An initiative of the European Commission



Proposal for a Multi-Stakeholder Coordination Group on European Higher Education Interoperability

Developed as part of the European Higher Education Interoperability Framework under the umbrella of the European Digital Education Hub (EDEH)

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The European Digital Education Hub (EDEH) is an online community for practitioners from all sectors of education and training aiming to contribute to improving digital education in Europe. To achieve this goal, EDEH is not only a place for exchange and discussions but also offers a variety of different events and activities. These activities included a dedicated workgroup and a series of squads on higher education interoperability. This document is part of the results of these specific EDEH activities.

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1 Introduction

This paper proposes a transparent, inclusive and sustainable way to coordinate work on the European Higher Education Interoperability Framework (HEIF) after February 2025. It is to effectively develop, implement, and maintain the HEIF. The coordination group's ultimate goal (impact) is a harmonised and interoperable European higher education ecosystem that advances mobility, collaboration, efficiency, and innovation, meeting all stakeholder's needs.

Scope

The coordination group focuses on the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the HEIF, developed to improve interoperability among higher education institutions (HEIs). HEIF covers the entire learner lifecycle, which includes all topics addressed by the use cases defined in the framework. This includes topics such as:

- Course catalogues
- Joint student enrolment in alliances and joint study programmes
- User identity
- The portability of transcripts and credentials
- Engaging with suppliers and procurement
- Institutional identity and accreditation

The HEIF explored these topics with a particular view to the virtual campuses of European University alliances as testbeds. The HEIF's scope and this proposal, however, covers the entire higher education (HE) sector.

Context

The HEIF promotes interoperability across the higher education sector, aligning with EU legislation, including the Interoperable Europe Act. It covers all layers of interoperability as outlined in the European Interoperability Framework (EIF).

The coordination group will need to fit in with various existing initiatives, managed by different organisations. Some are specific to HE and others that are more general. Aligning with those ensures consistency, coherence, and avoids duplication. It is crucial, thus, to ensure the HEIF builds on foundational EU initiatives. These include the European Student Card Initiative (ESCI), the European Learning Model (ELM), and the European Digital Credentials for Learning (EDC).

The proposed group might also coordinate a sector-wide approach to implementing EU legislation that affects higher education. This includes the Single Digital Gateway Regulation and the European Digital Identity Wallet.

2 Principles

The proposal is built on the key principles of the HEIF, as outlined in the Manifesto:

- Privacy and security
- Stakeholder engagement
- Open standards
- Technological integration
- Multilingualism and cultural diversity
- Lifelong learning

The governance model and the proposed structure are underpinned by the following additional principles:

Transparency and clarity

Transparency is achieved by having clear terms of reference, open communication channels, and clear accountability. This transparency leads to trust in the governance model, making all parties involved feel secure in their interactions.

Agile and pragmatic approach

The coordination group should use flexible and pragmatic methods to quickly adapt to changing circumstances and needs. Openness to compromise is also essential, so stakeholders need to be flexible and considerate to different perspectives. This will result in better and more sustainable solutions that all parties can accept.

Subsidiarity

Subsidiarity is a key EU principle, ensuring decisions are made at the most appropriate level. A Europe-wide coordination structure must respect national and local competences and regulations. It should focus on finding and fixing issues where standardisation across Europe is crucial for cross-border interoperability.

Sustainability

One key principle is that the governance model should ensure ongoing coordination, not just temporary solutions. Although projects or time-limited initiatives can make significant progress, stakeholders clearly expect a sustainable, inclusive and effective structure.

3 Goals and intended outcomes

This proposal aims to increase cooperation between European HEIs and to improve the mobility of learners and staff across the EHEA by:

1. Strengthening the technological and semantic infrastructure by supporting the implementation of the HEIF use cases.
2. Promoting the adoption of common standards across institutions and providers.
3. Reducing inefficiencies and fragmentation in digital infrastructure.
4. Creating predictability to help institutions and governments plan long-term when designing and investing in systems.

4 Tasks and activities

The proposed group would primarily coordinate and communicate. Its aim is to align the work of different actors on the standards and ecosystems they maintain. It would not develop standards or set up new infrastructure itself.

The coordination group should have a clear mandate for the following tasks:

Coordinate stakeholders in HE interoperability

Lead and coordinate Europe-wide efforts to boost collaboration between stakeholders. Focus on education organisations, infrastructure providers, EdTech associations, standardisation organisations, European institutions, and national governments.

The governance body should:

- Coordinate key projects and initiatives, ensuring seamless collaboration.
- Identify areas that need harmonisation and those that do not.

Engage the community

Provide a venue for the higher education community to work together, ensuring that their collective needs are effectively represented in the pursuit of interoperability. The governance body should:

- Maintain open lines of communication between all stakeholders, keeping each other informed about plans, changes, and updates to their standards.
- Engage with national governments, research & education networks (NRENs) and other relevant organisations. Promote aligning national initiatives with Europe-wide standards and infrastructure for data exchange.
- Collaborate with European Universities alliances, pioneers of cross-national data exchange.
- Encourage peer support activities.
- Identify flagships or champions to exemplify best practices in standardisation.
- Share expertise with all stakeholders in the education community.

Align policies and standards

Promote the alignment of policies and standards. Then recommend ways to set Europe-wide minimum requirements that ensure smooth integration and interoperability. This involves actions at all four layers described by the European Interoperability Framework (EIF):

- **Legal layer:** Help to develop and revise legal frameworks and policies that facilitate interoperability.
- **Organisational layer:** Develop and promote tools, like reference architectures or guidebooks covering use cases to aid interoperability.
- **Semantic layer:** Establish priority standards for the sector and promote their adoption. Develop additional common vocabularies and semantic standards where necessary.
- **Technical layer:** Recommend reference standards for key use cases and encourage their adoption. This can be done through conformance testing, quality seals, or including standard requirements in tenders.

This work should be grounded in continuously mapping the interoperability landscape in Europe and beyond, to ensure a strong basis for policy and decision-making.

Maintain the European Higher Education Interoperability Framework

Assume responsibility for maintaining and further developing the framework. This involves:

- Reviewing, refining, and potentially expanding its scope, starting from the initial set of use cases.
- Deciding on further developments, iterations, or adaptations of the framework to meet the sector's needs,
- Monitoring the framework's usage and its delivery of intended benefits.
- Identifying priority issues and proposing how the framework could address them.

5 Structure and roles

The proposed coordination group aims to enable effective, efficient collaboration among various stakeholders, including national organisations, higher education institutions, IT vendors, and other bodies.

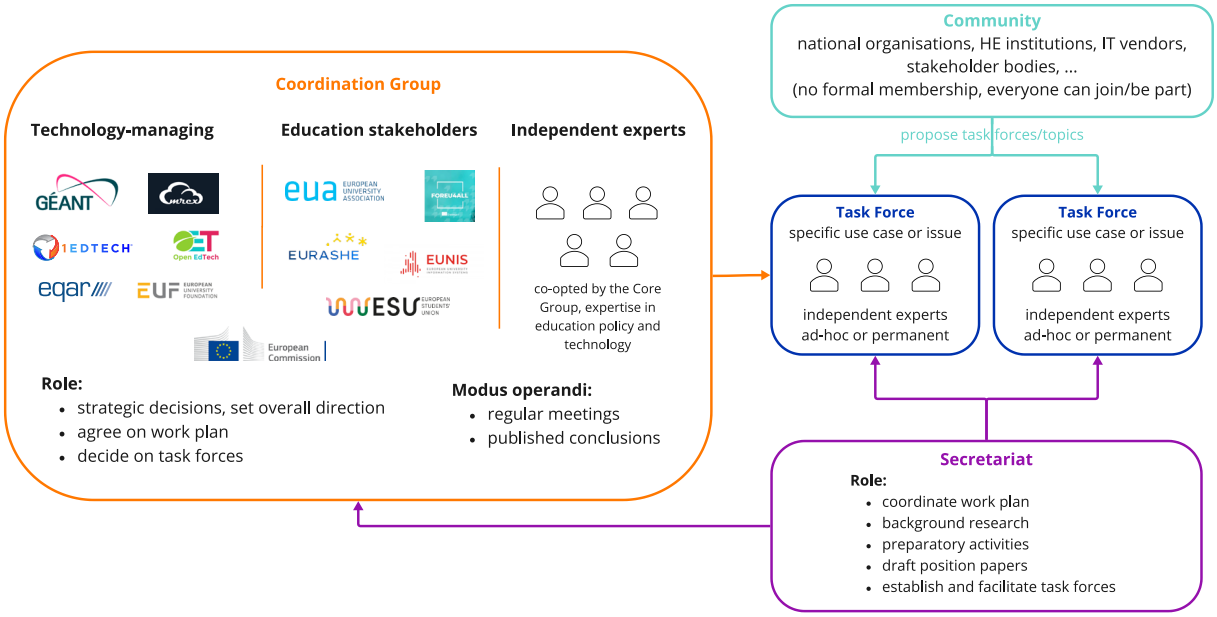


Figure 1 - Proposed Coordination Structure
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The proposed structure is designed to strike a balance between official representation and informal dialogue, making it a "network of networks".

Coordination group

The coordination group brings together multiple stakeholders whose activities and systems it aims to coordinate. It has the following responsibilities:

- Agreeing on the overall direction and the work plan.
- Making strategic recommendations.
- Deciding on task forces.
- Endorsing task force outputs and key recommendations.
- Providing an annual report on its work.

The coordination group should comprise fixed members, including the following:

- **Technology organisations:** European, international, or multi-national organisations that manage key sector-specific standards or infrastructure. This includes public bodies, networks, federations and EdTech industry associations.
- **Education stakeholder organisations:** European representative organisations of key stakeholders, such as students, higher education institutions or European University alliances.
- **European Commission:** Directorate Generals (DGs) and units that are responsible for sector-specific standards or infrastructure, including the European Student Card Initiative (ESCI), the European Learning Model (ELM) and European Digital Credentials for Learning (EDC).
- **Independent experts:** Around 5-10 individuals co-opted by the coordination group for their combined expertise in technology and education policy.

The coordination group would have regular meetings, for example twice a year. Its meeting conclusions will be published to ensure full transparency.

The coordination group should establish criteria and rules for further organisations to join. Initially, the organisations that actively contributed to the present proposal should be invited to "bootstrap" the group. This includes:

- 1EdTech
- EMREX
- EQAR
- ESU
- EUA
- EUF
- EUNIS
- EURASHE
- FOREU4All
- GÉANT

Task forces

The coordination group would establish smaller task forces to work on specific use cases or issues. These task forces could be temporary or permanent, depending on the needs and the scope of the issue.

Task forces would consist of independent experts appointed by the coordination group. They would work under Chatham House rule and report back to the coordination group and the public.

Secretariat

To function well, the coordination group and the task forces will need secretarial support. In particular, the secretariat should:

- Convene the coordination group meetings.
- Coordinate the work plan.
- Carry out background research or preparatory activities.
- Draft position papers.
- Facilitate the task forces' work.

Wider community

The structure's work addresses the wider higher education community, which benefits from its efforts. This community comprises higher education institutions, alliances, policy makers, stakeholder organisations at different levels, EdTech vendors, standardisation bodies, and others.

The coordination group represents key European stakeholders and organisations. But other organisations and experts will have relevant expertise or feedback to contribute. Therefore, it is crucial to enable input from the entire community to ensure the structure's success.

The wider community should remain open and accessible, without any membership requirement, allowing everyone to participate. It could take the form of a group, like the Higher Education Interoperability Workgroup established within EDEH.

Occasional community meetings, held on-line or in person, can be organised to engage the wider community.

6 Implementation options

The secretariat for the proposed structure would need to be provided by the organisation or entity convening it. There are several options to consider, each with its own advantages and disadvantages.

Option 1: The European Commission (EC) could convene the coordination group and provide its secretariat in the form of an expert group or similar. This would offer a direct link to European policy, including the possibility of involving national authorities. The EC has the necessary financial resources and could incentivise accelerated interoperability through European Universities alliances.

However, expert groups tend to be relatively rigid in terms of membership and mandate. Given the fast-evolving nature of technological interoperability, especially in higher education, a more flexible structure that can easily include private sector and out-of-Europe actors might be more suitable.

Option 2: The EC could mandate another organisation, for example a consortium under a service contract, to convene the coordination group and to do the secretarial work. This would let the coordinating group assess its own membership and respond to technological changes faster.

However, if organised through a project or service contract, sustainability would need to be ensured. Moreover, any selected secretariat would need to have close connections to the sector to ensure it can build on the trust of all stakeholders.

Option 3: One or several existing organisations could take on secretarial work and convene the coordination group. The advantages and disadvantages would heavily depend on the organisations and their characteristics. As each organisation has a statutory commitment to its membership, it would be challenging for any single organisation to claim to be the ideal neutral broker.

7 Roadmap

The present proposal was co-created as part of the EDEH Higher Education Interoperability work plan. It was drafted based on discussions with the key stakeholder organisations in the form of a “governance squad” between November 2024 and January 2025.

The proposal aims to maintain momentum and take forward the work started within EDEH beyond the current work programme, which ends in February 2025. This proposal should start closer collaboration. It recommends that the European Commission incentivises setting up a coordination structure as described. It also urges all stakeholders to actively participate in that effort.

Ideally, a first gathering of the coordination group should take place in spring 2025 to discuss its initial work programme of activities. Task forces on the most pressing issues should start work as soon as possible.

Appendix: Key topics and priorities

The coordination group is designed to address a range of critical topics in higher education interoperability. Creating common semantic standards has been identified as a key priority to ensure clarity and consistency in data exchange between different institutions and systems.

In the context of the EDEH interoperability project, the following priority topics have been identified through continuous engagement with stakeholders. The coordination group may consider these issues when drawing up the initial work programme:

1. **User identity:** Establishing a robust framework for managing user identities across institutions.
2. **Portability of transcripts and credentials:** Enabling the transfer of credits and credentials to enhance mobility and recognition.
3. **Supplier engagement:** Developing effective models for engaging suppliers and providing strategic procurement guidance.
4. **Accreditation:** Ensuring interoperability builds on European accreditation and quality assurance frameworks.
5. **Enrolment:** Facilitating joint student enrolment in alliances and joint study programmes.
6. **Course Catalogues:** Developing joint course catalogues to facilitate course selection and academic planning across alliances and beyond.

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