epistemologies. The framing of Erasmus+ as universally beneficial masks the reality that mobility programs often flow predominantly toward EU states (Breznik & Skrbinjek, 2020), enriching their institutions while peripheral participants adapt to their systems and norms. The hierarchies within Erasmus+ and the EHEA mirror broader global inequalities, with core actors accumulating resources, prestige, and talent, while peripheral actors gain access, but on terms that reproduce dependency. Moreover, the criteria for participation and funding often privilege those with pre-existing institutional capacity, conditions more readily met by wealthier, Western-based institutions. These structural inequalities perpetuate the reproduction of asymmetries between the Global North and the Global South through internationalization, where well-intentioned initiatives perpetuate the very inequities they purport to address (Klein & Wikan, 2019; Massao & Bergersen, 2024).

If the EU's educational empire is to shed its imperial characteristics, it should embrace a pluriversal approach (Assié-Lumumba, 2017; Escobar, 2018). This would entail rethinking integration as co-creation rather than assimilation, valuing diverse epistemologies, governance models, and pedagogical traditions equally, and designing programs that redistribute decision-making power. Such a transformation would require revising accession and participation requirements to allow for reciprocal norm-setting, rather

than unilateral adoption of EU standards, redistributing Erasmus+ funding to strengthen under-resourced institutions in peripheral and semi-peripheral contexts, embedding mechanisms for genuine policy co-design with non-EU partners in the EHEA, and recognizing and addressing the colonial legacies that shape mobility patterns and policy frameworks. These steps would align the EU's educational outreach with its professed commitments to inclusion, equity, and diversity, moving from soft colonialism toward genuine intercultural partnership.

The EHEA and Erasmus+ illustrate how education functions as imperial infrastructure within the EU's broader project of normative power. Framed as spaces of voluntary cooperation, they bind participants into asymmetrical relationships structured by regulatory convergence, funding conditionalities, and identity formation. While materially different from the empires of the past, these initiatives reproduce a civilizing logic, with the core defining the norms, while the periphery acquiesces and conforms to them. This dynamic is amplified by some EU member states' colonial legacies and the structural inequalities of the global knowledge economy. For CIE, examining the EU's educational empire-building opens critical space to interrogate the epistemic underpinnings of integration projects. By adopting decolonial, pluriversal approaches, scholars and policymakers can begin to imagine educational cooperation that truly values multiple worlds transforming education from a tool of empire into a platform for equitable, co-created futures.

Reimagining EU Educational Policy Through a Decolonial Lens

A decolonial perspective offers a critical pathway for rethinking the EU's role in global education, particularly when examined through the "EU-as-empire" framework. While the EU's flagship education actions, most notably Erasmus+ and the EHEA, are presented as beacons of democracy, cooperation, and intercultural exchange, their operational structures often reproduce asymmetries reminiscent of colonial relationships. Beneath their progressive rhetoric lies a subtler form of *soft colonialism* (Hamamoto, 2006), in which Eurocentric norms, governance models, and epistemologies are projected onto partner countries under the banner of integration and mutual benefit. This dynamic resonates with Quijano's (2007) *coloniality of power*, which emphasizes how colonial hierarchies persist within contemporary global governance. In the educational sphere, coloniality is manifest in the way European institutional models are upheld as universal standards, positioning them as benchmarks for quality and modernity. The EHEA's harmonization of degree structures, credit systems, and quality assurance

processes, though presented as technical reforms, functions as a normative project that privileges Western European academic traditions while marginalizing alternative pedagogical approaches rooted in other cultural, historical, or regional contexts.

Decolonial analysis compels us to problematize the implicit civilizing mission embedded in EU educational policy. Participation in Erasmus+ or the EHEA often demands alignment with frameworks devised within the EU's political and epistemic core (Dakowska, 2019; Scott, 2012). These frameworks are not the result of equal negotiation; instead, they are presented as established "best practices" to be adopted wholesale. As Mignolo (2007) argues, such processes reinforce a center–periphery relationship in which the EU assumes the role of arbiter, and non-EU partners are positioned as recipients of European norms rather than co-creators of shared standards. This coerced harmonization recalls historical patterns of imperial governance in which the metropole set the terms of "modernity" and peripheral territories were expected to conform. In the educational realm, it manifests in conditionalities attached to funding, restrictions on institutional leadership roles, and curricular reforms that displace locally grounded pedagogies. While framed as voluntary participation, these arrangements often present partner countries with a stark choice: accept EU-defined norms or be excluded from valuable funding and mobility networks.

However, decoloniality is not only a critique, but also a constructive project aimed at creating more equitable relationships. Applying it to EU education policy means moving beyond the export of norms toward fostering what Sousa Santos (2014) calls an *ecology of knowledges*. This would involve valuing multiple epistemologies, whether post-socialist, Indigenous or Global South, and creating institutional mechanisms that ensure they inform policy design and implementation. A truly decolonial EU approach would entail the:

- *Co-creation of frameworks:* engaging partners in substantive, not symbolic, roles in designing educational policies and program criteria.
- *Respect for epistemic diversity:* recognizing non-European pedagogical traditions as equally valid, rather than measuring them against European standards.
- *Redistribution of resources:* designing funding systems that prioritize capacity-building in under-resourced institutions, reducing structural dependency on the EU core.
- *Reflexive governance:* scknowledging and addressing colonial residues in member states' own histories and policies, which can permeate EU-wide programs (França et al., 2018).

This vision reframes educational cooperation as a horizontal process of knowledge exchange, rather than a vertical process of standard-setting, concomitantly opening the possibility for mutual learning, where the EU adapts its own policies based on innovations and perspectives emerging from its partners.

Shifting from harmonization as a policy goal to relationality as a guiding principle is central to decolonial transformation. Relationality acknowledges the value of difference, treating diversity not as an obstacle to integration but as a foundation for richer collaboration (Escobar, 2018). In practical terms, this might mean allowing for differentiated implementation of Bologna principles, supporting regional governance arrangements within the EHEA and its relationship with non-EHEA partners, or prioritizing reciprocal mobility that benefits both core and peripheral institutions equally. Such a reorientation would also require the EU to relinquish some control over the pace and scope of integration. Rather than assuming the superiority of its educational models, it would need to embrace the possibility of being reshaped by the perspectives, needs, and aspirations of those at its margins.

The stakes for such a shift are high, as persisting with the current approach risks reproducing the very inequalities the EU claims to disassemble. If educational cooperation continues to operate through frameworks that implicitly position European norms as the pinnacle of modernity, the result will be a more sophisticated form of dependency rather than genuine empowerment. By contrast, a decolonial reimagining offers the possibility of transforming the EU from a regulatory hegemon into a facilitator of educational plurality, a role that aligns more closely with its professed commitments to democracy, inclusivity, and human rights. This would not mean abandoning integration, but radically redefining it to center reciprocity, equity, and epistemic justice. In this vision, EU educational policy becomes a means to nurture a *polycentric* higher education space, where many knowledge systems coexist, influence each other, and evolve together without being subsumed into a single dominant framework. This is the essence of a decolonial future for EU education: not less cooperation, but cooperation grounded in mutual transformation.

Reframing EU Educational Expansion

This article's analysis of the EU's integrated educational programs through an "EU-as-empire" lens, particularly the EHEA and Erasmus+, sought to contribute to the ongoing critical turn in CIE (jules & Salajan, 2024). By cross-examining these initiatives as mechanisms of empire-building, the discussion challenges prevailing narratives that depict transnational education policy as inherently neutral, collaborative, or developmental. Instead, EU-led educational frameworks are situated within a broader logic of normative imperialism and soft colonialism, revealing the extent to which education operates as an instrument of governance, influence, and strategic power projection. This reframing is especially salient in an era where supranational organizations and regional blocs increasingly shape education

systems across national, cultural, and epistemic boundaries (Robertson, 2018). Rather than simply fostering harmonization for the sake of mobility and exchange, the EU's education policies embed deeper geopolitical and economic imperatives, reinforcing a hierarchical global order in which European epistemic traditions and policy paradigms predominate (Normand, 2016).

First, positioning EU initiatives such as the EHEA and Erasmus+ as tools of geopolitical strategy rather than neutral cooperation broadens the analytical scope of CIE. It underscores how education policy operates as a vehicle for soft power, cultural diplomacy, and regional integration, while consolidating the EU's normative and ideological influence (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022; Nye, 2004). This perspective invites CIE scholarship to move beyond functionalist interpretations of policy transfer and to critically interrogate whose interests are ultimately advanced. Second, by interpreting EU educational expansion as a form of soft colonialism, this analysis challenges Eurocentric assumptions ingrained in global education discourse. It aligns with decolonial interventions in CIE that call for scrutiny of how Western educational models are exported, adapted, or resisted across diverse socio-political contexts (Jules & Salajan, 2025; Takayama et al., 2017). This perspective reinforces the need for CIE research to engage more deeply with postcolonial, Indigenous, and non-Western epistemologies as legitimate sources of policy and practice.

Third, the EU's harmonization agenda, often framed as a necessary modernization process, demands a critical examination of its unintended consequences. While standardization may facilitate mobility, it also risks cultural homogenization, eroding local educational autonomy and perpetuating epistemic inequalities (Marginson, 2018; Normand, 2016). This critique encourages CIE scholars to explore alternative governance models that preserve cultural and regional diversity, questioning the tacit uniform approach embedded in much of the EU's educational architecture. Fourth, the chapter's focus on governance, policy diffusion, and the mechanics of soft colonialism points towards new methodological approaches for CIE research. Critical discourse analysis can uncover how EU policy rhetoric legitimizes hierarchical integration. Network analysis offers a means to visualize and interrogate the power asymmetries in transnational education governance. Ethnographic and case study methodologies can capture the lived experiences of actors navigating or reinterpreting EU norms within their local contexts (Shore & Taitz, 2012), with more recent scholarship providing rich accounts of such experiences related to Erasmus mobilities (see Ivasciuc et al., 2025; Kastelic et al., 2024; Kavasakalis & Gkiza, 2022).

Finally, by exposing the strategic interests underpinning EU education policy, this analysis expands the CIE research agenda on equity and inclusion. It prompts inquiry into who benefits, who is marginalized, and how patterns of inclusion and exclusion are reproduced in transnational reforms, particularly in postcolonial and developing contexts (Tikly, 2020). This critical perspective challenges scholars and policymakers to rethink the premises of "global" education reform, ensuring that cooperation does not mask structural inequality.

In sum, situating the EU's educational instruments within an empire-building logic not only complicates the dominant narratives of benevolence in global education governance but also enriches CIE's analytical toolkit. It opens the door for a more reflexive, politically attuned scholarship that is attentive to the entanglement of education with power, history, and global inequality.

Final reflection

This article has critically examined the EU's education governance as a set of soft colonialism mechanisms that reproduce asymmetrical power relations between the EU and countries participating in its educational initiatives. While flagship frameworks such as the EHEA and Erasmus+ are frequently celebrated for enhancing mobility, fostering cooperation, and advancing modernization, they simultaneously embed Eurocentric epistemologies and governance logics into a range of diverse educational contexts. Such policy transfers often overlook, or inadequately engage with, the cultural, social, and historical specificities of partner regions, raising important concerns about the erosion of local educational autonomy, the homogenization of higher education systems, and the long-term implications of aligning national priorities with EU strategic interests (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022; Robertson, 2018).

Ultimately, if the EU seeks to associate its educational diplomacy with the values of inclusion, equity, and mutual respect that it claims to champion, it must reckon with the colonial legacies embedded in its policies and practices. This means moving beyond tokenistic inclusion of non-European partners toward genuine co-governance, equitable distribution of resources, and recognition of diverse epistemologies as equally valid. In the absence of such shifts, EU educational outreach will remain trapped in the paradox of soft power as soft colonialism, an enterprise that extends influence under the guise of partnership, while subtly reproducing the global hierarchies it claims to transcend.

This analysis also foregrounded the colonial undertones inherent in these processes of policy diffusion, arguing that the EU's approach reflects historical patterns of cultural and intellectual imperialism (Panthaki, 2016). By conditioning participation in initiatives such as the EHEA on compliance with European norms, the EU consolidates a hierarchical global knowledge order in which its epistemic frameworks are privileged over others (Takayama, et al., 2017). This dynamic parallels broader debates in CIE about the persistence of postcolonial power asymmetries in the governance of global education (Marginson, 2022; Menashy, 2025; Sharma & Sayed, 2024; Wolhuter et al., 2025).

In conclusion, this article contributes to the critical turn in CIE by urging scholars to move beyond descriptive narratives of policy diffusion and instead question the geopolitical, economic, and epistemic structures that underpin EU-led educational integration. A decolonized approach to supranational educational governance, one that foregrounds plurality, reciprocity, and epistemic justice, is essential if the global education landscape is to become more equitable, inclusive, and responsive to the diversity of worldviews and knowledge systems.

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