The aim of this article is to discuss the contribution of the theory of differentiated integration to understanding Bologna as an instrument for building up the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), and to learn from that analysis what can be used to enrich the theory of differentiated integration. The analysis uses secondary data to grasp the national and the institutional appropriation of the Bologna process and to identify the dimensions that characterise the type of differentiated integration promoted by Bologna. The analysis underlines the role of national and institutional factors to understand how the EHEA, from its inception and its evolution, is a project of differentiated integration stemming from the translation of policy into action.