

Governing European educational research through ideas? Incremental ideational change in the European Union's Framework Programme (1994–2020)

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Abstract

The European Union Framework Programme (EUIP) is the most institutionalised form of supranational thematic programming in the world and the centrepiece of European Union research policy. Since 1994, the EUIP has also funded collaborative research projects in the social sciences. Surprisingly, little attention has been paid to its genesis, development, and effects in shaping the development of European science, especially examined by discipline or multidisciplinary fields. The EUIP is thus analysed here through an *instruments-as-institutions* approach that conceptualises the EUIP as an institution. Content analysis of the official documents of each funding cycle ($n=5$) and a sample of European-funded educational research projects ($n=122$) was analysed in conducting this research. The results show incremental ideational change of the EUIP's guiding ideas: from *knowledge* as an *instrument* to *knowledge* as a *resource*; *within-the-EU* to *outside-the-EU internationalisation*; and *cooperation* to an *integration* rationale of *Europeanisation* from the EUIP4 and EUIP5 (1994–2002) to the EUIP6 onwards (2002–2020). European-funded educational research contents are shaped by such

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representations of what is expected of European research. If the policy instrument steers European-funded educational research, ideas more than regulatory features significantly—though incrementally—change the direction of European social science.

KEYWORDS

educational research, European Union Framework Programme, incremental ideational change, policy instruments, research policy

1 | INTRODUCTION

The emergence of European educational structures has received considerable attention in the last decades in the education policy literature, such as the case of the European Education Area (Graf & Marques, 2022; Lawn & Grek, 2012; Nóvoa & Lawn, 2002), the European Higher Education Area (Keeling, 2006; Powell et al., 2012), or policies and programmes to foster mobility and international cooperation in teaching and research, such as the case of Erasmus+ (Marques et al., 2020; Vanden Broeck, 2019; Yuval & Yemini, 2017). Yet considerably less attention has been paid to how funding policy instruments for the European Research Area (see Beerkens, 2008; Nedeva & Wedlin, 2015) has shaped European-funded educational research.

The EUFP (European Union's Framework Programme) certainly is the most developed and institutionalised supranational research-funding instrument in the world. The first EUFP was created in 1984, following a decision of Étienne Davignon, the then European Commissioner for Industrial Affairs and Energy. It was established to find a means to select and pursue scientific and technological aims, to plan and coordinate community and national activities, and to create supranational financial provisions. Since its first funding cycle (1984–1987), the EUFP has had more eight funding cycles—EUFP2, 1987–1991; EUFP3, 1990–1994; EUFP4, 1994–1998; EUFP5, 1998–2002; EUFP6 2002–2006; EUFP7 2007–2013; and Horizon 2020 (2014–2020)—with the latest, Horizon Europe, beginning in 2021. Funding for social sciences and humanities research was introduced in the EUFP4 funding cycle.

Several studies show how the EUFP has become an important instrument for network formation and collaboration (Guy et al., 2005; Larédo, 1998; Marques, 2018; Peter et al., 2010; Zapp et al., 2018), for the promotion of interdisciplinary science (Kastrinos, 2010), and for stimulating internationalisation in research organisations (Geuna, 1998; Primeri & Reale, 2012). Yet less attention has been paid to the analysis of the development of the EUFP taking into consideration the guiding ideas underpinning the Europeanisation of science, including social sciences, and how such ideas have (re)shaped the disciplinary contents through the investment of these funding cycles over the past quarter-century.

On the one hand, the study of ideas in this context is particularly significant since the efforts taken by the European Commission to create a European Research Area are characterised by soft regulatory mechanisms (non-binding rules that are expected to produce some effect) such as the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), network formation, and research funding instruments (whether EUFP or, more recently, the European Research Council) (Nedeva & Wedlin, 2015). The EUFP is understood in this paper as an incentive-based funding instrument (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007) whose regulatory framework provides the general rules for organisations to participate. Therefore, in order to understand the institutionalisation of the EUFP, the analysis of its cultural-cognitive elements (Scott, 2013) becomes paramount. The approach taken here follows Lascoumes and Le Galès (2007) proposition to analyse *instruments-as-institutions* in order to show how policy instruments embody a form of knowledge about social control that can be captured by the analysis of ideas, meanings, and representations

incorporated within the instruments. The significance of embracing such an approach is more connected with the motivation to advance theoretical understandings on how to analyse incentive-based policy instruments beyond regulative and efficiency aspects, in particular the EUFP, than rather determine the extent of social control beyond the ideas supported by it.

On the other hand, some authors suggest that natural science fields have a higher international profile because they are closer to universal claims, while social science fields have few incentives and more impediments to international or intercultural collaboration, as they are more closely linked to nationally or culturally specific topics (Kyvik & Larsen, 1997; Luukkonen et al., 1992; Watson et al., 2010), despite recent studies showing that social sciences in Europe, including educational research, have experienced not only an increase in outputs but also a growing international focus (Aman & Botte, 2017; Engels et al., 2012). Without claiming a causal effect, it is also important to acknowledge the emergence of transnational regional structures for social sciences, such as the European Union, since their effects in shaping transnational disciplinary fields remain largely unknown (Aman & Botte, 2017; Heilbron, 2014a, 2014b).

With the incremental institutionalisation of the EUFP and after almost thirty years of supporting social sciences, this article makes a unique contribution to the field by taking stock of European-funded educational research since 1994 and how its contents reflect the ideas underpinned by the funding instrument across cycles.

Thus, the guiding research questions addressed here are: How have the cultural-cognitive elements of the EUFP evolved over the past quarter century? What ideational continuities and changes can be found? How have these ideational elements informed and pushed EU-funded educational research in these directions?

In order to answer the research questions, the first part of the paper introduces the theoretical approach of *instruments-as-institutions* (Hood, 2007; Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007) and the role of ideas in explaining incremental change in policy-making. The second part introduces data and methods, mainly content analysis of official documents ($n=5$) and of a sample of educational research projects funded by the EUFP ($n=122$) since social sciences were introduced in 1994 (EUFP4 to Horizon 2020). The results, discussed in the third part, reveal the incremental ideational change of guiding ideas in the EUFP: from *knowledge as an instrument* to *knowledge as a resource*; *within-the-EU* to *outside-the-EU internationalisation*; and *cooperation* to *integration* rationale of *Europeanisation* from the EUFP4/EUFP5 (1994–2002) to the EUFP6 onwards (2002–2020). Change in European educational research is examined through the analysis of funded *themes*, the focus and direction of which illustrates continuities and changes across cycles in line with the cultural-cognitive elements of the policy instrument.

Finally, in the fourth part of the paper, the significance of policy instruments in (re)shaping European (educational) research through cultural-cognitive elements is discussed, as are future research avenues for the study of policy instruments.

2 | INSTRUMENTS, IDEAS AND CHANGE—FINDING THE MISSING LINK?

This section links policy ideas and policy instruments to analyse how the European research funding instrument has contributed to the development of European educational research.

2.1 | Analysing policy instruments—Instruments-as-institutions approach

Throughout the last century, the study of policy instruments unfolded in two main directions: the analysis of policy instruments in specific policy domains, and the study of the broader toolkit that governments used (or generic policy instruments) (Hood, 2007). What these approaches have in common is a concern about the effectiveness of policy instruments and how government tools¹ control the behaviour of social actors. In the late 20th century, a strong emphasis was placed on the categorisation and the construction of typologies that could produce

comprehensive and comparative work across policy domains, such as the case of the NATO-scheme—nodality, authority, treasure, and organisation—or the sticks, carrots, and sermons (see Bemelmans-Videc et al., 1998; Hood, 1983; Howlett, 2000, 2011; Linder & Peters, 1998; Salamon, 1989, 2002; Schneider & Ingram, 1990).

What these typologies share, besides the generic categorisations for policy instruments, is an often-judgmental view about how effective each type of policy instrument is in achieving certain political goals. Several scholars have criticised the tendency to look at instruments as context-free and apolitical (Peters & Van Nispen, 1998). Others have critiqued the tendency to associate regulation and funding incentives as a form of instrument mixes (Hood, 2007; Howlett, 2009). Such instrumental views on policy instruments ignore the social and political dimensions embodied in policy instruments. This failure to acknowledge policy instruments' socio-political reality is contested by the instruments-as-institutions approach (Hood, 2007; Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007) through the analytical standpoint that instruments are institutions (Marques, 2021).

In rebuffing this critique, Lascoumes and Le Galès (2004, 2007, 2012) contributed to the development of an approach based on two main arguments, (a) that all policy instruments embody a form of knowledge about social control and the forms of exercising it; and (b) that instruments, far from being neutral, produce specific effects, intended or unintended, that end up structuring public policy through their own logic. Such an understanding comprises a broader notion of policy instruments than the previous ones, since Lascoumes and Le Galès (2004, 2007, 2012) consider the cognitive and normative dimensions (meanings and representations) of the instruments, as well as an attempt to understand how instruments are put in action (material and operational), charting policy instruments' histories. In contrast to functionalist explanations, Lascoumes and Le Galès (2007) propose a distinctive approach, arguing that instruments as institutions structure and influence the direction of public policies. From myriad definitions of institutions, Scott's (2013) serves well:

Institutions consist of cognitive, normative, regulative structures and activities that provide stability and meaning to social behaviour. Institutions are transported by various carriers—cultures, structures, and routines—and they operate at multiple levels of jurisdiction. (p. 33)

Thus, the EUFP, as a supranational thematic programme, can be seen as a new type of public policy instrument that offers few interventionist forms of regulation and bases its development on incentives. Incentive-based types of instruments, also known as “govern by contract” types of instruments (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2004, 2007), emerge as a reaction to strong criticisms of bureaucracy, and to the rigidity of legislative and regulatory rules. Thus, the European Commission assumes the role of coordinator more than interventionist, where legitimacy is assured by the direct involvement of research organisations and researchers coordinating and participating in the policy instrument. Because they are coordinative, incentive-based policy instruments are characterised in the literature as having a legal basis, but they use funding incentives to direct the behaviours of actors, instead of traditional forms of command and control. Thus, to understand their institutionalisation, the analytical standpoint should investigate the ideas that they convey. Therefore, analysing policy instruments as institutions offers a useful research lens that goes beyond the regulative aspect of policies, since it includes cultural-cognitive (but also normative) aspects of instruments.

2.2 | Understanding change through ideas? Ideational change in policy instruments

The study of ideas gained momentum throughout the 1990s and inspired a new generation of studies that marked an ideational turn in the study of public policy-making (Blyth, 2002; Czarniawska-Joerges & Sevón, 1996, 2005; Dobbin, 1994). In new institutional theory, this conferred theoretical robustness to the sociological institutionalist argument that institutional change is understood evolutionarily through the legitimisation and diffusion of certain ideas and norms (Campbell, 2002, 2004; Zapp et al., 2021). It also contributed

to the emergence of discursive institutionalism, which explores the relationship between ideas and discourses to understand how ideas, conveyed in discourse, trigger institutional change (Schmidt, 2008). Within historical institutionalism, the ideational turn contributed to the understanding of how ideas can trigger incremental institutional change, as opposed to the analytical tradition of understanding change exclusively via external shocks (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Streeck & Thelen, 2005; Thelen, 2004). Despite such theoretical developments, the study of ideas has been marked by the analysis of new ideas replacing old ones to explain ideational change. Less attention though, as Carstensen (2011) identifies, has been paid to ideas that change incrementally during periods of stability.

While the study of ideas contributed to the development of new avenues of research, the study of policy instruments has received little influence from the study of ideas and vice-versa (Braun & Capano, 2010). To address this gap, this paper analyses the cultural-cognitive elements of the EUFP to highlight which ideas have been conveyed in the policy instrument throughout the last quarter century, and crucially, whether these ideas have remained the same, or changed either radically or incrementally. Scott (2013) defines cultural-cognitive elements of institutions as “the rules that constitute the nature of reality and the frames through which meaning is made” (p. 40). Scott goes on to state that cognitive dimensions mediate “between the external world of stimuli and the response of the individual organism [as] a collection of internalised symbolic representations of the world” (Scott, 2013).

Therefore, studying cultural-cognitive elements of policy instruments is an important task to better understand the institutionalisation of policy instruments since instruments give meaning to the ideas they support (Braun & Capano, 2010). As the EUFP is an incentive-based policy instrument the analysis also raises awareness as to the role of ideas in shaping European-funded (educational) research. The next section introduces data and methods.

3 | DATA AND METHODS

To answer the research questions, a database was constructed, integrating two types of data analysed: (a) the official European Commission documents for each EUFP funding cycle—EUFP4 to Horizon 2020 ($n=5$), and (b) a sample of European educational research projects ($n=122$) (see Table 1). The main data sources used were the European Commission's web portal *Community Research and Development Information Service* (CORDIS) and the web portals of the European Commission related to science and research, such as the Directorate-General of Research and Innovation and the European Commission's websites related to the different funding cycles of the EUFP.

To understand the creation and the evolution of the EUFP, the official documents related to the overall structure of each funding cycle ($n=5$) were first gathered, specifically the European Parliament and European Council decisions concerning the structure and organisation of each EUFP's funding cycle and, where possible, documents related to calls for participants and the rules for participation. As the EUFP only started to fund social sciences from EUFP4, documents related to the sub-programmes were therefore specifically gathered and analysed.

The second step comprised the selection of educational research projects funded via the European research funding policy instrument. Through the CORDIS, the files (in Excel format) with the overall information for all funded projects for each funding cycle of the EUFP (EUFP4, EUFP5, EUFP6, EUFP7, Horizon 2020) were gathered. The files were comprised of several columns, such as the name and acronym of the projects, the thematic area of the programmes and sub-programmes, the type of contract, and the subject or area of study. Thus, in establishing the research sample, all projects categorised by CORDIS that listed “social sciences” and “educational sciences” as a subject or main area were selected. The resultant sample gathered included the abstract of the project and final reports, when available, for a total of 122 research projects that were directly related to educational research issues (EUFP4, $n=44$; EUFP5, $n=20$; EUFP6, $n=18$; EUFP7, $n=17$ Horizon 2020 $n=23$).

Both official documents and European educational research projects were coded using MAXQDA following a thematic content analysis to identify, analyse, and report patterns, or indeed themes, within the data. This

TABLE 1 Data, sources, and analytical categories.

Data	N	Sources	Categories	N
Official documents	5	EUFP 4—specific programme: 'Targeted Socio-Economic Research', 1994–1998 (TSER)	Knowledge	27
		EUFP 5—'Improving the human research potential and the socio-economic knowledge base', 1998–2002 (HUMAN-POTENTIAL)	Internationalisation	11
		EUFP 6—'Citizen and governance in a knowledge-based society', 2002–2006 (CITIZENS)	Europeanisation	16
		EUFP 7—specific programme: 'Cooperation—Socio-economic Sciences and Humanities', 2007–2013		
		Horizon 2020—Europe in a changing world— inclusive, innovative and reflective societies		
		Total	54	
European educational research projects	122	Community Research and Development Information Services (CORDIS)	Themes	122
			Total	122

Note: N refers to the number of analysed projects and *categories* of the themes that emerged from the EUFP's documents.

occurred following the steps of familiarisation, the generation of initial codes, searching for themes, revision of themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In relation to the official documents ($n=54$ codes), three cultural-cognitive elements emerged as the most central themes in the analysis—*knowledge* ($n=27$), *internationalisation* ($n=11$), and *Europeanisation* ($n=16$). These three ideational elements—*knowledge*, as to the understanding and purpose of research; *internationalisation*, as to the orientation and scope of research production; and *Europeanisation*, as to the role of research to strengthen the EU project—emerged following the generation of initial codes and were later reinforced by the searching and revision of themes, considering their prominence over others, such as innovation or competitiveness, that fell under these three overarching ideas.

For the European educational research projects' *themes* ($n=122$ codes) the aim was to categorise the topic of research. Some projects had overlapping topics, for instance, studying widening participation in higher education and the exclusion of minorities. In this latter case, the focus of the project was related to questions of widening participation, therefore, the project was coded as a participation theme, rather than as inclusion or exclusion, which appeared as a secondary focus. Thus, when two topics appeared to overlap, the decision to code the projects into a single topic was based on finding the main focus over secondary aspects, usually found in the research aims and research questions. In total, six larger themes were identified: *inclusion/exclusion*; *governance & organisations*, *VET/HE and the labour market*, *teaching and learning*, *transitions/mobility/access/participation*, and *improvement/achievement/evaluation*. The findings of this analysis are presented below according to the analytical categories for the EUFP and specifically for educational research.

4 | INCREMENTAL IDEATIONAL CHANGE IN THE EUFP: GOVERNING EUROPEAN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH THROUGH IDEAS

The results show the cultural-cognitive elements of the EUFP across the last five funding cycles according to the categories of analysis: *knowledge*, *internationalisation*, and *Europeanisation*. In particular, the focus here is on the evolution of such cultural-cognitive elements across time.

4.1 | The cultural-cognitive elements of the EUFP—Knowledge, internationalisation, and Europeanisation

The results derived from the document analysis of the cultural-cognitive elements of the EUFP—*knowledge*, *internationalisation* and *Europeanisation*—indicate an incremental ideational change across funding cycles that can be divided into two periods of time and funding cycles, EUFP4-EUFP5 (1994–2002) and EUFP6-Horizon 2020 (2002–2020).

In relation to the category of *knowledge* a shift from knowledge as an *instrument* (EUFP4 and EUFP5) to knowledge as a *resource* (EUFP6 to Horizon 2020) is observed between the two groups of funding cycles.

In the EUFP4 and EUFP5 the idea of *knowledge* as an *instrument* is aimed at improving European human resources in different areas. In particular, in the EUFP4, the main role of knowledge is connected to the desire to provide “updated knowledge” to train professionals and enhance their skills. Following the same rationale, the EUFP5 emphasised improvements in the quality of researchers, engineers, and technicians as well as the need for mobility in order to guarantee access to research infrastructures.

The idea of *knowledge* as an *instrument*, incrementally changed in the following funding cycles, as it was coupled with a broader initiative, the European Research Area, to affirm the EU as a leading region in the world in matters of scientific production and exploitation of research results. Therefore, the focus was no longer on just improving human capacity and structures, but on exploiting knowledge stores. Such a rationale of *knowledge* as a *resource* can be found in the last three funding cycles: “Europe’s transition towards a knowledge-based economy and society” (EUFP6), “providing an improved knowledge base for policies in the fields concerned” (EUFP7), and “placing emphasis on the widest possible use of knowledge generated by the supported activities up to the commercial exploitation of that knowledge” (Horizon 2020).

The ideas of *internationalisation* and *Europeanisation* appear as highly connected. Nevertheless, they merit being individually analysed. One of the initial aims in the genesis of the EUFP was to enhance collaboration between research systems within Europe and other research systems outside of Europe. Despite such a rationale being present throughout the life cycles of the research funding policy instrument, it is possible to distinguish a shift in the rationale of *internationalisation* from *within-the-EU* (EUFP4 and EUFP5) to *outside-the-EU* (EUFP6 to Horizon 2020).

In the EUFP4-EUFP5 (1994–2002), the rationale of *within-the-EU internationalisation* is imprinted in the idea of harmonising national research structures and network formation for the exchange of ideas and training of researchers mainly, but not exclusively, within European borders. Therefore, the idea of European research emerges as a complement to national research structures. In the following cycles (EUFP6-Horizon 2020), the emphasis is not just focused on creating networks within European borders, but also on strengthening and extending such networks *outside-the-EU*, with other international research systems and international organisations. This is stressed in order to consolidate the position of Europe in worldwide scientific activities and guarantee that the European Research Area attracts research potential worldwide. This aspect is connected to, but distinct from *Europeanisation*.

Thus, in relation to *Europeanisation*, the EUFP4-EUFP5 (1994–2002) stressed the creation of standardised research structures that would facilitate exchange and comparison, emphasising the importance of *cooperation*. For instance, in EUFP4 the main challenge for research was to gather data and create indicator systems that would enable comparison between sectors and countries and to develop conceptual and methodological tools for understanding not only nation-specific issues but also pan-European ones. In the EUFP5, the idea was to intervene in a “common European challenge or problem” through research projects with a clear “European focus”.

In the following cycles (EUFP6-Horizon 2020), the emphasis has been placed on *integration* and on European-related topics that are transversal to the community. For instance, the EUFP6 highlights that the “European dimension is only just starting to be taken into account” and that research assumes a crucial role in the sedimentation

of the “European model of society”, based on integrated economic and social progress, values of justice and solidarity, and cultural diversity. In the EUFP7, the “development of a genuinely European socio-economic knowledge base” to tackle European challenges appears as a fundamental way to understand the EU and European citizens. Finally, Horizon 2020 focuses on exploring common problems among European countries to project Europe as a competitive global actor through the commodification of knowledge.

Such incremental ideational change showcased through the document analysis highlights how the cultural-cognitive elements of *knowledge*, *internationalisation*, and *Europeanisation* are interrelated. In the EUFP4-EUFP5, knowledge is perceived as an important instrument to foster network formation among European national research systems to foster cooperation within European borders. Yet from the EUFP6 onwards, knowledge appears as a crucial resource for international research systems and researchers to act as collaborators and to reinforce the competitive advantage of Europe in the world. How have these shifts informed and pushed European-funded educational research?

4.2 | How does EUFP's incremental ideational change inform and push European-funded educational research towards European ideational elements?

Delving into the contents of European-funded educational research across all cycles, the *themes* delimiting the topics for each funding cycle are presented to later establish the connections between the cultural-cognitive elements of the EUFP and the contents in European-funded educational research (Figure 1).

The theme *inclusion/exclusion* is the most studied theme of European educational research (34%), followed by *governance/organisations* (19%) and *VET/HE* (Vocational Education and Training and Higher Education), and *labour market* (19%), *teaching and learning* (18%), *transitions/mobility/access/participation* (9%), and, finally, *improvement/achievement/evaluation* (5%). Examining the predominant research themes within each funding cycle, I find that *VET/HE* and *the labour market* emerges as the central focus in EUFP4, *inclusion/exclusion* in EUFP5-EUFP7, and *teaching and learning* in Horizon 2020. As expected, all the research projects have a cross-national comparative focus or a European-related focus.

The *inclusion/exclusion* theme (34%), dispersed across cycles but mostly present in the EUFP5, EUFP6, and EUFP7, includes projects with a wide range of issues, such as gender and qualifications, ethnic minority differences in education, religious education, intergenerational transmission of inequalities, social exclusion or social integration and child immigration, among others. Most research projects within this theme assess the overall relationship between education and gender, the transmission of inequalities, and the importance of education in child immigration. Others, such as religious education, often target a more focused approach in primary or secondary education and the analysis of practices and programmes associated with the school curriculum.

Governance & organisations (19%) is the second most researched topic in European educational research, concentrated heavily in the EUFP4. Research projects in this subcategory deal with the overall structure of education

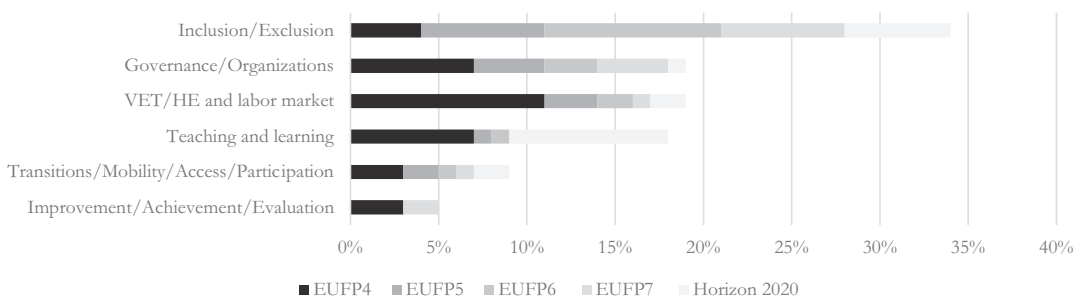


FIGURE 1 Themes of European educational research. Source: Author's calculation.

and training systems, such as funding for lifelong learning; the relationship between education, training, and growth; funding and returns to education; innovation in services; higher education and regional development; organisational change in higher education; performance and evaluation of universities; or even, organisations as learning environments. Research projects in *VET/HE and the labour market* (19%) deal specifically with higher education and the labour market in the frame of: lifelong learning policies; the updating of skills in different working contexts; the importance of VET for the development of skills for less-educated workers; questions related to work experience; the relationship between skills and workers; and training for long-term unemployment, among others.

Teaching and learning (18%), which is highly significant in EUFP4 and Horizon 2020, is connected with: teachers' professionalisation; the use of information and communication technologies within the classroom; early literacy practices, or the development of models to improve the process of teaching and learning in the sciences (EUFP4); or digital tools to enhance teaching and learning experience (Horizon 2020).

The *transitions/mobility/access/participation* (9%) category is foremost related to transitions from school to work or from secondary to higher education, with a strong focus on individuals learning from their experiences to inform policy-making and/or educational organisations. Despite the fact that these topics might look at the different socio-economic family backgrounds, their fundamental rationale is not connected with inclusion- or exclusion-related topics. Finally, *improvement/achievement/evaluation* (6%), also mostly present in EUFP4, is related to school improvement or school-age assessment of child development, or tools used to assess curricular competences.

Therefore, in the analysis of European-funded educational research, it is possible to observe continuity, while at the same time, incremental ideational change in the researched topics. On the one hand, continuity can be found in the research topics of *inclusion/exclusion* that permeate the entire range of EUFP funding cycles, with special occurrence from the EUFP5 to EUFP7 (1998–2013). Such continuity is intimately connected with the desire to develop a “European model of society” where research plays an important role in tackling social exclusion issues and informing policy-making for social inclusion.

On the other hand, incremental ideational change can be identified through the prominence of certain topics over others within funding cycles. *Governance & organisations* and *VET/HE and the labour market* research topics were heavily represented in the EUFP4 and EUFP5 (1994–2002), gradually losing prominence to *inclusion/exclusion* related issues. Paradoxically, pedagogical research topics linked to *improvement/achievement/evaluation* are only present in the EUFP4 and EUFP5 (1998–2002) and *transitions/mobility/access/participation* within cycles of education systems remain insignificant throughout the funding cycles. The most dramatic change is related to the topics of *teaching and learning* across funding cycles. In the EUFP4 the main focus was targeted at STEM sciences in the curriculum and the inclusion of technologies of information and communication into the teaching profession. By contrast, Horizon 2020 is heavily represented by the conception, development, and commercialisation of digital tools to enhance the teaching and learning experience. Such results form the basis of the discussion that follows.

5 | DISCUSSION

Throughout the institutionalisation of the EUFP, in particular since the integration of social sciences (1994) into the funding instrument, an incremental change in the ideational elements of *knowledge*, *internationalisation*, and *Europeanisation* can be identified. In EUFP4 (1994–1998) and EUFP5 (1998–2002), knowledge is perceived as an *instrument*, internationalisation is considered as having an *inside-the-EU* orientation, and Europeanisation has a *cooperation* rationale. Yet from the EUFP6 to the latest funding cycle (2002–2020), knowledge is perceived as a *resource*, internationalisation is considered as having an *outside-the-EU* orientation, and Europeanisation is legitimated by an *integration* rationale. How is such incremental ideational change reflected in European-funded educational research content?

Through content analysis of the research projects, parallels were found between the incremental ideational change of the funding policy instrument and the contents of European educational research. In fact, in the EUFP4 and EUFP5, European-funded educational research knowledge reflects an *instrumental* role, targeted at enhancing *cooperation* efforts within European educational systems (internal). This aspect is evidenced through the representation of themes related to *VET/HE and the labour market* and *governance & organisations* in the EUFP4, and to a certain extent the EUFP5, in order to produce cross-national comparisons that could highlight governance aspects in the fields of higher education (see Powell et al., 2012; Välimaa & Hoffman, 2008) and lifelong learning (see Lima & Guimarães, 2011; Marques, 2014). Such an ideational component reflects the at-the-time developments of the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Strategy. In the former, a strong emphasis on harmonisation across (higher) education systems to encourage mobility within Europe (see Vanden Broeck, 2019; Yuval & Yemini, 2017); in the latter, in promoting a knowledge-based economy.

In the following cycles, EUFP6 to Horizon 2020 (2002–2020), the idea of knowledge as a *resource* and Europeanisation as an *integration* process was also found emergent in European-funded educational research, although less visible is the idea of *outside-the-EU* internationalisation. Such an aspect might be explained as a result of the intrinsically contextualised nature of European-funded educational research within national educational systems (Kyvik & Larsen, 1997; Luukkonen et al., 1992; Watson et al., 2010). Nevertheless, the EUFP is used as a policy instrument to geopolitically position Europe as an internally strong and externally attractive European Research Area, where educational research plays an important role. Such development and ambition can be also attributed to the maturation of the EU's ERA, especially from 2009 onwards, when the ERA was introduced in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union as an explicit objective (Article 179), the growing bulk of funding across EUFPs' cycles and the reinforcement of the EUFP's Associated Countries in enhancing 'knowledge sharing and skills as well as research and innovation capacities' (European Commission, 2020).

Knowledge as a *resource* can be identified in the theme of *teaching and learning*. In the EUFP4 (1994–1998) the main rationale is connected to pedagogical aspects of integrating information and communication technologies in the teacher profession or, for instance, to improve the teaching and learning aspects related to STEM sciences, as a reflex of a growing EU's concern of integrating digital tools in several sectors of European societies as, for instance, evidenced in the eEurope Action Plan—eLearning Initiative (*1999), and the desire to establish a European Area of Lifelong Learning, later embedded in the European Lifelong Learning Programme (*2000) (European Commission, 2000).

Twenty years later, the emphasis seems to have shifted to the design and development of digital tools to enhance teaching and learning processes with a commercial purpose, certainly promoted as a larger European strategy focused on digitalisation evidenced in the Digital Single Market (*2015) and the Skills Agenda for Europe (*2016). This aspect shows how (educational) knowledge as a *resource* can be commercialised, and reflects a larger trend of edu-business (Ball, 2018) within the global education industry (Parreira do Amaral, 2019) that reinforces the competitiveness of Europe worldwide.

A second consideration is related to aspects of European *integration*. The theme of *inclusion/exclusion* that spans the five funding cycles, but mostly in EUFP5 to EUFP7, embodies a rationale of *cooperation* that is gradually supplanted by an *integration* one, as a reflex of the 2004 and 2007 enlargement of the European Union. Therefore, the aim is no longer a matter of learning from cross-national comparisons in order to harmonise structures, but it is, in fact, to find common solutions for pan-European problems in order to build the "European model of society".

Treating the EUFP as an institution proved a useful approach to understanding how the supranational policy instrument provided meaning (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007; Scott, 2013) to European science and shaped European-funded educational research, especially given the lack of research in attempting to theorise incentive-based policy instruments. In particular, the concept of incremental ideational change (Carstensen, 2011) highlighted how the institutionalisation of the EUFP throughout the several funding cycles incorporated ideational changes, illustrating the authority of ideas in governing European research.

Understanding how such emblematic European research funding is shaping European research through ideas surges as relevant taking into consideration the overture of a new funding cycle—*Horizon Europe* (2021–2027), with a total budget of €100 billion—and the ideas presented by it for European research. Therefore, the role of knowledge as a *resource* is highly represented given the desire to create a European Innovation Council as a “one-stop shop” to transform ideas into having “real world application” and support innovative start-ups and companies (European Commission, 2018a). Additionally, the gradual interdisciplinary focus that has been encompassing the institutionalisation of the EUFP is even more pronounced in *Horizon Europe*. This is because the funding rationale is based on a research and innovation “missions-oriented approach” in line with the Union priorities that have wide societal or economic relevance (European Commission, 2018b).

The EU's idea underpinned for educational research, as part of the social sciences, is to contribute to the Union's societal challenges. In particular, in developing a “learning and entrepreneurial society” at the service of innovation (European Commission, 2018c), and confirming the entrenchment of knowledge as a resource rationale in European-funded (educational) research for the near future.

6 | CONCLUSION

The analysis presented facilitates a better understanding of overarching ideas and how they have changed throughout the institutionalisation of the EUFP over the last five funding cycles, and how such changes are reflected in the contents of European-funded educational research. The research identifies incremental changes in the cultural-cognitive elements of *knowledge*, *internationalisation*, and *Europeanisation* in the funding instrument itself over a quarter century. This was also reflected in the contents of the European-funded educational research and is especially evident in the funded project themes across cycles.

Theoretically, this analysis uncovers the influence of the EU research funding policy instrument in the focus and purpose of steering European-funded (educational) research, and the importance of the guiding ideas in shaping research-themes' trajectories. Therefore, treating policy instruments as institutions were proven a useful approach to understanding such ideational dynamics and to highlighting the authority of certain frames of meaning and symbolic representations to determine what constitutes significant European-funded (educational) research. Thus, the analysis shows how incentive-based policy instruments indeed have their own life, rather than being apolitical and neutral devices, as suggested by functional accounts in the policy instruments literature. However, the analysis has a major limitation since it does not capture how the policy instrument controls and regulates the actors' social behaviour by, for instance, looking at how research groups and individuals change their research focus to capture European funding. However, this article underscores the pivotal role of ideas in guiding European-funded (educational) research, placing greater emphasis on ideational factors than regulatory ones. It is worth noting that regulatory aspects within the EUFP have largely remained unchanged. Embracing the theoretical standpoint that ideas evolve instead of being radically and externally changed, opens the study of ideas in the field of policy instruments.

Empirically, the paper sheds light on how the EUFP materialises and steers research according to the aims of the overarching project of the European Union. How the educational research project results are, in fact, transferred into other domains of European and national policy-making remains an open question deserving closer attention, as well as the commercialisation of educational knowledge. Myriad intended or unintended consequences of the institutionalisation of the policy instrument in shaping national and organisational priorities for research at large are yet to be examined. Such open-ended questions deserve further attention, especially as the new cycle of European research funding begins with *Horizon Europe* (2021–2027), as briefly discussed earlier.

Moreover, the gradual institutionalisation of other European funding instruments, such as the Erasmus+ and the grant-making European Research Council, deserves closer attention, especially concerning the way these

instruments steer and shape (cross-) national policies, research agendas, and disciplinary fields. Finally, to what extent these incentive-based funding instruments (re)shape organisations and researchers that have been continuously involved in supranational funding would show how organisational and professional norms and values associated with the production of European-funded (educational) research have shifted, reflecting the broader influence of ideational change.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ENDNOTE

¹ The policy instruments scholarship uses the terms “tools” and “instruments” interchangeably without providing a clear or distinctive definition between both. For the sake of coherence, the term “policy instrument” is used.

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