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Referentiality mechanisms in EU education policymaking: The case of the European Education Area

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Abstract

In 2017, the European Union (EU) initiated the development of the European Education Area (EEA). The referentiality approach frames an original and timely inquiry into how EU policymakers explain the reasons for the development of the EEA. This inquiry relies on thematic analysis of relevant key policy materials, produced by the European Commission and the Council of the EU. The findings highlight a range of internal and external referentiality mechanisms that EU policymakers use to justify the development of the EEA. Internal references are related mainly to education traditions in the EU as a strong foundation for the EEA and the source of its ideas; the beliefs that the EEA can help overcome the interlocking crises the EU has faced in its recent past in the area of education as well as more generally; as well as the organisation of the EEA as part of the functioning of the EU, with both mutually shaping each other. External references are used to build on this and boost the competitiveness of EU's education sector and the EU as a region in the world. These findings address important gaps in our knowledge about EU policymakers' reasons for the development of the EEA. They enrich the limited literature about the EEA, make a theoretical contribution by extending the application of the referentiality

approach and call policy actors at all levels of the EEA to facilitate a shared understanding of the reasons for the development of the EEA to ensure that their work serves EEA's purpose.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The European Union (EU) has been coordinating a number of education policy initiatives, some of which reached far beyond the boundaries of the EU, such as the European Higher Education Area and the Erasmus Plus Programme. In 2017, the EU instigated the development of another initiative—the European Education Area (EEA)—specifically for the EU. The website of the European Commission details that the EEA is an EU project, which commenced in 2017 to enable *"all young people to benefit from the best education and training, and to find employment across Europe"* (EC, 2020). The EEA comprises a number of initiatives across all levels and types of education in the EU, such as: mutual recognition of diplomas, quality in early childhood education and care, language learning, key competencies for lifelong learning, the digital education action plan, common values, the European universities initiative, and the European student card initiative. The European Commission (EC, 2018a) summarises the vision for the EEA as follows.

> In its contribution to the Leaders' meeting in Gothenburg, the Commission set out a vision for a European Education Area by 2025: 'a Europe in which learning, studying and doing research would not be hampered by borders. A continent, where spending time in another Member State—to study, to learn, or to work—has become the standard and where, in addition to one's mother tongue, speaking two other languages has become the norm. A continent in which people have a strong sense of their identity as Europeans, of Europe's cultural heritage and its diversity.' (EC, 2018a, p. 5)

This article sets out to answer the question: *how do EU policymakers justify the development of the EEA by the usage of referentiality mechanisms?* The referentiality approach that originates from the works of Luhmann (1986a, 1986b, 1990) and Schriewer (1992) for the analysis of the justification of education policies, frames this original and timely inquiry. The analysis in this article relies on a thematic analysis of relevant key policy materials, produced by the European Commission and the Council of the EU.

The article argues that EU policymakers use a range of internal and external referentiality mechanisms to justify the development of the EEA. The article starts with the explanation of the referentiality approach and its links to other dominant theories in EU studies. Next, the literature on EU education policymaking is explored, highlighting the emerging and still very limited body of literature about the EEA—which showcases the gap about the reasons for the development of the EEA. Then, the methods are explained, followed by the presentation of the findings.

These findings address important gaps in our knowledge about EU policymakers' reasons for the development of the EEA. They enrich the limited literature about the EEA, make a theoretical contribution by extending the application of the referentiality approach and call policy actors at all levels of the EEA to facilitate a shared understanding of the reasons for the development of the EEA to ensure that their work serves EEA's purpose.

2 | BRIDGING EU POLICYMAKING AND THE REFERENTIALITY APPROACH

A range of approaches are used to theorise EU policymaking: institutionalism, neo-institutionalism (Jones, 2018), intergovernmentalism (Jones, 2018), new intergovernmentalism (Falkner, 2016), liberal intergovernmentalism (Borzel & Risse, 2018), transactionalism, new supranationalism (Falkner, 2016), functionalism, neofunctionalism (Borzel & Risse, 2018) and postfunctionalism (Schimmelfennig, 2018). There are many similarities amongst these

theoretical approaches, particularly in their focus on EU integration—the strengthening and structuring of the relationships amongst EU member states, between EU member states and EU candidate countries as well as between the EU and the United Kingdom after Brexit (Kushnir et al., 2020). For instance, both new intergovernmentalism and liberal intergovernmentalism see national governments as the main actors of integration policy in the EU. However, the former approach emphasises consensual agreement as the major decision-making mode, while the latter one points out the role of bargaining (Hatton, 2011).

There is no consensus as to what theoretical approach is the most suitable to describe EU's recent context. For example, Falkner (2016) explains that while new supranationalism may be developing, new intergovernmentalism will potentially dominate in EU policymaking in the future. However, Borzel and Risse (2018) claim that liberal intergovernmentalism, neofunctionalism and postfunctionalism have already become the dominant theoretical approaches. Moreover, none of the above theoretical approaches can fully explain the integration trajectories that the EU adopted after its different crises. For instance, Borzel and Risse (2018) maintain that none of the dominant approaches—liberal intergovernmentalism, neofunctionalism or postfunctionalism—can fully explain why the Euro crisis led to a substantial deepening of European financial relationships, while EU member states opted for disintegration while dealing with the recent migrant crisis.

Given the ambiguities around the ever-growing theoretical array for the analysis of policymaking in the EU, this article seeks to go beyond these more *traditional* approaches. It appeals to a new referentiality approach, which has more sociological roots and has been adopted in the area of international education. Applying it to the analysis of EU policymaking in education in this article enables us to learn how EU policymakers explain the reasons for the development of the EEA.

Policymaking in the area of education, like in any other area, is induced by certain pressures and this is reflected in the ways in which the policy is justified. Steiner-Khamsi emphasises that "*using references as sources of authority—internal or external, domestic or international—is endemic to education, which is under constant public pressure to legitimize its practices, values and forms of organization*" (Steiner-Khamsi, 2002, p. 70).

The literature that explores how policies are justified by using references as sources of authority has been developing for a few decades now. Steiner-Khamsi (2002) and Perry and Tor (2009) explain that the approach combines Luhmann's self-referential social systems theory and Schriewer's externalisation thesis.

Luhmann's Self-referential Social Systems Theory is developed through his multiple works, such as Luhmann (1986a, 1986b, 1990). A couple of pillars of this theory can be identified. First, social systems exist, and different societies are examples of such social systems. According to this logic, the EU can, arguably, be positioned as a social system. The second pillar of the self-referential social systems theory is that social systems are *autopoietic*, which means self-organising as they aim to solve problems that threaten their functioning and existence. They do this through recurrent self-referentiality—social systems reflect on how they function and look within themselves to find justifications for their need to exist.

Schriewer (1992) used Luhmann's idea of self-referentiality of social systems as a foundation to suggest that the self-organisation process of social systems involves not only self-referentiality but also its opposite mechanism—externalisation. In his further work, Schriewer (2000) focused on policymaking, expanded his discussion and explained that self-referentiality means making references to internal sources of authority to justify reforms, while externalisation means referring to external sources of authority to make such justifications. Hence, the roots of self-referentiality are in Luhmann's theory but Schriewer elaborated on the meaning of self-referentiality and added externalisation while demonstrating how these two mechanisms work in a policy context.

Luhmann's (1986a, 1986b, 1990) and Schriewer's works (1992, 2000) were later applied to the area of education policymaking by, for instance, Steiner-Khamsi (2002), Luschei (2004), Silova (2004) and Vavrus (2004) and Kushnir (2015). Steiner-Khamsi states that "*education constitutes an ideal site for studying referentiality*" (Steiner-Khamsi, 2002, p. 70). Steiner-Khamsi also specifies the meaning of the two referentiality mechanisms in the area of education policymaking. According to her, self-referentiality, that allows education systems to self-perpetuate themselves, involves internal references to tradition, beliefs and organisation. What concerns externalisation, education systems turn to this mechanism in justifying policy innovation when internal references are not enough to solve the problem

or justify the need to do that. She notes in this vein that *"In times of rapid social, economic and political change [...] internal references fail to justify the persistence or introduction of reforms"* (Steiner-Khamsi, 2002, p. 70).

3 | THE EDUCATION POLICY SPACE OF AN EU SOCIETY

The existence of EU or European society is advocated by the literature that investigates the relationship between EU governing structures and its wider civil society (e.g., Kohler-Koch & Finke, 2007; Kohler-Koch & Quittkat, 2013) as well as the literature on European identity formation (e.g., Childe, 2009; Kushnir, 2016). A great deal of the analysis in this article rests on the idea that an EU or European society exists. This is important for positioning the EU as a society that exemplifies Luhmann's (1986b) social systems, as Luhmann (1986b) states that different societies make social systems which are, by their nature, self-organising. According to this logic, the EU can, arguably, be positioned as a social system, governed by EU policymakers and the wider civil society in the EU.

The formation of an EU society has been taking place in the midst of a number of interlocking crises in the EU, such as economic, political, security, external relations crises (Falkner, 2016; Seabrooke & Tsingou, 2018; Taggrat & Szczerbiak, 2018), a migration crisis (Balkan, 2016) as well as the recent health crisis in the context of the pandemic (Reusken et al., 2020).

In light of the challenges that the EU was experiencing in the aftermath of its formal establishing by the Maastricht Treaty in 1993, the EU set out *"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"* (Gillies, 2019, p. 1, citing European Parliament, 2000). This goal was set in the Lisbon Strategy of 2000 and sparked an accelerated growth of EU education policies (Gillies, 2019).

This growth was accompanied by a shift from politico-economic to economic-functional goals in EU education policymaking (Walkenhorst, 2008). One of the indicators of the change has been a move towards an intergovernmental mode of policymaking. Despite this transition, the work of EU policymaking bodies remained important. According to Walkenhorst

> The Council of Education Ministers has held regular meetings since the 1970s, both the European Parliament and the European Commission have established separate administrative divisions to deal with education, there is a relevant budget chapter [...] EU education policy is backed by sanction as it is subject to scrutiny by the European Court of Justice. (Walkenhorst, 2008, p. 568)

The Lisbon Strategy, mentioned above, was at the heart of the development of the European Higher Education Area through the Bologna Process. This is a policy initiative to harmonise higher education structures and promote the European dimension of higher education. The Bologna Process which became the biggest higher education initiative in the world was originally an EU initiate which eventually transformed into a wider European project that crossed the borders of the EU, to encompass the geographical Europe and some countries beyond it as well (Kushnir, 2016). It came to be known as the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). This is where a tension lies between the Bologna Process and the initiatives that it encompassed. On one hand, the Bologna Process was one of the tools for achieving the goal that the EU set up for itself at the Lisbon European Council meeting in 2000—to become the most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world. On the other hand, the territorial expansion of the EHEA through the implementation of the Bologna Process in different countries has blurred the meaning of a *European* education space as it was not limited to the EU anymore. The term *European* did not refer to an *EU* education space, it was wider. The emergence of the European education space as a dynamic space of flexible meanings (Kushnir, 2016; Novoa & Lawn, 2002) invites us to view the EU education space as a nested space within a wider European education space.

EU countries are part of the EHEA. The studies about it focus on the following key aspects of the influence of EU integration on higher education: changes in the governing of higher education on the national level; changes

in the governing of higher education institutions (Charlier & Croché, 2005; De Wit, 2003; Lowe, 1992; Maassen & Olsen, 2007; Maassen & Musselin, 2009); changes in the governing of research in higher education (Amaral et al., 2009), the impact of EU integration on private higher education institutions (Kwiek, 2007), and the European integration of higher education through student mobility (Papatsiba, 2006).

There is research on integration tendencies in education in Europe in general, not limited to higher education—termed a *European education area* in the sense of a European education space (Grek & Lawn, 2009; Lawn, 2003). However, it is not the European Education Area (EEA) that was officially initiated by the EU in 2017. The European Commission Directorate General for Education and Culture coordinated a number of initiatives that collectively came to be known as the Education and Training (ET) Work frameworks for 2010–2020. They consider *"the whole spectrum of education and training systems from the perspective of lifelong learning, covering all levels and contexts (including non-formal and informal education)"* (Ionela & Camelia, 2014, p. 330).

The literature specifically on the EEA is limited. The EEA has been explored from the following angles in the scholarship: digitalisation of education in the EU (Decuypere & Simons, 2020; Salajan, 2019) and student mobility within the EEA (Grinberga-Zalite et al., 2018), national responses to the initiative illustrated by the case of Croatia (Kasap et al., 2018), the governance of the EEA which resembles the governance of the EU through the creation and expansion of interest groups that coordinate stocktaking and benchmarking (Cone & Brogger, 2020). The first two topics are similar in the sense that they focus on two policy initiatives within the EEA, linked to its action lines. The study about the Croatian national response also touches on EEA's action lines but it places more emphasis on how the implementation was governed nationally and its preliminary results. The standardisation tendencies portrayed in the last study are presented as examples of the integration of the EU policy field in the area of education.

The study presented in this article is the closest in its scope to the study by Cone and Brogger (2020) because it also explores the EEA's international level of policymaking and draws parallels between EEA and EU governance. The difference is that while Cone and Brogger (2020) demonstrate the similarities of how the EEA and the EU more widely are governed through such similar mechanisms as interest groups, stocktaking and benchmarking, the study presented in this article, explores a new angle by uncovering the reasons of EU policymakers to develop the EEA and how they link to the crafting of the EU project more widely. This is accomplished through the adoption of referentiality as an original lens for this analysis.

It is also important to mention that some references to the EEA can be found in the literature prior to 2017 (Burnett, 2007; Fernández, 2014; Kirkwood-Tucker, 2004; Lentner, 2007; Salimova et al., 2012) but they are used as synonyms of the European Higher Education Area. The emergence of the EEA in 2017 as a separate initiative makes such synonyms inappropriate now. The development of the EEA is a milestone in demarcating the borders of, specifically, the EU education space.

4 | METHODOLOGY

The data informing this article were collected in the framework of a larger project focused on the role of the EEA in EU integration. Although I did not set out to research how EU policymakers justify the establishment of the EEA by the usage of referentiality mechanisms, this emerged as a key theme in the data, and it forms the focus of the current article.

The larger project, in the framework of which this article was developed, was a qualitative study, consisting of policy analysis. Key international policy materials relevant to the development of the EEA were collected from the website of the European Commission and qualitative thematic analysis was applied to these materials. The data collection and analysis was conducted between January and March 2020.

Seven key documents of different types, issued between 2017 and 2019, were collected as well as the initial press release of the European Commission to announce the EEA initiative. The choice of this timeframe was dictated by the commencement of the work on the EEA by EU leaders at their meeting on 17 November 2017 in

Gothenburg, Sweden; also, the fact that the latest relevant key documents at the time of the data collection were issued in 2019. The following documents were collected in addition to the European Commission press release by Bertaud et al. (2017): a resolution of the Council of the European Union (2019); and six documents by the European Commission, including two communications of the European Commission issued in 2017 and 2018, a report by the Directorate-General (DG) for Communication (2018), and three supplementary documents by the European Commission presented at the EEA section of the European Commission website (EC, 2020). It is worth acknowledging that few other documents supplementing each of the action lines exist. For this research, only key documents about the EEA in general were targeted. Therefore, the materials selected for analysis should be treated as a purposeful sample of the EEA materials that explain the emergence and governance of the EEA overall. The selected documents were listed as key documents in the European Commission press release (Bertaud et al., 2017) and the EEA section of the European Commission website (EC, 2020).

Manual thematic analysis of these materials was conducted. The thematic analysis followed Rubin and Rubin's (2012) guide for open and axial coding of themes. Open coding entailed breaking down the data in the documents into themes, sub-themes, sub-sub-themes and so on, while being open to different insights. The open coding was guided by theoretical ideas around EU integration in times of crises and yielded three main themes: (1) *the context of crises*, (2) *deepening of the EEA*, and (3) *EU deepening through the deepened EEA*. A number of sub-themes were identified within each of these themes. Each of the sub-themes were further sub-categorised supported by a list of relevant quotations from the EEA materials. The open coding of themes relied partially on key concepts in different linguistic forms that helped to generate some themes, such as the words *crisis, challenge, difficulty, uncertainty, struggle, problem* and *shortage* in the first theme *the context of crises*, for instance. Additionally, the open coding for the themes relied on the overall meaning of sentences that could convey the same ideas without explicitly mentioning any of the crisis-related synonyms. The sentence "*Europe does not excel in delivering high-quality skills*" (EC, 2017, p. 2) does not contain any of the crisis-related terms but conveys a crisis-related meaning, using other linguistic tools, such as the negation of the desirable. The open stage of coding was guided by deductive analytical strategies—shaped by the dominant theoretical approach. The themes and their subordinate themes from the open coding were regrouped in the axial coding, relying on inductive analytical strategies, and consequently, highlighting the nature of the relationship amongst them. The thematic analysis was recorded on 22 pages of a Word document.

For the purpose of this article, another round of axial coding was conducted to single out and regroup the justifications for the development of the EEA from the three key themes into *self-referentiality mechanisms* and *externalisation*. The theme *self-referentiality* included three main foci, following Steiner-Khamsi's (2002) definition of self-referentiality as the mechanism that involves internal references to traditions, beliefs and organisation. Herein, the term *tradition* means established ways of member states' working together on education projects in the past, *beliefs* are about the purpose of the development of the EEA, and *organisation* pertains to how the work on the EEA is organised and positioned within the wider structures of the EU.

Both major themes—*self-referentiality mechanisms* and *externalisation*—included references to EU education in particular as well as the EU overall. To illustrate, the theme *deepening of the EEA* included internal and external references for education policymaking in the EEA per se. The theme, *EU deepening through the deepened EEA* also included similar references but they pertained to the justifications of the development of the EEA for wider purposes.

5 | REFERENTIALITY MECHANISMS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EUROPEAN EDUCATION AREA

EU policymakers use a range of internal and external referentiality mechanisms as sources of authority to justify the development of the EEA—which they position as an integral part of the functioning of the EU. These

mechanisms include self-referentiality and externalisation that any self-organising social system can use, as explained by Schriewer (1992). The data showcases that the internal references are related mainly to the need to overcome the interlocking crises the EU has faced in its recent past—in the area of education in particular as well as more generally. External references are used to build on this and boost the global competitiveness of education in the EU, and the EU as a region.

5.1 | Self-referentiality

Schriewer (2000), focusing broadly on policymaking, explains that self-referentiality means making references to internal sources of authority to justify reforms. What concerns education specifically, self-referentiality involves internal references to tradition, beliefs and organisation (Steiner-Khamsi, 2002).

5.1.1 | Tradition in education

The EEA materials cite a number of other projects that have traditionally come to be associated, at least partially, with EU education and have now formed the foundation for the development of the EEA. These include the Creative Europe Programme that supports a transnational cultural project (EC, 2017, p. 9); since 2000, the Strategic Framework for European cooperation in education and training (DG for Communication, 2018, p. 2); the project *Move2Learn Learn2Move* that supports young Europeans to discover and learn about Europe (EC, 2017, p. 5); the Erasmus+ programme, the European Solidarity Corps and the Bologna Process more widely (Bertaud et al., 2017). The Bologna Process is the largest of these projects. According to Vögtle and Martens (2014), it is the largest higher education initiative in the world. It aims to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) with comparable higher education structures within it to provide opportunities for academic and job mobility, and cultural exchange. The Bologna Process currently encompasses 49 countries and major developments in their higher education systems; for example, a common system of study credits, cycles of study progression; the development of a diploma supplement for graduates, to promote mutual recognition of higher education qualifications; the promotion of student and faculty mobility and shared quality assurance practices in higher education in Europe (EHEA, 2020). A lot of the work of the EEA is about advancing the action lines of the Bologna Process specifically for the EU countries. This can be exemplified by how the EEA relies on the Bologna Process action line about the recognition of higher education qualifications. "*A European Area of Education should include* [...] *The mutual recognition of diplomas: by initiating a new 'Sorbonne process', building on the 'Bologna process', to prepare the ground for the mutual recognition of higher education and school leaving diplomas*" (Bertaud et al., 2017). Evidently, the EEA builds on the Bologna Process action line related to the recognition of higher education qualifications and adds another focus on the recognition of school leaving diplomas. This is an internal reference to tradition as the Bologna Process originally started as an EU initiative. Similar developments exist in the work of the EEA towards its other goals that overlap with the Bologna Process, such as cross-border mobility and quality assurance (Council of the EU, 2019, p. 4). They get expanded in the EEA due to the inclusion of non-tertiary education developments. In addition to statements like this, the EEA materials evidence the decision to maintain all "Bologna commitments" in the work towards the EEA specific idea of the creation of European inter-university campuses (EC, 2019a, p. 7).

Aside from the established education traditions through the concrete projects, the EU member states' "*tried-and-tested ways of working together*" (EC, 2017, p. 12) on these projects is another reason to consolidate the work on the development of an education space specifically for EU member states—the EEA—and hope for its success.

Beliefs about the context of the EEA

Aside from the traditions on which the EEA is founded, the authors of the EEA documents express specific beliefs. The beliefs articulated are important contextual factors that are fundamental to understand why the EEA is important for the EU. These beliefs, arguably, shape the organisation of the link between the EEA and the EU, discussed in the next section. One group of these belief are about the EU which is the wider context of the EEA. The other group comprises the beliefs about the EU education field, which has celebrated a range of achievements but which still needs improvements. This is another important contextual feature of the EEA that has been integrating the EU education policy field.

The EU tends to be characterised in a very positive way in the EEA materials which present the EEA as a project for the EU. The 2017 Communication cites Juncker, the former President of the European Commission, who in the European Commission's White Paper on the Future of Europe noted that the European Union has improved the lives of people in the EU (EC, 2017, p. 12). The EU is also presented as a *"unique project"* in the European Commission document (2017, p. 2). The existence of the EU is seen by the European Commission as particularly important now because it enables EU member states to deal with emerging problems. *"The EU is the best instrument we have for addressing the new challenges we are facing"* (EC, 2017, p. 1 citing the Bratislava declaration). The fact that internal references to the EU are used as a mechanism to address these challenges is surprising at first sight as Steiner-Khamsi suggests that self-referentiality fails to justify policy innovations in times of rapid social, economic and political change (Steiner-Khamsi, 2002, p. 70). However, a deeper analysis of the crises that the EU has been facing suggests that the recent challenges are not novel and sudden—the EU has dealt with problems throughout the history of its existence.

The literature about EU integration highlights a number of the same crises in the EU as the EEA materials mention (Balkan, 2016; Falkner, 2016; Reusken et al., 2020; Seabrooke & Tsingou, 2018; Taggrat & Szczerbiak, 2018). These include crises that pertain to economy and security (EC, 2017); migration (Bertaud et al., 2017; EC, 2017, 2019b), political developments (Bertaud et al., 2017; Council of the EU, 2019; EC, 2017) and health (EC, 2019b). Aside from these crises, a number of other overlapping crises in the EU feature in the EEA materials: populism (Bertaud et al., 2017; EC, 2017, 2018a), the phenomenon of *fake news* and media illiteracy (Bertaud et al., 2017; Council of the EU, 2019; EC, 2017, 2018a, 2019b), xenophobia (Bertaud et al., 2017; EC, 2017, 2018a), discrimination (EC, 2018a), the risk of radicalisation (EC, 2017), the crisis of democracy (EC, 2017, 2019b), unemployment (EC, 2017), a gap between a rising skills demand by employers and the skillset of the population (Council of the EU, 2019; EC, 2017, 2019b), persistent social inequalities (Council of the EU, 2019; EC, 2017), ageing population (Council of the EU, 2019; EC, 2017), overall underperforming of the EU in its excellence in different areas in comparison to other countries, particularly Asian countries (EC, 2017). Moreover, the materials that were analysed mention a couple of globalisation challenges that the EU faces, such as climate change (Council of the EU, 2019; EC, 2019b) and sustainability problems (Council of the EU, 2019).

Education in the EU has celebrated a range of achievements. Its track record of promoting mobility is believed to be excellent (DG for Communication, 2018; EC, 2017). It is also mentioned that *"Education and training systems in Europe are* [already] *in general of good quality"* and that the EU is already an attractive place to study (EC, 2017, p. 4). Moreover, significant progress has been made towards the EEA (Council of the EU, 2019) which is an encouragement for further work in developing it. Particularly as a number of problems in EU education are believed to persist. These include obstacles to student mobility within the EU due to legal obstacles imposed by borders and financial constraints (Bertaud et al., 2017; DG for Communication, 2018; EC, 2017, 2018b); a number of gaps in student participation in education on different levels, particularly gender disparity in choosing to study science, technology, engineering and math. Further, a limited pursuit of inter-disciplinary studies and participation of adults in lifelong learning (EC, 2017); a shortage of digital equipment in schools and teacher training programmes in IT (EC, 2017, 2019b); and the existence of a big share of low achievers in education most of whom come from poor households (EC, 2017, 2018b). Some of these challenges resonate with what is also discussed in

other studies about the EEA, such as academic mobility issues (Grinberga-Zalite et al., 2018) and digitalisation problems (Salajan, 2019).

5.1.2 | The EEA and the EU contribute to shaping each other as organisations

The mirroring foci of the discussion above about the EU and its EEA also defines how the work on the EEA is organised and positioned within the wider structures of the EU. The education space of the EU represented by the newly established EEA is juxtaposed to the wider functioning of the EU, which highlights their inextricable role in shaping each other. *"The European project has always been about overcoming* [internal] *borders and allowing for free movement [...] we see an increasing interest in cross-border cooperation and mobility for both learners and cultural and creative works in all EU member states* (EC, 2017, p. 4).

The similarity of developments for open borders within the EU and its EEA can also be traced in the plethora of statements about both the EU acting as an indispensable creator of the EEA with all of its benefits, and vice versa. The EEA is depicted as a key to ensuring a more united EU in the future. Here follow a couple of exemplary quotations of the former idea: *"We need the EU to serve better their needs and wishes to live, study, work, move and prosper freely across our continent and benefit from the rich European cultural heritage"* (EC, 2017, p. 1 citing the Bratislava declaration); a *"Union where young people receive the best education and training and can study and find jobs across the* [European] *continent"* (Bertaud et al., 2017).

While the EU is portrayed as acting as a creator of the EEA, the EEA, in its turn, is presented in the EEA materials as being key to building a very much needed increased unity within the EU in the future. *"Education and culture are the key to the future—both for the individual as well as for our Union as a whole* (EC, 2017, p. 1 citing former EC President Juncker).

The analysis above has illustrated references to tradition, beliefs and organisation in the self-referentiality mechanism at work in the EEA materials to justify the development of the EEA. The next section explores the other key referentiality mechanism—externalisation.

5.2 | Externalisation

Externalisation is presented by Schriewer (1992) as a mechanism, which is opposite to self-referentiality. According to him, externalisation means referring to external sources of authority to justify reforms. Steiner-Khamsi (2002) as well as Perry and Tor (2009) explain that policymakers opt for externalisation particularly in times of rapid changes when internal references would fail to justify reforms. Indeed, a range of rapid changes rooted in the global context form the foundation for the externalisation mechanism that EU policymakers have used to justify the development of the EEA. This mechanism is related to EU's international competitiveness. Other groups of countries, such as non-EU states or Asian countries, as well as globalisation in general are part of the statements that showcase externalisation mechanisms. One may counter this by saying that international competitiveness is as much about externalisation as it is about self-referentiality because it maintains the focus on the internal—it is about how much the internal can compete with the outside world. While there is logic behind claims like this, equating externalisation to self-referentiality or blurring the boundary between them completely in this case would be erroneous (although a possibility of overlaps is not rejected here). It is because competitiveness is essentially about comparing how well the internal does in relation to the external. Such comparison presupposes the acknowledgement of the entities that exist externally. Both self-referentiality and externalisation provide justifications for reforms in a particular context that can be understood as *internal*. However, while self-referentiality is about using internal references to justify reforms in a particular context, externalisation may bring in external elements to justify reforms in this same context.

The international competitiveness of the EU is a very strong theme in the data. In addition to the crises in the EU overall and its education explicated earlier, the EEA materials recognise that the excellence of the EU in general is contested and that education in the EU is lagging behind in comparison to other counties. The European Commission notes that many are worried about Europe's *"place in the world"* (EC, 2017, p. 1). A concern is raised that while there is ambition to engage with new developments, Europe does not excel in delivering high-quality skills, that even the best-performing member states *"are outperformed by advanced Asian countries"* (EC, 2017, p. 2).

The EEA is presented in these materials as a vehicle for driving the competitiveness of EU education systems in particular, and of the EU as a whole. The European Education Area is understood as a mechanism for enabling EU member states to do more, faster, to drive up the quality, *competitiveness* and inclusiveness of their education and training systems; meanwhile, also to provide *"inspiration for non-EU countries to follow"* (EC, 2018a, p. 6). High-quality education and training is here understood to provide the Union a *competitive* edge in an increasingly digital and knowledge-based *global* economy (Council of the EU, 2019, p. 1).

What concerns the competitiveness of EU education in particular, EU policymakers place a lot of emphasis on higher education by aspiring to *"increase* [the] *international competitiveness of European higher education"* (EC, 2019a, p. 2); ensuring that Europe is an attractive place to study for people from other countries (EC, 2017, p. 4); creating a competitive world-class European university (Bertaud et al., 2017). Also, by ensuring that *"more EU universities top international ranking*[s]*"*—as currently, out of 50 top universities in the world, only ten are located in the EU (EC, 2017, p. 4). Higher education is emphasised perhaps because it may be seen by EU policymakers as the area that can demonstrate impact within a relatively short time, other levels of education are not ignored. The competitiveness of all levels of education are implied in statements that the EEA is about developing *the best education* (Bertaud et al., 2017; Council of the EU, 2019; DG for Communication, 2018; EC, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b).

> The significant progress made towards the European Education Area and the importance of reinforcing the commitment towards the ambitious further development of its goals, objectives and scope, in order to make the vision of the European Education Area a reality and to make Europe *the leading learning society in the world*; contributing to a culture that encourages, empowers and motivates people and societies to learn and innovate, including all levels and forms of education and training and all stages of life. (Council of the EU, 2019, p. 2, added emphasis)

This quote unveils the meaning of EU competitiveness. Becoming the world leading learning society is one of many other similar references that emphasise the competitiveness of the EU, such as becoming *"a Union where citizens have new opportunities for cultural and social development and economic growth"* (EC, 2017, p. 1 citing the Rome declaration), and allowing talent in Europe to flourish (Council of the EU, 2019, p. 1). Economic growth is a key pillar in EU competitiveness, whereby the EEA is meant to support the resilience of the EU economy which is essential for the overall resilience of the EU in the global context.

> Education is part of the solution to get more people into decent jobs, respond better to the economy's skills needs and strengthen Europe's resilience in a context of the rapid and profound change induced by the technological revolution and *globalization*. (EC, 2017, p. 2, added emphasis)

Aside from all of these explicit references to the competitiveness of the EU, there is a handful of references about EU's work towards common global action lines, such as global health, climate protection in particular (EC, 2019a) as well as the whole set of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Council of the EU, 2019; EC, 2019a).

> European action for [the] Green Europe [agenda …] needs to involve all levels and all forms of education and training and all stages of life, enabling activities initiated at local and regional level

and in cooperation with civil society, with the aim of moving forward towards the implementation of the relevant *UN Sustainable Development Goals.* (Council of the EU, 2019, p. 2, added emphasis)

It is debatable whether these infrequent references are about EU's competition in the global arena, or instead, its cooperation with other countries and regions in achieving common targets. Arguably, it is both as a degree of competitive spirit drives everyone in the race towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals along with a sense of collective responsibility for the future of the world. This form of cooperation is termed *coopetition* in literature about the Sustainable Development Goals. *Coopetition* is a neologism that denotes hybrid behaviour that *"refers to the collaborative efforts of competitors with the aim of achieving mutually beneficial results"* (Hafezalkotob, 2017, p. 229).

6 | CONCLUSION

This article has explored a range of internal and external referentiality mechanisms that EU policymakers use as sources of authority to justify the development of the EEA. This exploration relied on thematic analysis of relevant key policy materials, produced by the European Commission and the Council of the EU. The analysis has revealed a range of aspects of self-referentiality in the justification of the EEA. The EU has a strong tradition in building its education space, however, a lot of its work was not confined by EU borders, such as in the case of the Bologna Process. Now, the EEA aims to advance the strengths of many of the past projects specifically for EU member states by focusing on all the levels and types of education. Internal references used to justify the development of the EEA are also related to expressing the beliefs that the EEA can help overcome the interlocking crises the EU has faced in its recent past in the area of education as well as more generally. The development of the EEA is also justified by referring to how the work on the EEA is organised and positioned within the wider structures of the EU. The most striking finding is the strategic importance of the EEA for the existence of the EU. In a way, the EEA is positioned in the EEA materials as a moulder of the future of the EU, due to its capacity to raise the citizens the EU needs—valuing diversity but, at the same time, appreciating and aspiring for unity. The external references in the EEA materials are about the potential of the EEA to boost the competitiveness of education in the EU, and moreover, the EU as a region in the world overall.

These findings address gaps in our understanding about why EU policymakers have been developing the EEA. These findings enrich the limited literature about the EEA and make a theoretical contribution by extending the application of the referentiality approach. Understanding the architecture and essence of these reasons also has a practical significance for all policy actors at different levels and establishments in the EEA, from EU policymakers to teaching staff and students at educational establishments, as they all have to develop a shared understanding of these reasons to infer a common goal and join efforts in achieving it. How they respond to and co-create EEA policies plays a role in shaping the nature of the EEA in particular, and of the EU project more widely—and their place in the world. A sense of responsibility in this process is particularly important now. The EU has been experiencing turbulent times recently, with the migrant crisis, rising populism, Brexit and other aggravating political divisions amongst the EU member states. EU policymakers have appealed to education to play a role in further crafting and strengthening the EU as a Union which cannot proceed without a common understanding of the goal, and joint efforts of all policy actors—at all levels—in achieving it.

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