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Differentiation in Europe is an ongoing phenomenon, with multiple intersecting factors and policy areas that create an increasingly complex vision of the European project. As such, the DiCE project seeks to facilitate a continuous reflection on differentiation and the further development of relevant approaches and theories, also allowing for the evaluation of policies and the provision of further policy advice. We present here a blueprint on possible designs for an ongoing think tank on differentiation to not only help bring the debate on differentiation closer to the general public but also ensure that our project's findings remain openly accessible for future generations.

What is differentiated integration (DI) and why is it important?

Differentiated Integration (DI) is one of the distinguishing features of the European project. It means that the participation of Member States in EU policies does not necessarily need to apply at the same time, to the same degree, and to all policies: this is what is usually called [internal differentiation](#), a useful tool that can make it easier to reach an agreement within a smaller group of Member States. Then, there is [external differentiation](#): a form of European integration allowing for the selective extension of the validity of EU legal rules to non-members.

Despite being central in the integration process since its very beginning, academic research on DI has been for a long time rather sparse and un-systematized. One of the [first methodical categorization](#) – based on three variables: time, space and matter – only arrives after the integrationist push of the early '90s leading to the Maastricht Treaty. The first decade of the new millennium, characterized by the challenges posed by a series of subsequent crises, have resulted in calls to make arrangements more flexible and adaptable to member states' different needs and to different policy areas; however, in the early 2010s [scholars](#) were still lamenting the current research on DI being based on (too) many concepts, sparse theory, and few data.

Then came Brexit: the unprecedented “living experiment” of the shift of a European country, at that time the champion of opt-outs, from internal to external differentiation. This watershed moment definitely put DI on the highest position of prominence on the European agenda: the 2017 [White paper on the Future of Europe](#), for instance, was offering five scenarios for the Union's evolution depending on central choices, all of them strictly connected to more or less unitary or differentiated (dis)integration.

Advancing knowledge on DI: three sister projects – InDivEU, EU IDEA, EU3D

In this framework, the European Commission was comprehensibly keen on encouraging research on DI. The Research and Innovation Action (RIA) [“Past, present and future of differentiation in European governance”](#) opened in 2018 to fund projects capable of attaining two crucial goals: first, to ascertain whether – and if yes, how much – DI is necessary, conducive, sustainable and acceptable; then, to assess how



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future approaches towards differentiation fare in the light of these findings. Research endeavours, in other words, with the ambition of advancing the current state of the art on DI and basing, on these novel findings, exercises of scenario building to provide policy-makers with actionable evidence. This call was part of [Horizon 2020](#), the EU's research and innovation funding programme from 2014 to 2020, with a budget of nearly €80 billion, then followed by [Horizon Europe](#) which will last until 2027.

Three projects were funded, all of them based on top-level consortia composed of both universities and think tanks: Integrating Diversity in the European Union ([InDivEU](#)), co-led by [Brigid Laffan](#) and [Frank Schimmelfennig](#) and based at the European University Institute; Integration and Differentiation for Effectiveness and Accountability ([EU IDEA](#)), led by [Nicoletta Pirozzi](#) and based at the Istituto Affari Internazionali; EU Differentiation, Dominance and Democracy ([EU3D](#)), led by John Erik Fossum and based at the Centre for European Studies of the University of Oslo. All projects started in early 2019, and share the same overarching goal spelled out in the Horizon 2020 call. However, each of them has a distinctive and unique approach to it, as explained below.

Firstly, **InDivEU's** conceptual core is strongly driven by a legal approach, according to which DI is analysed starting from the definition of European integration: the body of binding formal rules of the EU to which states agree to adhere. In this definition of DI, the unit of analysis is the EU legal rule, and these rules can be uniform or differentiated. InDivEU distinguishes demand and supply conditions of DI: the key demand factor for DI is heterogeneity (of interests, dependence and capacity). Externalities, prior integration, and institutional factors (organizational decision rules and norms, supranational actors, and path-dependence) shape the supply of DI: they influence to what extent demand for DI is met. No evaluative predisposition towards DI, either positive or negative, is present. InDivEU concluded its work at the end of 2021.

Secondly, the main claim underpinning **EU IDEA** is that differentiation is not only *necessary* to address current challenges more effectively, by making the Union more resilient and responsive to citizens. Differentiation is also *desirable*, by introducing a useful degree of flexibility in the complex EU machinery, so long as such flexibility is *compatible* with the core principles of the EU's constitutionalism and identity, *sustainable* in terms of governance, and *acceptable* to EU citizens, Member States and affected third partners. In this sense, DI is – if properly designed – intrinsically positive. EU IDEA, too, concluded its work at the end of 2021.

Thirdly, **EU3D's** centre of gravity pertains to an innovative take on each of the three Ds in EU3D: differentiation, democracy and dominance, and in how they are combined. The point of departure is that some forms of differentiation sustain democracy; other forms foster dominance. EU3D systematically examines the question of how and in



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what sense *certain forms of differentiation cause dominance* and, in addition, in developing a program of action that spells out how and in what sense the EU can avoid those forms of differentiation that engender dominance. Here, the focus is on the risks of unintended negative outcomes of DI. EU3D was originally planned to conclude its work at the end of 2022, but further funding from the Research Council of Norway pushed ahead the end of the project to July 2023.

United for greater impact: a joint project – Differentiation: Clustering Excellence (DiCE)

It was only natural, then, that the three project would start to interact and exploit the complementarity of their approaches. The opportunity came in the form of a Coordination and Support Action (CSA), a Horizon 2020 type of funding not aimed at conceiving new research like RIAs do, but rather improve cooperation among existing consortia. The three leading institutions, together with TEPSA and the University of Exeter, joined their forces under project Differentiation: Clustering Excellence ([DiCE](#)). In its funding triennium 2020-2022, DiCE has – in addition to regularly highlighting [outputs from the three projects](#) also through a social media campaign – pursued four main objectives:

To establish an academic expert network. DiCE developed an extensive [network of academic experts](#) working on differentiation or related topics, who participated in flagship events such as the [Networking Conference on Brexit](#). Two waves of a survey were also run in [2021](#) and [2022](#) to assess experts' preferences towards DI.

To create a differentiation portal. DiCE undertook a comprehensive stocktaking and synthesis of research in order to provide a complete picture on this complex subject. The comprehensive academic literature was sorted by means of four main categories identified by a [differentiation manual](#) and made available through an extensive differentiation portal, the [Differentigate](#). This portal is the go-to place to connect policy, academics and other stakeholders to research on differentiation.

To take stock of future differentiation scenarios. In order to support policy makers in examining how much differentiation is necessary, conducive, sustainable and acceptable in Europe, DiCE has mapped, synthesised, developed and tested future scenarios across a selection of policy areas. In the scenario mapping, DiCE also engaged with policy makers and planners in a [Scenario Marathon](#) about future opportunities and risks of differentiation.

To ensure sustainability after the end of the project. DiCE ensured the sustainability and impact of its network and research findings on differentiation also after the end of the project. To this end, DiCE has developed [training material and teaching tools](#), and established an [ECPR standing group](#) to institutionalize the academic discussion



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on DI. It is under this last objective that the four consortium members of DiCE form the 'DI Think Tank'.

The legacy of DiCE after its conclusion: a decentralized, flexible and scalable DI think tank

The legacy and sustainability of DiCE was conceived, since the project was in the preparatory phase, as best advanced by continuous critical reflections on recent events in an appropriate environment and by disseminating and preparing these debates for all relevant stakeholders. This is a challenging and encompassing task, which can hardly be undertaken by a single actor. It was for this reason that DiCE included the idea of building a full-fledged think tank on differentiation that can continue the work of DiCE after its lifetime of the funding period. This think tank was intended provide a platform for exchange and communication to the network of scholars, policy-makers and the civil society, to take stock of all relevant publications and events, and organize workshops and conferences on a regular basis.

Think tanks are, however, complex organizations that require staff and physical resources, as well as a substantive budget to maintain them. In addition to this, the abovementioned tasks do not necessarily require a permanent and separate structure; instead, they can be pursued by a more informal organizational configuration of the existing structures. It is for this reason that the DiCE consortium members decided to continue their collaboration as part of a *decentralized, flexible and scalable* DI think tank.

Decentralized refers to the absence of a unitary structure. The DI think tank is decentralized as it exists not as a standalone organization, but as the combination of the organizational structures (be they research-oriented, administrative, or communication) of the consortium members, who remain committed to provide the resources needed for its baseline activities.

Flexible refers to the variation in engagement of the activities of the DI think tank according to the future needs. The DI think tank is able to shift execution to a new initiative rapidly, and responsively to put in place or adjust processes and organizational structures if needed: if a new activity is planned, the DI think will quickly adapt to manage the task in the most efficient way possible.

Scalable refers to the capacity to handle a growing amount of work and the level of resources that may be available in the medium and long term. If the DI think tank will acquire new resources through external funding to expand its scope and activities, it will be able to scale up accordingly.

Do you want to get in touch with the DI think tank? Email egpp@eui.eu