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The building of learning epiphanies in Europe: The influential power of soft law mechanisms in contemporary adult education governance

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Abstract

Adopting elements of Global Education Policy and Global Governance theories, our study aims to uncover facets of the influential power embedded in European soft law mechanisms at use in the cross-loading type of Europeanisation, and its role in setting Member States' agenda for contemporary adult education, while establishing its legitimacy. Using a qualitative mode of inquiring, our fieldwork was based on document analysis and an interview. Approaching the object through the political sociology of public action, the research question seeks the linkages between the European Years Initiative, particularly the 2023–2024 European Year of Skills, and the role of expert working groups in spreading a 'policy imaginary' for the building of the European Education Area (EEA) as a learning epiphany. Results reveal aspects of the backstage 'ways of doing things' in the context of multiscale educational governance. A light was shed in the actual processes of 'policy transfer' through global mechanisms based on policy instruments, such as National Coordinators Networks for mutual learning, and in its (over) valorisation of best practices (e.g. coordination practices and dissemination practices). Results also show that the role of Adult Learning in the EEA is currently envisaged as a crucial issue to keep the European way of living, to upskill and reskill, thus adapting workers to new emerging needs, and to improve competitiveness in the global arena.

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Introduction – the (re)building of learning epiphanies in Europe

If, at the beginning, the political agenda of the European Union (EU) did not show clear interest in educational issues,[1] after the Maastricht Treaty (articles 126 and 127) the subject entered officially, in 1992, into European policy documents, and has evolved from the 'Lisbon Agenda' in 2000, and its Memorandum on Lifelong Learning,[2] to the point of becoming a 'media policy subject' in the context of Europeanisation. As we are interested in this connection, let's start by clarifying, in short, that we understand the concept of Europeanisation as a multiscale governance architecture with a set of processes that operate through an interrelated constellation of policy documents, which creates a 'collective narrative' (abstract social representations), and coordination mechanisms, methods, and instruments, creating a 'collective structure' (concreate social order). For now, it is important just to keep in mind that both abstract and concrete dimensions are interlinked. In the next section, we will develop this topic further.

In this framework, the 'desire to spread adult education' [or Adult Learning Initiatives[3] (ALIs) as it is officially referred to in the context of the European Education Area (EEA)] across Europe is our core object of attention, and, from our analytical point of departure, the EEA can be seen as one aggregating (rhetoric) epiphany emerging from the education (multiscale) governance channels. We argue that the basis of that 'intersubjective project' relies on soft law mechanisms, specifically on the key policy mechanism known as the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), and on key policy instruments at work today, namely: the Working Group on adult learning (WGal) and the Network of National Coordinators for adult learning (NNCal). While these soft law policy mechanisms, methods, and instruments improved, communication has been increasingly valued as a 'political way' of organising information to create new realities (social imaginaries) and achieve its legitimation; thus, diverse mediatic measures have been adopted to disseminate the referred epiphany. Among these policy mediatic measures is the European Years Initiative (EYI), which we have studied through the recent Portuguese case.

In more detailed terms, in this article we also argue that the EEA besides being an important and persuasive aggregating learning epiphany nowadays, it is an interesting composite one, as there has been a political (re)building of three interrelated learning epiphanies along 21st century Europe, giving it a 'palimpsest rationale'; that is, in the core writing material of policy documents supporting the construction of a 'European imagined space' with educational goals, the key ideas have been superimposed on later writing allowing a colloquial usage and its repetition in discourses. Grounded in results from the qualitative content analysis, in the discussion section we state that this rationale represents a 'way of doing things' (Radaelli, 2003) which was crucial for the success of the EU influence, concerning lifelong learning, on Member States, and the widespread valorisation of skills throughout the current general policy narratives on adult education.

By definition, an epiphany is a moment of sudden and great revelation, and it is expected that these rhetorical constructions act as incentives, on the one hand, for Governments to keep in step with EU's guidelines and related benchmarks targeting the learning of the adult population, and, on the other, for European workers to increase participation in ALIs and stimulate the desire of taking the chance to improve their skills. Indeed, these illuminating realisations emerged as a result of two and a half decades of a continuous, intensive, and well disseminated lifelong learning strategy (CEU, 1996), within the scope of which coordination (as a governance glue) and competitiveness (as a policy imaginary) were the leitmotifs to envisage, first, a 'European Area of Lifelong Learning' in 2001, then, a 'European Area of Education and Training' for 2010 and 2020, and, finally, a 'European Education Area' in force since 2018 (to be achieved by 2030).

In parallel, the complexity of the European educational governance has increased simultaneously with the rising complexity of the Union itself. Indeed, in almost seven decades of existence we can observe, diachronically, diverse moments of enlargement of the Union, with cyclical entry of diverse groups of Member States. This fact has contributed to the growth in the European internal density of policy production (Barros & Belando-Montoro, 2013), implying, for example, several degrees of sociocultural and socioeconomic differentiated 'integration mechanisms' for each round of new countries entering the EU (Schimmelfennig, 2014). In this sense, the recognition of the value of formal and non-formal education, along with informal learning, increased as a means for the political development of an 'intersubjective wisdom of belonging' to the Union. Within this scope, the (re)building and wide spreading of learning epiphanies in Europe constituted material for the emergence of a 'regional symbolic space', which needs to be taken in relation with globalisation and the larger context of the 'global education policy space' (Addey et al., 2017), that some authors propose is evolving to 'global ecosystems of lifelong learning' (Singh, 2024; Spours, 2024), as International Governmental Organisations[4] (IGOs) are now often using this conceptualisation.

Conceptual framework

There is a set of different theoretical perspectives on the relationship between globalisation and its effects on education policy (e.g. Dale, 1999; Rizvi & Lingard, 2009). According to Verger et al. (2012), analysing 'the different ways in which globalisation processes, agents and events contribute to educational policy change on a range of scales, and with what consequences' (p. 7) constitutes the central object of global education policy (GEP) studies. In this frame, our analysis was developed as an attempt to understand education policies globally, which implied an effort to study the complex relationships between global ideas, its dissemination in Europe, and national recontextualisation of policy priorities and recommendations from the EU. This key task is critical, and more often than desirable research fails to capture the complexity of global politics, and the fact that different political scales are mutually constituted (Robertson et al., 2002).

As we clarify in the introductory words, in the wake of some authors, particularly Claudio Radaelli's contributions over time, we conceive Europeanisation as being

grounded in a multiscale governance architecture that implies a set of processes with interlinked abstract and concrete dimensions that occurs embedded into a scope of a competitive globalisation, and pressures Europe to perform better, in different fields, than other global actors. This means that regional power relations take place in a broad global context, even if partial manifestations of it can be, and have been, analysed with a specific focus, like the studies on European integration, that started to be produced in the fifties, have done. Therefore, we keep in mind the link between global governance and educational governance, when reflecting on the processes involved in the Europeanisation of adult education and the regulation of ALIs in the EEA.

For this mega-analytical reason, to base our reflections, and discuss results, we use a set of conceptual contributions of the GEP field of research, making connections with Zürn's (2018) definition of 'global governance' as 'the exercise of authority across national borders as well as consented norms and rules beyond the nation state' (p. 4). In fact, the expression of these ideas in current Europe can be summarised, to a certain extent, as the Lisbon Strategy, which is a multilevel policy strategy based on the OMC, envisaged as a policy mechanism with a wide range of policy instruments at the service of networks of 'likeminded policy-makers' (Collignon et al., 2005).

From this prism, by means of the contributions from the GEP studies, we use the concept of 'policy mechanism' as an issue that 'consists of a constellation of causal elements of a different nature including policy drivers, systems of rules, norms, powers and structures' (Verger, 2020, p. 7). As the policy instruments of the OMC are frequently used for legitimacy purposes, then we also have adopted elements of the theoretical framework presented by Rauh and Zürn (2019), especially their conceptualisation of a 'legitimation dynamics' behind the political authority of international institutions, and have focused particularly on the case of the EYI, as it has recurrently contributed to (re) create and disseminate the global prestige of EU as an UpToDate policy actor in the global competitiveness 'policy imaginary'.

In this particular aspect, taking inspiration from Taylor's concept of 'social imaginary' as 'that common understanding which makes possible common practices, and a widely shared sense of legitimacy' (2007, p. 172), which 'creates realities' in the public space, we conceive 'policy imaginary' (for hermeneutic purposes) as a common understanding, however mostly shared by groups of stakeholders and experts in positions of power. Like this, if the common understanding of policy actors, involved in educational governance, relies on a 'humanistic imagination' (e.g. embedded in solidary-socialist globalisation principles), then it will be more probable that educational policy and programmes emerge in connection with it. Actually, many studies showed that the 'shared idea' in the UNESCO's adult education policy making venues relies on the 'education for all pledge' which searches for educational justice around the world (see among others, Ireland & Spezia, 2014). In a similar framework, also the UN system recently advocated for 'the leaving no one behind pledge' which seeks the expansion of adult education as a right in every national context (see among others, Barros, 2024). Yet, if the common understanding of policy actors, involved in educational governance, relies on an 'economic imagination' (e.g. embedded in capitalist-neoliberal globalisation principles), then it will be more probable that educational policy and programmes emerge in connection with it.

Indeed, in recent times, as many scholars have demonstrated, the 'shared idea' in the EU's adult education policy making venues relies on the 'competitiveness pledge' as the one indicating the pathway for European growth. When setting the policy agenda, this has promoted, especially in the last two decades of Europeanisation, the 'instrumentalisation' of most part of adult education provision (see among others, Lima & Guimarães, 2024) and is influential for the current ALIs in the 'imagined space' of the EEA, as results of our research also show.

However, these ideological opposite sides along the spectrum of possibilities for the 'policy imaginary' are not crystallised in the space-time where public action occurs, and frequently manifest in the global context of adult education policy and practices in an intertwined manner along the multiscale governance processes and its related discursive narratives (e.g. legal and andragogical). This explains why an analysis of the historical development of the 'fabrication of Europe' (Nóvoa & Lawn, 2002) shows that tensions, contradictions, and symbolic (and effective) struggles for power have inhabited its (educational policy) landscape.

Therefore, the mentioned conceptual contributions of the GEP studies have been mobilised to help us better apprehend the global scenario in which the 'many faces of Europeanisation' (Olsen, 2002) can take place, with several effects in the topic of educational governance. In this framework, as Nasibov put it, 'different conceptions of Europeanization address different dimensions of it, and none of them are able to wholly explain the phenomenon alone' (2012, p. 52). As a result of the complexity of the processes involved, different analysis of Europeanisation have contributed to the existing knowledge on the subject. Thus, departing from a revision of studies on Europeanisation, we selected a few theoretical subsidies to follow in this article.

With this alignment of ideas, to make sense of the concept of Europeanisation, in our research, we rely on the approach developed in the work of Radaelli, and adopt, as departure point for our own understanding, his well-known definition,

> Europeanisation consists of processes of (a) construction, (b) diffusion and (c) institutionalisation of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, 'ways of doing things' and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the EU policy process and then incorporated in the logic of domestic (national and subnational) discourse, political structures and public policies. (2003, p. 30)

Even if this works well as an umbrella definition, it assumes a top-down and bottom-up main understanding of the existing processes, which are indeed useful to think about the mutual influences between EU and its Member States. Despite the relevance of this lens, it does not exhaust the possibilities of analysis of how the EU works; consequently, it has been complemented by other authors. In this scope, Dosenrode (2020) has contributed with a summary of the state of the art concerning the conceptualisations of Europeanisation, and proposed a typology with five subgroups, namely (a) meta-Europeanisation (regional integration); (b) downloading (top-down); (c) uploading (bottom-up); (d) cross-loading (exchange); and

(e) export Europeanisation (enlargement), each type having its own primary policy mechanisms, methods and instruments at work.

From this theoretical scenario, we have considered particularly the cross-loading type of Europeanisation to bridge the Europeanisation processes with ALIs in the context of the EEA, because it is relevant in shedding a light on the ways in which EU can affect domestic arrangements 'by altering the beliefs and expectations of domestic actors' (Dosenrode, 2020, p. 17), and our research is interested in the influential power of soft law mechanisms and the spread of a 'policy imaginary' that has been creating the features of contemporary adult education (multiscale) governance.

This particular type of Europeanisation involves the EU facilitating exchanges of best practices and experiences among Member States, with minimal involvement from the EU institutions themselves. Thus, in a contradictory world where the 'solid modernity' coexists with the 'liquid modernity', complex human 'ecosystems of intersubjectivity' emerged having effects in the public sphere of our collective life, including the ways we learn and develop our (critical or instrumental) knowledge. This fact is contributing nowadays to expand 'lifelong learning ecosystems', which can be defined as,

> Learning landscapes which are not necessarily institutionalised and structured as systems, are learning-oriented, and are flexible in terms of including and recognising as many stakeholders as possible, their inter-relationships, and the outcomes of their (in)actions, and place the learner at the centre of everything. (Singh, 2024, p. 16)

In this context, as pointed out by Claudia Major (2005), the increasing interwovenness of national and European spheres in intergovernmental policy fields (like adult education governance) implies for researchers the attempt to capture a 'cross-country', a 'cross-institutions', and a 'cross-policy' dimension in the Europeanisation processes, 'where domestic change might not only be generated at the EU level but might come indirectly through the transfer of ideas, norms and ways of doing things that are exchanged from and with European neighbours, domestic entities or policy areas' (p. 186).

This policy transfer aspect is relevant, as the EU has been developing in non-linear ways that use (and transcend) a wide spatial and symbolic (intertwined) dimensions of political power issues. Indeed, for example, in the setting of international policy agendas, between the bilateral alliances and the multilateralism cooperation, a complex continuous rationale has marked the scene of power relations (Snidal et al., 2024). Therefore, in the attempts to build a stronger multilateralism in the globalisation era, IGOs have been changing the 'policy building ethos', from previous sectors (more structured) to systems (more integrated), and are moving, more recently, towards (intersubjective) ecosystems (more interconnected), in a complex transitional process that allows coordination possibilities to improve, diversify, and deepen, what actually is happening in different ways between different sorts of policy entities and policy players. This means that traditional mechanisms of bilateral influence such as 'policy borrowing' and 'policy learning' have lost centrality (Dale, 1999, 2020), although they have not disappeared (Verger et al., 2012), in favour of another type of global mechanisms of (mutual) influence for policy

transfer frequently involving different ideological possibilities and components of the 'policy imaginary', which is expressed by the cross-loading architecture in the Europeanisation processes, with diverse characteristics, some of which this study aims to illustrate.

Methodology

Either the GEP studies or the political sociology of public action have used a set of different methodologies to develop critical policy analysis (Fischer & Miller, 2007), making sense of 'the reasons, agents and factors behind the globalisation of educational policy and, by doing so, reflect on the structures, processes and events through which a global education policy landscape is being constituted' (Verger et al., 2012, p. 2). In this frame, from the varied range of methodologies available, this study is based on a triangulation of document analysis (Bowen, 2009) and qualitative content analysis (Drisko & Maschi, 2015) from which we scrutinise the empirical material from (1) policy documents and (2) one in-depth interview.

Concerning the data set of policy documents, a distinction was made between (1a) the broad examination of a wide set of policy documents from the EU on the basis of which the Lisbon Agenda has developed and Europeanisation processes have complexified, which has constituted the ground for a glance at the primary source of information, useful to apprehend the interpretation authors, from different scientific fields, made of it; and (1b) the narrow study of a tight key set of policy documents on the basis of which, we argue, the building of learning epiphanies in Europe has been possible, and makes the policy process as part of societal dynamics, nurturing discourses, with core writing material, towards the construction of a 'European imagined space' with educational goals.

The qualitative content analysis was made of a *corpus* comprising this last set of documents, mainly (i) the *Communication from the Commission – Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality* (CEC, 2001); (ii) the *ET 2010 – Education & Training 2010* (CEU, 2004); (iii) the *ET 2020 – Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training* (CEU, 2009); (iv) the Council Conclusions on Moving Towards a Vision of a European Education Area (CEU, 2018); (v) the Communication on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025 (CEU, 2020a); and (vi) the Council Resolution on Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training towards the European Education Area and beyond – 2021–2030 (CEU, 2021b). The procedures used in the content analysis of this core writing policy material have involved three major steps: first, we have defined the units (e.g. frequency of individual words like learning, education, practice, adult, skills, and agenda) and the more conceptual categories of analysis (e.g. coordination, multiscale/multilevel, dissemination, communication, transferability, legitimacy, competitiveness, and best practice), then our coding has organised the units of meaning found in the material around the previously defined conceptual categories, and finally, we have examined each document with this analytical lens to find thematic patterns and draw conclusions in response to our research question.

As said before, our study aims to uncover facets of the influential power of European soft law mechanisms, and its role in setting Member States policy agenda for contemporary adult education. Therefore, for analytical purposes, we also have used the approach of the political sociology of public action to focus, particularly on the governance instruments in place for the regulation of the ALIs among the EEA, and have applied the policy instrumentation framework, developed by Lascoumes and Le Galès (2007), adopting their definition of 'policy instrument' of public action as 'a condensed and finished form of knowledge about social power and the ways of exercising it' (p. 31).

This investigative rationale was useful to analyse material on two regulatory policy instruments of public action, inherent to the OMC, namely the Working Group of Member State Experts [specifically, the ET 2020 Working Group on adult learning (WGal) and the New Working Group on adult learning (NWGal) for 2021–2025], and the NNCal. In other words, to look at those policy instruments, and interpret them as technical and social policy arrangement devices at service of government, we use the lens of the policy instrumentation framework, as the authors of the model have demonstrated their links with different forms of public legitimacy (Table 1).

In addition, to understand aspects of the current operationalisation of soft law mechanisms by means of the regulatory policy instruments of public action in force, the research also collected evidence, through an in-depth semi-structured interview (Edwards & Holland, 2019), from the (single) national coordinator responsible for the implementation of the 2023–2024 European Year of Skills (EYS) in Portugal. Although this option had limitations (discursive empirical data on working groups relying on the voice from just one actor), it also had potential, mainly because this particular thematic event, in the context of the EYI, was dedicated to the main leitmotiv policy notion (skills) influencing the agenda setting of contemporary adult education in Europe (and beyond). But also, due to his role as a policy actor, with the capacity to cross different scales at any moment, we chose to collect his perceptions, even if single, because it seemed to us that he would occupy a privileged locus of power, since not all actors are equally influential as international policy players.

Table 1. Typology of Five Types of Instruments in Line With Five Different Forms of Legitimacy.

Types of instruments	Forms of legitimacy
Legislative and regulatory	Imposition of a general interest by mandated elected representatives
Economic and fiscal	Seeks benefit to the community; social and economic efficiency
Agreement-based and incentive-based	Seeks direct involvement
Information-based and communication-based	Explanation of decisions and accountability of actors
Performance indicators, standards, and best practices	Scientific/technical, democratically negotiated, and/or competition; pressure from market mechanisms

Source: adapted from Lascoumes and Le Galès (2007; 2012).

The ambition was to collect a wide range of data, and triangulate different sources (policy documents and transcription of a strategic interview), to elucidate aspects of the OMC and the interplay between the cross-loading type of Europeanisation, the political expectations of EU's decisors (as manifested in the selected policy documents and dissemination products), and the perceived impact capacity of policy mechanisms and regulatory instruments in force, together with a set of tools and resources, to trigger the processes of shaping national education agendas. In particular, the insights of this liaison actor, moving in cross-national European places of foreign expertise, about re-contextualisation of supranational policies in Portugal, have been a means of capturing some (back office) empirical evidence of the GEP in action, and the ways in which legitimation can occur through dissemination processes.

By choosing Portugal for a case study in this respect, we had a couple of departure advantages: on the one hand, the facility of better framing the answers by putting them in context with an informed lens, as we have been researching this national context of adult education policy making continuously for the last 25 years, and, on the other, the aggregating value this country could eventually bring to the study, because it has been pointed out, for example, in CEDEFOP Reports,[5] as a representative educational policy Member State, for having 'good practices' in implementing European priorities (e.g. for the adult education VET system) as well as 'good practices' concerning the improvement of national development of adult learning provision (e.g. for the validation of non-formal and informal learning). Therefore, in spite of the fact that this option for a single national case, and a solo interview, implied that we lose the comparative aspect of results that comes with a larger cohort methodological design involving multiple cases and informants, or the representative gain that comes from a quantitative study, we believe this research still gives a contribution, firstly, by illustrating more intersubjective aspects in which soft law mechanisms also rely on, and thereby addressing a picture that is missing, or has been underestimated, in current research, and, secondly, by showing facets of how the 'ways of doing things' are influencing adult education in Portugal.

Within this analytical perspective, and expectancy, we tried to catch the interviewee's insights using a set of 35 interlinked questions organised in an interview grid structured in two parts: one part around the topic of 'multiscale governance and EU's (adult) lifelong learning', which pursued the objective of better understanding how the European education agenda and its adult learning skills solutions are formulated and constituted, and by whom?, and another part around the topic of 'Working Groups and the National Network of Coordinators', with the goal of shedding a light on the principal aspects that can explain how certain policies for adult education become selected and privileged in the EEA, instead of others. In other words, in conducting the interview we were interested in knowing how this key-multilevel actor, interviewed in February 2024, perceives his own national coordination policy role, concerning the work to be done to achieve the EEA by 2025 (CEU, 2020a) and beyond (CEU, 2021b). In this respect, as the key informant of the study occupies a public role, and could be easily identified, to ensure the necessary ethical considerations, the researcher obtained his permission to openly refer to him, although clarifying that the name would not be directly mentioned. Therefore, he was asked for informed consent, and he has voluntarily chosen to either participate in the study or be

referred to by his national role in the context of the EYS and the Institute of Employment and Vocational Training (IEVT).

At the same time, we were interested in 'seeing through his lenses', by collecting his first hand interpretations, about the ways in which transnational policy actors actually work together, to set up common interests for adult education governance. For the prism of our research, it seems relevant to better understand the mechanisms of multiscale governance which enable Member States to align their national policies and discourses, given contributions for the building of learning epiphanies in Europe. In this frame, the two parts of the interview grid were based on a set of conceptual categories that have emerged from the literature review and the conceptual framework. The procedures used in its qualitative content analysis respected the three major steps, previously summarised, which allowed the systematisation of a rich ensemble of empirical collected data, from which resulted some fieldwork emergent categories (e.g. transversal need, counselling entities, policy advisors, adoption of ideas, databases, and European way of living) and were an effective contribution to draw conclusions in response to our research question.

Indeed, our interviewee can be seen as a 'transfer agent' (Stone, 2004) in the context of cross-loading Europeanisation. His performance as a liaison actor between the European Commission, other European countries, and national entities, particularly his role as a member of the board of the national IEVT, makes him a privileged witness of how the coordination of 'the work to be done' (CEU, 2021b) is occurring in multi-scalar political ecosystems and how communication from the political to the social level is happening. In addition, the structuring capacity of the IEVT[6] in the Portuguese context, and its significative influence in decision-making dynamics, has contributed (in a long-term permanent way) to the building of an adult learning (VET) system (Barros, 2025), and (consistently since the turn of the century) has legitimised skills as a priority in the country's policy agenda of learning activities for the adult population, particularly since the European Council has called for a reinvestment in the Upskilling Pathways Initiative (CEU, 2019), in the aftermath of EU's skills agendas (CEU, 2016, CEU, 2020b). His views on the reasons for adopting those Initiative and agendas in the national context have been collected, as well as his perceptions of 'the ways of doing things' in a multiscale governance policy frame, along with the specific difficulties and main challenges associated with the implementation of European education policies and the EYS in Portugal.

Framed by this methodological rational and options, together with our conceptual map, a selection of the main results from the qualitative content analysis is presented and discussed in the next section.

Results and discussion – facets of the influential power of European soft law mechanisms

The vision of a 'European Area of Lifelong Learning' shared in the turn of the century referred to 'a region in which all stakeholders collaborate to meet specific local learning needs and implement joint solutions to common problems' (CEC, 2001, p. 33), like the ones preventing European competitiveness.

This 'policy imaginary' was a strong mobilising one and has remained in EU's core policy making processes, as attested by the recently proclaimed 'Competitiveness Strategy for Europe', aimed at 'removing barriers that prevent innovative companies from growing and attracting finance, and undertaking concerted efforts to close skills gaps' (CEC, 2024, p. 13). That competitiveness policy imaginary has impacted also the European policy making for adult education, as we can see in the current Council Resolution on a 'New European Agenda for Adult Learning 2021–2030', in which it is stated that,

> It is of the utmost importance to foster greater awareness among employers that adult learning contributes to the quality of work processes and outcomes, as well as to the quality of workers' engagement with their work. Adult learning can contribute to productivity and competitiveness. (CEU, 2021a, p. 7)

In fact, in the 21st century European governance of adult education, a clear continuity of policy purposes inscribed in (neoliberal) competitiveness features can be noted when comparing the three major policy documents dedicated to this learning system (Guimarães & Barros, 2025), namely the above-mentioned Council Resolution and the previous 2011 Council Resolution on a 'Renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning', together with the first 2006 Communication from the Commission, 'Adult Learning: It is Never too Late to Learn'. Specifically, if one document drives tertiary, or equivalent education, as an essential goal for young adults to achieve, as this 'would contribute to developing a competitive economy based on knowledge and innovation which makes full use of its resources and human capital' (CEU, 2011, p. 8), the other document has displayed that 'an equitable distribution of skills across populations has a stronger impact on overall economic performance' (CEC, 2006, p. 3). Thus, as noted by Hefler and Markowitsch (2010), motivating adults to engage in ALIs was part of the vision, aiming to increase the stock of skilled workers contributing for a strong Europe.

Overview of the core documents under analysis grounding the learning epiphanies

In this visionary context, one of the epilogues of the policy task of 'fabricating Europe' (Nóvoa & Lawn, 2002), as the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world,[7] was that of establishing a Europe of Education and Training. Within these concerns and 'policy imaginary', policy efforts 'founded on transparency and mutual trust' (PCEU, 2008, p. 2) were made to develop a European Qualifications Framework, envisaged as a supranational reference for the recognition of national qualifications, and without which it was understood that 'the European labour market cannot function effectively and smoothly' (CEU, 2004, p. 11), which would hinder the Union's economic performance, with negative impacts in several common policy valued indexes and rankings, like the 'Human Capital Index' or the 'Global Competitiveness Index', both propagated by the World Economic Forum on a regular basis, through the Global Competitiveness Reports.[8]

Indeed, much inspired by the eurozone's ambition,[9] from the turn of the last century, the 'European area of Education and Training' has expanded the vision of the foundational 'European Area of Lifelong Learning'. Since then, the delimitation of an imagined space, defined in political terms, progressively became the systematic learning approach of Europeanisation, and European nations were invited to adhere to an intuitive grasp of reality through policy implementation mechanisms. In the building of a common Education Space, the sharing of a lifewide and lifelong learning throughout the community of Member States has been the major epiphany, for which it is projected that 'well-functioning cooperation using new, transparent ways of networking is needed not only between the relevant EU institutions, but also with all relevant stakeholders, who have a considerable contribution to make in terms of policy development, implementation and evaluation' (CEU, 2009, p. 5).

On this basis, the 'European Education Area' claims for equal 'access to quality education and training', for example, on its website.[10] In fact, it is stated that the EEA 'need to ensure complementarity and coherence with respect to national education and training systems and should include all levels and types of education and training, including adult education' (CEU, 2018, p. 10). Actually, the participation of adults (aged 25–64) in learning activities to improve skills received a reinforced attention, for being regarded, since the 'New Skills Agenda for Europe' (CEU, 2016), as crucial for the continuity of the EU's support of the development of businesses 'to sustaining our competitiveness' (CEU, 2020a, p. 4), in line with the previous pledge of giving life to a 'genuinely European labour market' (CEC, 2001, p. 93). Hence, adult learning as a focus topic of the EEA implied the promotion of mutual learning concerning the policy implementation of shared goals, objectives, and scope, like the ones envisaging the 'building trust in micro-credentials across Europe' (CEU, 2020a, p. 16), foreseen as one of the ways of creating conditions to 'allow those who have left early to re-enter education, and those who need it should be able to access higher education and VET programmes to acquire or update skills that the jobs of tomorrow require' (CEU, 2020a, p. 7).

Under this umbrella of a permanent (re)building of learning epiphanies in Europe, several education governance initiatives, mechanisms, instruments, and tools entered the scene over the last two decades 'to increased cooperation between Member States' (CEU, 2018, p. 7), and have been developed to 'boost flexible cooperation methods' (CEU, 2020a, p. 25) for multiscale coordination (the governance glue of Europeanisation). Thus, for the period 2021–2030, the policy instrumentation protagonists are now summarised in the EEA enabling framework. Indeed, the 'Strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond' (CEU, 2021b) comprises several tried and tested governance frames, among which we highlight, for being relevant for the contemporary adult education governance, the Working Groups and the National Coordinators, which are two policy arrangement devices allowing policy actors to 'work together to set up governance solutions to facilitate efficient communication of information from the technical to the political level, when necessary, and coordinate the work to be done' (CEU, 2021b, pp. 9–10). At the same time, communication from the political to the social level has been increasingly valued as a political way to achieve legitimation and diverse mediatic measures has been adopted. Among

these measures is the EYI, being particularly relevant, for adult education, the 2023–2024 EYS.

In next subsections of this article, we discuss results of the analysis, concentrating efforts, first, on two regulatory policy instruments of public action, inherent to the OMC,[11] namely the Working Group of Member State Experts [specifically, the ET 2020 Working Group on adult learning (WGal) and the New Working Group on adult learning (NWGal) for 2021–2025], and the NNCal; and second, on a set of perceptions inscribed in the experiential learning of a Portuguese (internationalised) policy player responsible for the implementation of the EYS, with the aim of better understanding aspects of the backstage concerning the complex processes of the re-contextualisation of global and European policies at the country level, and the forms of legitimacy that are operating through communication-based policy instruments, like the events he has coordinated under the umbrella of the skills-thematic EYI.

Key adult learning initiatives of the European Education Area: the working groups and the national coordinators as influential regulatory policy instruments

Adopting a comprehensive analytical approach to the power of soft law mechanisms, as appears on the written discourses with political expectations of EU's decisors, we focused on their declared mandates (as they are fixed in policy documents and official websites) for key transfer agents, and their attributed role in the operationalisation of current multiscale coordination tools and policy arrangements initiatives for lifelong learning ecosystems, envisaged as 'ways of doing things' able to improve

> Cooperation in areas such as enhanced coordination, including at political level, greater synergies between different policies which contribute to social and economic growth and green and digital transitions, and strengthened communication and dissemination of outputs, within a more innovative and future-oriented perspective of support for education and training reforms. (CEU, 2021b, p. 2)

An interesting finding of the analysis was the verification that the declared search for equal 'access to quality education and training', based on a desire to spread ALIs in the context of the EEA and 'opening up opportunities for all' across European countries, has been made visible, particularly through a focus on online communication.[12] Within the scope of this information-based framework, under the auspices of the OMC, the Working Groups, both WGal and NWGal, together with the NNCal revealed to be of utmost strategical importance for the building of learning epiphanies in Europe. Thus, as stated on the European Commission's official website,[13] on the one hand, the current NWGal has a political mandate to 'support Member States in implementing the EU's vision for a European Education Area', and, on the other hand, the NNCal is expected to 'promote adult learning in their respective EU country, provide policy advice and support, gather and disseminate best practices to national authorities'. This makes it clear that educational governance and policy making have been designed requiring 'a high-level political steer to take decisions in a complex ecosystem' (CEU, 2020a, p. 26) of public action.

If we consider that the 'sociopolitical ecosystem thinking' has been built basically upon a 'network idealism' that provides symbolic spaces for conceptualising learning as 'utopian thinking' (Spours, 2024, pp. 5, 11), then it is possible to recognise the centrality of communication in current coordination instruments in place, which act as a governance glue. Using the policy instrumentation framework (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007), we understand that networking is a regulatory instrument of public action that allows experts to exercise power through a 'surface harmonising ability', which is inherent to the OMC, as it has proved to be effective in filtering political oppositions, by creating an atmosphere of consensus and cooperation (Dehousse & Boussaguet, 2008).

Indeed, consensus allows for agreements as the ones stated at Strategic Framework for furthering the EEA, where it is mentioned that 'cooperation in education and training has gradually become an important instrument for the implementation of EU external policies, based on European values, trust and autonomy' (CEU, 2021b, p. 8). In this context, policy (intersubjective) ecosystems require mutual trust, which in turn implied the active promotion of reliability in peer working. Therefore, 'mutual learning arrangements, tools, instruments (…) peer learning, peer counselling and the exchange of good practice' (CEU, 2021b, p. 17) have been much valued, as useful devices for the policy implementation of the EEA with a perceived shared of goals, objectives, and scope.

The influential power of these soft law mechanisms comes, precisely, from their ability, both material (devices and documents) and ideational (symbolic and events), to thoughtfully control dissensus allowing for a combined set of agendas and country priorities (Verger, 2020). This operating referential for public action can be illustrated, for example, in the Horizontal Rules of Procedure[14] that guide the current navigation of expert groups, including the NWGal, were it is clearly established that 'the group shall adopt their opinions, recommendations or reports by consensus' (cf. point 5). In other words, it is interesting to note that majority, instead of unanimity in policy making, relies on the democratic ability of admitting adversaries in the public debate, allowing the combination of pluralistic policy rationales, and interest concerns, for example, to make decisions about the role(s) of adult education, or to choose the policy priorities to be considered in each national context. It can be argued, however, that this openness for admitting competing visions in the policy making does not correspond to the aspirations of the New Public Management, which is the 'hegemonic paradigmatic trend'[15] in contemporary global governance, claiming 'to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public service performance in modern bureaucracies' (Indahsari & Raharja, 2020, p. 73).

In fact, to ensure that a 'flexible and efficient governance structure is in place' (CEU, 2021a, p. 14), it is expected that the NWGal for the period 2021–2025, operating under the enabling framework for the EEA, gives continuity to the policy work done by the previous WGal, operating under the ET 2020 framework, with the ambition of maintaining 'all the tried and tested mutual learning arrangements' (CEU, 2020a, p. 26; CEU, 2021b, p. 21). Against the backdrop of these statements, for example, the EU's Mutual Learning Programme[16] has been further developed, and financed, to facilitate the multiplication of means available for this political pathway, like 'peer learning activities, peer counselling and exchanges of best policies and practices, conferences, seminars (…) studies and analysis, networks (including web-based) and other forms of dissemination

and through clear visibility of the outcomes' (CEU, 2021a, p. 9). The key policy actors targeted are the members of high-level forums and expert groups, mainly the elite with participation access in the peer learning events, as it works by invitation only.[17]

Another interesting finding of the study, highlighted by the results of document analysis (Table 2), allowed one to expose that repetition of key ideas, along the constellation of public policy documents and dedicated websites, is used systematically in the legislative and regulatory policy productions on ALIs, and in the related discourses on policy instruments in force at EEA (like the NWGal and the NNCal), which can be interpreted as an attempt to give them legitimacy (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007).[18]

Besides, systematic repetition of ideas could be, by hypothesis, also a marketing-technique to create feedback loops of credibility in the communication on 'forums for European government representatives to exchange information and experiences',[19] and a 'way of doing things' influencing the 'priority' topics and, simultaneously, mainstreaming 'good ideas' for adult education governance. This could be seen as one aspect of the GEP in action aiming at promoting the mutual learning of a subject (e.g. 'co-ordination/cooperation good practices'), defined by decision-makers as having general interest (like the ALIs for 'skills' and 'competences' acquisition), what would be useful to foster well-trained (trustful) liaison policy actors, then capable of setting Member States policy agenda (e.g. through constitution of 'committees') in favourable ways, consolidating ('implementing') the envisaged ecosystems of Lifelong Learning in Europe.

Indeed, these coordination policy actors are an integral part of the architectural process of the cross-loading type of Europeanisation, which relies on their capacity to provoke processes of 'policy transfer' as they are expected to act as mandated experts, which should contribute to the explanation at national level of decisions made at European level (Borrás & Radaelli, 2014). This is supposed to result in a policy influence flow (from European Council and European Commission) to introduce (softly) priority issues into countries policy agendas, therefore also spreading 'ideational messages' (which are important symbolic attributes of the learning epiphanies), mainly designed and negotiated at supranational scales, relying on a kind of influential power that Dosenrode (2020) has described as a process through which,

> European policy neither prescribes concrete institutional requirements nor modifies the institutional context for strategic interaction but affects domestic arrangements even more indirectly, namely, by altering the beliefs and expectations of domestic actors. Changes in domestic beliefs may, in turn, affect strategies and preferences of domestic actors, potentially leading to corresponding institutional adaptations. Hence, the domestic effect of European policies is primarily based on a cognitive logic. (p. 17)

In this scenario, for example, it is stated (e.g. through the EPALE) that the Renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning has been 'promoted in 36 countries by a Network of National Coordinators',[20] which, as a regulatory policy instrument, is a strategic and intrinsic part of the EU's mechanisms of influence. Definitely, the NNCal, operating along

Table 2. Repetition of Key Ideas in Core Documents Analysed (Frequency).

Terms and concepts	(CEC, 2001)	(CEU, 2004)	(CEU, 2009)	(CEU, 2018)	(CEU, 2020a)	(CEU, 2021b)
coordination/cooperation	10/18	0/1	6/38	0/17	1/50	9/62
Agenda/polic	10/36	0/24	1/11	6/1	18/36	12/22
learning/education	469/102	57/192	52/99	15/95	85/355	90/302
Skill/competence	45/45	5/28	11/11	9/11	60/23	23/18
Euro/Area/challeng	213/38/9	177/41/9	77/25/12	75/12/1	254/79/17	201/74/15
market/econo/indiv	28/20/28	10/22/6	3/9/5	1/6/1	6/36/4	14/34/7
Inclus/equal/social	18/19/89	6/4/26	2/1/11	10/2/12	29/19/24	40/15/55
Group/Mutual/shar/Committee/expert	37/4/10/8/4	13/4/6/0/0	1/4/4/2/1	3/2/2/10/2	9/12/11/7/13	13/15/14/31/7
Transition/reform/implement/adop	2/3/47/6	1/17/28/11	1/2/4/5	1/0/2/1	18/16/17/2	19/19/16/2

the European area, are 'trustful' and have proven to perform accordingly with the declared foundational mandate.

Certainly, the attempt to understand education policies globally, which implied an effort to study (the backstage of) the complex relationships between global ideas, their dissemination in Europe, and national re-contextualisation of policy priorities and recommendations from the EU (or other IGOs), is a fascinating, however, critical scientific task. If the different political scales are mutually constituted, then the exercise of approaching the ways (and directions) the 'policy influence flow' develops is a logic methodological option. Yet, a challenge comes, because those power loci are restricted, as socialisation with policy decision happens in high-level forums (frequently with the counselling of global policy entrepreneurs) and are disseminated, for coordination purposes, in peer learning events (which, as highlighted before, are only accessible by invitation) clearly tailored to elite members of the expert groups.

At this point, based on the believe that 'each instrument of public action is a condensed and finished form of knowledge on social power and ways of exercising it' (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2012, p. 31), we have decided to interview (at least) one of these transfer policy actors, performing with a high level of legitimated authority in the Portuguese context of the ALIs, as said before, with the expectation of capturing his perceptions, and specific insights, about the intrinsic policy aspects of the globalisation–education relationship as it is manifested today in the EEA.

Key policy dissemination events of the European Education Area: the EYS as a legitimising scheme for a learning epiphany

Portugal, as a Member State of the Union, since 1986, has been interacting with global and European policy ideas launched in public and private events systematically attended by national political leaders and committees of key policy-makers. Definitely, the pluri-scalar political strategies to govern Portuguese adult education gained significance during the second half of the nineties, as we have demonstrated elsewhere (Barros, 2009, 2013). The emergent processes and institutions that have characterised, since then, the Adult Learning System in this context (Barros, 2025) have been outlined with several features recognisable as effects of the globally structured educational agenda (Dale, 1999, 2000). Therefore, this country has integrated the set of European countries that have mutually agreed on the implementation of common policies for harmonisation. Despite this fact, some authors have pointed out the Portuguese tensions and contradictions that occurred in the EU's policy implementation, for example, aimed at increasing youth and adult participation in lifelong learning activities, suggesting the emergence of a 'dual Europeanisation' in this national context (Antunes, 2025).

Still, in the Portuguese history of adult education governance, the most stable and long-term-operating institution is the national IEVT, whose mission has been connected with the qualification of workers. This is significant, as our interviewee plays a role as a member of the Board of this Institution and acts frequently as expert in different contexts of policy decision. Indeed, he was the choice of the government when a nomination for the

Portuguese National Coordinator of the 2023–2024 EYS was required by the EU, and was also our choice as a key informant for the purposes of our research.

The Network of National Coordinators, performing under the umbrella of diverse EU's objectives (like the ALIs or the EYI) is a regulatory policy instrument in which this study is particularly interested, mainly because it is a declared means to materialise the political wish to 'make the EEA a reality' (a statement recurrently expressed in the several key policy documents and official websites analysed).

In this context, our interviewee's involvement in policy making at the national level in addition to his recent performance as a liaison actor between the European Commission, other European countries, and national entities, for the EYS, has made him a privileged witness of how the coordination of 'the work to be done' (CEU, 2021b) is occurring in multi-scalar political systems, and how communication from the political to the social level is happening. Therefore, in this subsection, we present a selection of his views and perceptions on the 'ways of doing things' that the EU has been operationalising. We moved with the conviction that discussion (with the conceptual-analytical lens mobilised) of his interpretations can clarify a part of the modes of operation through which the EU regulates the implementation of certain policies at the service of the construction of the EEA. In other words, it brings a contribution to apprehend one of the (national) pathways through which the EU pressure is refracted in multiple policy ways, cross-loading the use of discourse, and its influential power.

Having in mind that communication (and marketing), in the information era, has been increasingly valued as a political way to achieve legitimation (among other functions), the EYI[21] is a tool used as an awareness campaign, working as a political signal from the EU Institutions that the theme, selected for each of these events, constitutes a priority subject that will be addressed in future policymaking and will produce new legislation and measures to develop and deepen the ecosystem around it. Therefore, in the Council's decision 2023/936 (CEU, 2023), which is a policy document marked as a 'text with EEA relevance' (p. 1), the EYS has been envisaged as a policy device through which 'the Commission seeks to increase the momentum and foster the implementation of the many actions that it has already taken to strengthen reskilling and upskilling in the Union in order to address labour market shortages' (p. 3). Indeed, 'increase the momentum' has meant implementing a campaign with significative mediatic impact as, according to the European Pillar of Social Rights 1st Interim Survey Results,[22] the EYS messages 'reached millions of people and businesses all over Europe', particularly through dissemination of videos on YouTube and Twitch (90M views), and news in other social media (69M views), as well as diffusion through traditional national media, like TV (41M viewers in 5 targeted countries) and press (7M readers in media partnerships).

Being a legitimising communication-based scheme, accordingly with Lascoumes and Le Galès' typology (Table 1), the EYS has addressed the perceived need to deepen the skills universe rationale, crucial to competitiveness, into the ALIs and related lifelong learning ecosystems. The envisaged 'skills revolution'[23] has relied on the Network of National Coordinators as a policy instrument to regulate the spread of the

message from the political to the social level. For example, the key idea of a need to overcome the mismatch between labour skills demand and adult education supply, described in EU's main official statements, has been stressed as very relevant by our interviewee,

> 'I have been regularly in European meetings in different countries, for the sharing of best coordination practices that ensure the alignment between the needs of companies and people with the right skills, which today means digital and green skills'. In the context of the EYS, 'the dissemination activities have been mainly promoted by us with this key message, because the IEVT is very committed with the mismatch of skills, and, for example, we are the national coordinator entity[24] for the European Reskilling 4 Employment (R4E), but there are a myriad of other related actions in the VET provision, among which I can highlight the establishment of new partnerships with key market stakeholders like the SONAE GROUP,[25] also intended for the increase of reskilling opportunities, (…) this is fundamental as much EU's green and digital documents are aligned with the round table business, in Europe[26] and in USA,[27] and those are the stakeholders who make the definition of the current market needs, because they create jobs'. (Portugal E2_fev. 2024)

To some extent, that declaration elucidates aspects of how the priorities for the European education agenda are (globally) formulated and by whom. In this line of thought, the reason our liaison actor pointed to adopting and reinvesting in the Upskilling Pathways Initiative and the Skills Agenda(s) in the national context was justified on the basis that,

> Today it is mandatory for all to adapt (…) the speed of changes is fast and impacts society at large and all sorts of economic activities (…) if you don't adapt you perish, this is so, no matter the qualification level (…) every worker needs to be involved in upskills opportunities, I mean the high and the low skilled workers, everybody (…) particularly ICT upskilling is a transversal need. So, next year [2025] will be declared the European Year of Digital Citizenship. (Portugal E2_fev. 2024)

In fact, this key-multilevel actor perceived his own national coordination policy role, in disseminating the ICT skill-needs along lifelong learning ecosystems, as tactical mainly in view of the Digital Decade Policy Programme 2030.[28] Indeed, his transfer role is particularly impacting because the IEVT (that he codirects) has a structuring capacity in the Portuguese context, for being

> 'A national public institute with a tripartite management (between the State, employers and trade unions)', but also for having 'a long history in being the major entity in connection with the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)'and its accumulated experience in 'articulating VET practices'. (Portugal E2_fev. 2024)

In this context, having the 'skill-needs' as a priority in the country's policy agenda of learning activities for the adult population is, by itself, an illustrative result of

transnational policy actors actually working together, and being politically socialised in peer learning events that highlight this need. On this topic, it is worth remembering that skills are only a part of what adults in each community need to learn to achieve autonomy and improve knowledge, as academic critical literature has long demonstrated (e.g. Brookfield, 2012; Freire, 2005).

The interviewee also mentioned, several times, how important it was to attend the European meetings, and associated events, organised for national coordinators,

> During the mandate we have the opportunity to become involved in very interesting cross-national exchange visits, bringing together the different policy actors and high level counselling entities (…) we can learn about best practices from elsewhere, access best practices data-bases, and adopt policy ideas that work and have an impact in real terms, you see … we don't need to reinvent the wheel. (Portugal E2_fev. 2024)

This statement is relevant insofar as illustrating aspects of the backstage that allow one to understand how certain policies for adult education, like the ones that prioritised green and digital skills, become selected and privileged in the EEA, instead of others. If relevant liaison actors from different countries, with access to national policy-makers, perceive that a certain policy 'from elsewhere' works, then policy convergence can proceed, to make policy-makers voluntarily adopt it. Credibility in setting Member States policy agenda can be achieved by means of the complementary set of soft law mechanisms already available in the cross-loading type of Europeanisation processes, like the information-based policy instruments dedicated to disseminating evidence.

In fact, EU Institutions regularly provide explanations of decisions through highly distributed (increasingly online) policy reports, Working Group of Expert' deliverables, and a cascade of policy briefs, factsheets, and online frequently asked questions (FAQs), which are effective 'integrated digital marketing' strategies (Sayudin et al., 2023) to spread policy ideas in an appealing, clear, and concise manner. In other words, results show that more than the internal consistency of policy ideas, the way they are framed and presented, targeting transfer actors, affects policy-makers' decisions. This positions marketing in a central place of communication-based policy instruments (like the EYI) and draws attention to the need for research on the influence of neurosciences knowledge (e.g. for applied persuasion techniques) in the global era of policy making.

Actually, public or private events and conferences at service of regulatory policy instruments for public action, like the Network of National Coordinators, also use this referred set of dissemination products (usually created by communication specialist with an apparently neutral and technical discourse). Nevertheless, the 'mutual peer learning' strategy, extensively using these appealing materials, can be related to a persuasive power capacity inherent to 'the expert' symbolic meaning, that is, the 'persuasive effect of experts' (Klucharev et al., 2008), with a political utility for building (persuasive) learning epiphanies. Indeed, the 2022 Report[29] on

Progressing towards the European Education Area pointed out that working groups bringing together experts from Member States are the path towards a stronger governance. In this frame, the next statement is illustrative and interesting,

> I attended fascinating peer learning presentations (…) the selected best practices are always carefully prepared for us and shared with great enthusiasm (…) we receive clear information about evidence showing they have an impact, but…well, that's why they are the best ones! right? (..) usually proposals come from experienced policy advisors we can trust, as they demonstrate that implementation is technically workable … I mean they prove to 'fit within budgetary constraints' (…) therefore, are good ideas to be adopted for educational reforms. (Portugal E2_fev. 2024)

This perspective shows that appropriate best practices to be implemented, in the learning ecosystems of each country, need to be cost-effective and adequate to available resources of current programme calls and tenders. Budgetary and administrative constraints in Portuguese adult education governance relate frequently with challenges associated with policy implementation, whose solution usually implies the accountability of educational actors and the adoption of supervision mechanisms. The vision, prevailing in the EEA, about the control of outputs and Portugal's adult education governance specificities are illustrated next,

> Communication between the State and educational practitioners [Organisations and Institutions] develops mainly through the good practice of bookkeeping and reporting. That is, the public funding has a statutory obligation for beneficiaries which implies the duty to report outputs regularly, and this keeps regular communication alive. I mean … silence cannot happen, right? This is expected as a priority action (…) for example, a few years ago, in the context of national CNO [New Opportunity Centres], reporting on result of RVCC [recognition of prior learning] had even a conditioning assumption, with consequences for the funding in the next cycle of adult education practices … The principle is simple, if the policy implementation metrics were achieved, in the previous accessed period, then provision was maintained, and educators had a job. Although this requirement is no longer made, as some problems and bias were recognised, the obligation to report has remained, as it is a good practice (…) is useful for keeping the flow of [performance] indicators updated in the national databases (…) by experience [in the IEVT] I do know that data is essential, mainly for education and training good governance. (Portugal E2_fev. 2024)

In the case of the Portuguese policy agenda for the education of the adult population, a mix of policy strategies, combining several policy arrangements, has been in force, from the adoption of governing by numbers (Barros, 2020), with internal control devices aiming for efficient policy implementation, till the embracing of a focus on external events, aiming for policy dissemination of selective discourses, for example, lifelong learning instead of lifelong education or skills instead of competences (Barros, 2012). In fact, particularly, during the EYS a 'legitimation dynamics' was put in place, and has contributed to (re)create and broadcast the global prestige of EU as an UpToDate policy

actor, in the Portuguese society. If credibility can be achieved through repetition of persuasive ideas, we can see the effects of this mechanism of influence in action, as, for example, this testimony illustrates in a more complex way,

> Sometimes different events [targeting national coordinators] had some repetition of ideas … But that's because they are good ones! As the proposals work, then its normal, they are advocated with more emphasis, and repeated in different places where European meetings took place (…) for example, there was a complete consensus around the idea of Adult Learning having an essential role, in the EU, to allow workers to adapt to new emerging needs concerning digitalization and, then, improve our competitiveness in the global arena (…) also a common concern was how to build more capacity at local level to increase the awareness on the need to actively react to crises, like the one resulting from recent invasion of Ukraine (…) and spread resilience skills in the population to keep the European way of living (…) indeed, it is important to defend the European model of development against the current threats coming from Russia (…) also because our economy still depends on fossil fuels, we need to have skilled Europeans to deal with these new realities, particularly the pressing reality of energetic, green and digital transitions (…) this is the urgent kind of work that needs to be pursued to achieve the European Education Area in a short time. (Portugal E2_fev. 2024)

In short, in this subsection we have illustrated 'ways of doing things' through which cross-national policy actors work together setting up common interests that, indeed, Portuguese policy-makers have well adopted reproducing the European mainstream language, and its key ideas for educational reforms (the Qualify Industry Program[30] launched in 2023 is an example). The testimonies selected put a light on backstage processes, showing that current internal events for policy dissemination strategies, targeting liaison actors like the ones operating through the EU's Mutual Learning Programme, are effective in building a 'common policy speak', as a powerful ingredient for the establishment of 'political authority across nations' (Rauh & Zürn, 2019), convincing countries on the implementation of certain policies instead of others. We believe, the views and perceptions of the National Coordinator interviewed have brought interesting insights on dynamics and the role of current global mechanisms of influence.

Concluding remarks

In this article, we claim there has been a political building, based on the influential power of soft low mechanisms, of three interrelated learning epiphanies throughout 21st century Europe. Indeed, these 'illuminating realisations' emerged as a result of two and a half decades of a continuous, intensive, and effectively disseminated lifelong learning strategy, within the scope of which coordination (as a governance glue) and competitiveness (as a policy imaginary) were the leitmotifs to reach the current EEA.

We demonstrate that 'transfer agents' are key policy actors and privileged witnesses of how the coordination of 'the work to be done' is occurring in contemporary adult education governance. In fact, they are an integral part of the architectural process of the cross-loading type of Europeanisation, and count on an increasing capacity to provoke

processes of 'policy transfer' of ideas and norms, with capacity for mainstreaming 'policy imaginaries'. Results showed they are deeply involved in the 'ways of doing things' that create a 'policy influence flow' capable of (softly) introducing priority issues into countries' policy agendas. Furthermore, they are targeted by the European Council and European Commission to be in the centre of exchanges of best practices and experiences, in a sort of events that are conducted (e.g. by policy advisors and entrepreneurs) in a convincing way, that is, with potential for altering their beliefs and expectations and, by those means, facilitating a process where it becomes 'natural' to adhere to the policy ideas that are crucial in framing a 'common policy speak' based on 'European values, trust, and autonomy', to be disseminated across nations.

In this context, results also showed, on the one hand, (i) the centrality of persuasion by 'repetition of key ideas' (in online communication, policy documents, and peer learning events), as a way through which transferable aspects, chosen by policy-decision-makers (e.g. leaders at business round table), get a new look allowing influence to be exercised to set national agendas (e.g. in adult education). This manifests mainly in the 'networking strategy investment' that EU has been making when mobilising resources, in a permanent way, for high-level forums and mutual learning events targeting experts groups. This regulatory policy instrument has proved to be effective in filtering political oppositions, thoughtfully controlling dissensus, and constitutes a mechanism to actively promote intersubjective reliability by peer working, important for the implementation of EU policies, and can be illustrated by the national appropriation of the EEA disseminated discourses of goals, shared objectives, and scope, which circulate by a multiplication of means (e.g. seminars, conferences, and cross-national meetings) where key ideas are repeated and spread through open access appealing materials available to be cross-loaded (e.g. policy briefs, factsheets, and online FAQs). This creates the constellation of information-based framework through which liaison actors move and perform a 'policy in action' that facilitates support for adult education and training, and centrally envisaged, national reforms (e.g. through the domestic use of WGal deliverables).

On the other hand, results illustrate trends of (ii) the influential power in the European adult education policymaking, pointed out in recent literature (among others, Milana et al., 2020; Milana & Mikulec, 2023) about the changing relationship between the state and supranational education actors with credibility for a global setting. Against this backdrop, different sources of research finding reinforce the need to go beyond the problematisation of the state as a merely national entity. In this analytical angle, our results show that the investment in policy devices to build 'mutual trust' between the different sorts of Experts Working Groups (envisaged as regulatory policy instruments within the scope of coordination) has proved to be crucial, for example, to make credible the 'skills idiosyncrasies' (and its policy priorities), within the Member States' adult education policy agendas, thus enabling them to align their national policies and discourses to keep in step with European competitiveness appeal.

This has been visible, for example, in the transversal prevalence of the use of terms like skills over competences in the written discourses of core policy documents analysed. In this particular topic of the repetition of key ideas, our research has uncovered an interesting aspect of an apparently changing trend in the disseminated 'common policy

speak' of the last two decades in Europe, as the prevalence of the concept of 'learning' in the earliest phase of the building of learning epiphanies [e.g. at use in core documents like CEC (2001)] seems to be given place (again) to a current prevalence of the concept of education [e.g. at use in core documents like CEU (2021b)]. This fact leaves a clue for more research to be pursued in order to better understand this 'semantic looping' (from lifelong education to lifelong learning and back again), which we believe can be relevant to interpret the motivations behind the 'ways of doing communication' from the political to the social level.

In highlighting the linkages between the EYI, particularly the 2023–2024 EYS, and the spread of a common 'political wish' to make the EEA a reality enabling the overcoming of a 'skills gap' among the workforce and, by this means, contributing to (re)build Europe as the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, our study has also uncovered what seems to be another emerging facet of the current influential power of European soft law mechanisms, which appears not to be core grounded, as before, in findings of traditional areas of social sciences (like socioeconomics, management, and social psychology) but increasingly in fields like neurosciences and digital marketing. Therefore, even if the ambition of researching the dynamics of 'policy in action' is methodologically challenging for a solo researcher, we honestly believe the study has brought to light valid illustrative dimensions that can inspire new avenues for more research, complementing the scientific knowledge on the contemporary path to achieve consented norms and rules beyond the Nation State.

Finally, in this sense, at least one conclusion is very clear, the one arguing that a 'stronger' governance of contemporary adult education has been obtained by the systematic use of 'soft' law mechanisms. In other words, 'soft' means 'hard' on the pathway to the building of enabling learning epiphanies in Europe.

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Notes

1. In the fifties, no mentions to education can be found in the Treaty of Paris and the Treaties of Rome. See: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/1/os-tratados-iniciais.
2. Since then, concrete policy measures on lifelong learning in Europe should be based on five principles (p. 5). See: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52001IP0322.
3. In the Context of the EEA, the European Council defines ALIs as referring to 'to a range of formal and informal learning activities, both general and vocational, undertaken by adults after leaving initial education and training' (see: https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/adult-learning/about-adult-learning).
4. UNESCO, for example, states that UIL's work focuses today on the three main pillars of lifelong learning ecosystems (LLE), explaining that 'learning takes place across all ages and in diverse settings, whether in formal education and training institutions, at work or at home. Lifelong learning involves a broad set of knowledge, skills, competences and attitudes through which a learner's agency is both recognized and fostered. In the age of digital technology and AI, the learning ecosystem is interconnected, employing both online and offline resources to enable learning to take place anywhere, anytime, via individualized pathways' (Cf. https://www.uil.unesco.org/en/learning-ecosystems). Also, the EU is actively promoting an integrated learning ecosystem (ILE) that aims to ensure individuals and organisations can adapt to changing labour market and societal needs. Key Components of this European ILE have been detailed in CEDEFOP materials for 'Making learning progression a reality: policy scenarios towards 2040' (Cf. https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/news/making-learning-progression-reality-policy-scenarios-towards-2040). Another recent example is EU's 'Deep Tech Talent Initiative', tailored to prioritise adult learners in companies and startups who need additional skills in deep tech (aiming to 'create new ecosystems' that connect companies, investors, researchers, etc.). See: https://www.eitdeeptechtalent.eu/the-initiative/.
5. The regular Reports on the referred topics are available here: https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/country-reports/implementing-eu-priorities & https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/country-reports/european-inventory-on-validation.
6. The IEVT is the oldest Governance Structure for the Coordination of Portuguese Adult Learning System (ALS), and the only one permanently in force since 1979 up until now. See: https://www.iefp.pt/historia.
7. In 2000, the Lisbon European Council stated 'the Union has today set itself a new strategic goal for the next decade: 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' (see paragraph 5 here: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/lis1_en.htm).
8. The Global Competitiveness Report series are framed for 'transformation towards new economic systems that combine "productivity," "people," and "planet" targets' (see more details here: https://www.weforum.org/publications/the-global-competitiveness-report-2020/).
9. The ambition implied the development of EU's economic governance mechanisms over time (like the European Semester), to allow that 'the economies of the euro-area members become more integrated' (see more details here: https://european-union.europa.eu/institutions-law-budget/euro/history-and-purpose_en).

10. https://education.ec.europa.eu/about-eea.
11. The OMC has based its strength precisely on this type of regulatory policy instruments that have been proclaimed and adopted since the Lisbon Agenda. For example, in the framework of the 'Education & Training 2010', it is stated that 'working groups have been set up in successive waves since the second half of 2001 in order to support the implementation of the common objectives. This was necessary in order to identify the priority themes, make an inventory of existing experience, define a preliminary list of indicators for monitoring progress and to secure the consensus needed between all the interested parties' (2004, p. 4).
12. There is an emphasis (in official websites) on the need of Member States promoting ALIs that 'cover the entire adult population and all types of skills' and the key role that Working Groups play to make it a reality (e.g. https://wikis.ec.europa.eu/display/EAC/Adult+Learning).
13. Cf. here: https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/adult-learning/about-adult-learning.
14. Different devices regulate the 'ways of doing things' of the Working Groups, for example, the Horizontal Rules of Procedure (cf. here: https://health.ec.europa.eu/publications/commission-decision-c2016-3301-final_en), the Register of Commission Expert Groups (cf. Here: https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/expert-groups-register/screen/home?lang=en), and the Comitology Committees and Regulation (cf. here: https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/comitology-register/screen/faq?lang=en)
15. In this article, a 'hegemonic paradigmatic trend' refers to a dominant set of beliefs, ideas, or practices within the policy making venues. It exerts significant influence power and can shape how people think, act, and organise their coordination or implementation tasks. It is not just about power but also about the ways in which that power is maintained and legitimised, often through the incorporation of dominant values into everyday communication from the political to the social level.
16. The MLP focus is to 'encourage mutual learning opportunities resulting in policy influence at the EU and national levels' (cf. here. https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/european-employment-strategy/mutual-learning-programme_en).
17. The referred restricted access is clarified like this: participants in the peer learning events 'are European government representatives, as well as other relevant stakeholders' (cf. here: https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/european-employment-strategy/mutual-learning-programme/peer-learning-events-and-public-conferences_en).
18. Table 2 presents only part of the frequency results (the root of words was used to organise the units of meaning found in the material around the previously defined conceptual categories, seeking to find thematic patterns and draw conclusions in response to our research question).
19. It is stated that the Peer Learning Events, for example, through the MLP, have the goal 'to discuss a specific topic, with the view of identifying transferable aspects and learning from good practice examples and/or support the implementation of emerging policies or practices' (cf. here: https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/european-employment-strategy/mutual-learning-programme/peer-learning-events-and-public-conferences_en).
20. The NNCal 'coordinate and steer different actions in the field of adult learning by engaging with the main stakeholders involved, disseminating and implementing European policies and exchanging good practices and knowhow' (cf. here: https://epale.ec.europa.eu/en/resource-centre/content/national-coordinators-implementation-european-agenda-adult-learning).

21. The EYI have been running for nearly four decades, signalling different sorts of policy priorities among time (cf. here: https://european-union.europa.eu/priorities-and-actions/european-years_en).
22. The Survey's main objective was 'to measure the campaign's impact among the EYS target audiences in a selection of 12 countries, focusing on the Skills topic' (cf. here: https://year-of-skills.europa.eu/document/download/61aa8f9b-95bc-47b4-a788-7f187c295582_en?filename=EYS-results-presentation_2024.pdf).
23. In fact, skills have been at the centre of EU policies, for example, with over 190 initiatives in the EYS (cf. here: https://year-of-skills.europa.eu/document/download/22bb1aa3-1efe-46af-8a19-f6ca83eccf4f_en).
24. This involves coordination of more than 120 enterprises in Portugal and 8 in-action laboratories in an ecosystem created in 2021 and called PRO_MOV (cf. here: https://pro-mov.pt/).
25. Sonae is a Portuguese multinational, managing a diversified portfolio of businesses in retail, real estate, telecommunications, technology, and financial services (cf. here: https://sonae.pt/en/).
26. The European Round Table for Industry (ERT) membership only occurs by invitation and links individuals that are 'united by a vision for a strong, open and competitive Europe' (cf. here: https://ert.eu/).
27. USA's Business Roundtable members are 'leaders, advocating for policy solutions that foster America economic growth and competitiveness' (cf. here: https://www.businessroundtable.org/.
28. In its founding 'Declaration on Digital Rights', the importance of ensuring that EU's values are at the centre of the forthcoming digital future is stated (cf. here: https://commission.europa.eu/europes-digital-decade-digital-targets-2030-documents_en).
29. The Report considers the expert groups as key pillars of the building of a 'genuine EEA' (cf. here: https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/eb9b7e17-66f5-11ed-b14f-01aa75ed71a1/language-en).
30. Law n. 282/2023 of 14 of September.

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