Connecting internal and external dynamics in European intersectoral policy coordination – the case of education and employment

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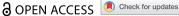Marcelo Marques[a], Judith Rohde-Liebenau[b] and Lukas Graf[c]

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ABSTRACT

Intersectoral policy coordination has garnered considerable attention in the study of the European Commission (EC) over the past few decades. Within the EC, a logic of hierarchy and a logic of policy portfolios coexist, often leading to a conflictual and complex relationship. While the literature has extensively explored the internal dynamics of the EC, there has been less focus on the role of external dynamics in influencing intersectoral policy coordination. This paper addresses this gap by examining the case of European policy coordination in education and employment and how both internal and external dynamics can hinder or facilitate policy coordination within the EC. Based on the analysis of interviews with EC actors and various EU policy documents, the paper discusses how these internal and external dynamics have affected policy coordination, highlighting elements of both positive and negative coordination.

1 Introduction

Intersectoral policy coordination has become a ubiquitous concern in European Union (EU) policymaking over the past decades. This is due not only to the increasing intricacy of social issues but also to the growing complexity of the EU's political system. The European Commission (henceforth the Commission) lies at the heart of this system (Nugent 2000), acting both as a political powerhouse that sets the EU's legislative agenda and as a supranational administration that implements community policies, upholds EU Treaties, and manages day-to-day activities (Hartlapp, Metz, and Rauh 2014). One key aspect that hinders intersectoral policy coordination in bureaucracies, both at the national level and – due to its similar organisational and administrative logic – at the EU level, is the presence of *silos* (Egeberg and Trondal 2016; Trondal 2012, 2017).

Siloisation poses a significant challenge at the national level, and its impact is equally, if not more, pronounced within the Commission. This is underscored by the Commission intricate internal organisational structure and its integration into a political system that

imposes specific demands not only from its own structures but also from other EU-level institutions and the member states. Furthermore, the upsurge in external dynamics, such as crises or 'wicked problems', adds extra complexity. In this context, intersectoral policy coordination is crucial for the Commission and the entire EU to leverage organisational capabilities, foster policy innovation, and address coordination challenges stemming from both internal and external dynamics.

Prior research characterises the Commission as a relatively fragmented 'multi-organisation' (Cram 1994) with centrifugal tendencies due to its principle of functional specialisation into different Directorates-General (DGs) (Knill and Grohs 2015). Tensions have been identified both vertically – between hierarchical levels such as the College of Commissioners and the Secretariat-General (SG) – and horizontally, due to strong sectoral differentiation (or 'siloisation') into the DGs that represent policy portfolios and communities (Gornitzka and Sverdrup 2008; Hartlapp, Metz, and Rauh 2014; Knill and Grohs 2015). In recent decades, particularly during the Barroso I/II (2004–2014) and Juncker (2014–2019) Commissions, there have been attempts to strengthen the capacity for bureaucratic centralisation around the President and the SG (Ophey and Schwalbach 2022; Trondal 2012). To illustrate, Juncker publicly bemoaned bureaucratic silos and vowed to break down 'silo mentalities, clusters and portfolio frontiers' (European Commission 2014) at the start of his Commission presidency, aiming for a more political Commission with increased hierarchical steering (Bürgin 2020; H. Kassim and Laffan 2019; Peterson 2017).

While studies have been dedicated to the Commission's internal dynamics, focusing on its actors and established institutional practices, less attention has been paid to external dynamics. These include the role of exogenous factors (Jochim and May 2010; Marques, Graf, and Rohde-Liebenau 2023), such as crises (Kamkhaji and Radaelli, 2017), policy issues (Martens, Rusconi, and Leuze 2007), and wicked problems (Candel, Breeman, and Termeer 2016), in strengthening or hindering intersectoral policy coordination and thereby contributing to either breaking or maintaining siloisation. These external dynamics could create further demand for intersectoral coordination, ultimately enabling policy innovation, but they could also lead to further tensions between policy sectors due to conflicting policy ideas in sectors where coordination is needed. Hence, this paper aims to analyse both internal and external dynamics and their interrelationship in the Commission's intersectoral policy coordination and siloisation. Thus, we ask: *How do internal and external dynamics related to the work of the European Commission facilitate or hinder European intersectoral policy coordination?*

To address this question, we have selected the Commission's portfolios of education and employment to understand how internal and external dynamics play out in these intertwined policy fields and influence intersectoral policy coordination and siloisation. The policy fields of education and employment are not only closely connected in general terms (see e.g. Thelen 2014), but also exhibit a high degree of portfolio overlap (Senninger, Finke, and Blom-Hansen 2021) and clear political salience in EU governance (Milana, Klatt, and Vatrella 2020), despite the EU's limited capacity to legislate and adopt binding acts in these areas. Education and employment are structurally divided into the Commission's Directorate-General Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC) and the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL). Previous research has noted the portfolio overlap between education and employment and

identified these policy fields as 'cross-cutting challenges' (Senninger, Finke, and Blom-Hansen 2021; Graf et al. 2023). However, the extent to which policy coordination occurs within the Commission's work in these intertwined policy fields remains under-researched.[1]

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we provide an outline of the conceptual framework surrounding policy coordination and 'siloisation', based on public administration and policy studies literatures. We complement this conceptual framework with a discussion of internal dynamics identified in the literature as contributing to either positive or negative coordination. Additionally, we address external dynamics, which have not yet been extensively studied in terms of how they facilitate or hinder intersectoral policy coordination in the Commission. In the subsequent section, we outline the methodology of the study and the rationale for our case selection, focusing on intersectoral policy coordination in the fields of education and employment. Our data consists of 10 interviews conducted with former and current Commission officials in the College of Commissioners, SG, DG EMPL, and DG EAC. Furthermore, we systematically analyse relevant EU policy documents to cross-verify the findings from interviews. This is followed by the empirical analysis, where we identify and analyse both positive and negative coordination elements in internal and external dynamics, uncovering which features associated with these dynamics facilitate or hinder intersectoral policy coordination in education and employment. We conclude with a discussion of the findings and their implications for the scholarship on European policy coordination.

2 Between internal and external dynamics in supranational intersectoral policy coordination – a framework

This section first discusses the concepts of policy coordination and siloisation in the case of the Commission. We provide a framework to analyse the effect of external and internal dynamics on intersectoral policy cooperation.

In the context of the Commission, Hustedt and Seyfried (2016, 891) have studied coordination at the bureaucratic level and defined it as a 'process of mutual interaction to establish consensus', most prominently among DGs.[2] For any intersectoral coordination, Scharpf (1994) has established a distinction between negative and positive coordination. Positive coordination is understood as an 'attempt to maximize the overall effectiveness and efficiency of government policy by exploring and utilising the joint strategy options of several ministerial portfolios' (Scharpf 1994, 38). Within the Commission's operations, optimal positive coordination would maximize the connection between hierarchical coordination (i.e. across levels, such as College of Commissioners and SG) and horizontal coordination (most importantly across DGs) (Hartlapp, Metz, and Rauh 2014). In a policy procedure marked by positive coordination, all affected units would be involved from the outset and jointly discuss policy alternatives, resulting in higher transaction costs but also a higher scope for policy innovation. In contrast, negative coordination is more limited and restricted to 'clearance' negotiations with other affected departments. In this case, 'any policy initiative designed by a specialised subunit within the ministerial organisation will not interfere with the established policies and the interests of other ministerial units' (Scharpf 1994, 39).

In line with studies on bureaucracies at the national level, hierarchical steering and horizontal coordination have been diagnosed as traditionally weak in the Commission (Bürgin 2020; Cini 1996; Trondal 2012, 2017). The Commission's bureaucracy is seen as fragmented and 'dominated by "silos"' (Egeberg and Trondal 2016, 587). However, other studies have reported on positive coordination between the Commission's organisational units and their individuals (Bauer, 2008; Vantaggiato, Kassim, and Connolly 2021). Analyses have confirmed the presence of positive coordination, particularly in policy fields that lend themselves well to coordination (Senninger, Finke, and Blom-Hansen 2021). Thus, the picture remains inconclusive, and it is fruitful to study intersectoral coordination across policy fields that are inherently connected, as is the case for education and employment (see detailed case selection below).

While our subsequent empirical application of this framework to the policy fields of education and employment is novel, this combined framework of internal and external dynamics is also innovative. At present, the literature on the Commission's internal organisation, actors and established institutional practices (e.g. Bürgin 2020; Hartlapp, Metz, and Rauh 2013; Knill and Grohs 2015; O'Flynn 2013; Ophey and Schwalbach 2022; Trondal 2012; Trondal and Grohs 2015), and the literature on external dynamics, such as the role of crises, policy issues, and wicked problems in triggering, strengthening, or hindering intersectoral policy coordination (Candel, Breeman, and Termeer 2016; Jochim and May 2010; Marques, Graf, and Rohde-Liebenau 2023), are largely disconnected. Given the complex internal structures of the Commission and the necessity to fully utilise organisational capabilities in response to external governance challenges, it is essential to connect internal and external dynamics to understand how they condition coordination (positive or negative) and, therefore, weaken or strengthen siloisation.

Having provided this overview of our analytical framework, we next turn to a detailed discussion of both internal and external dynamics concerning how they might influence coordination in the European Commission.

2.1 Internal dynamics – actors and established institutional practices

Regarding internal dynamics, the role of actors such as Presidents, Vice Presidents, Commissioners, and individual officials in the DGs or SG, as well as established institutional practices like interservice consultation, interservice groups, and staff mobility, are all relevant in facilitating or hindering intersectoral policy coordination. The following section first outlines the organisational structures of the Commission, then discusses specific actors and their capacity or desire to manoeuvre towards or against coordination, and concludes with an examination of how established institutional practices might push or pull intersectoral policy coordination.

The Commission was designed as a bureaucratic organisation throughout the 1960s (Loth and Bitsch 2007), where policy powers were mainly concentrated in the DGs, providing a fertile ground for horizontal specialisation and silo formation (Kurpas and Kaczynski 2008). DGs exist as horizontal pillars that are relatively autonomous vis-à-vis other sub-units and the Commission's Secretariat-General. The SG is supposed to serve the College and act as a 'guardian of collegiality' (Bürgin 2020). However, in the absence of a centralised political authority (such as a Prime Minister in national systems), DGs have been able to pursue their own agendas and also tend to be the focus of loyalty of

individual officials (H. Kassim 2008). Siloisation tendencies in the Commission are often attributed to the fact that DGs are organised by purpose,[3] which mobilises a sectoral behavioural logic: DGs usually focus on a specific portfolio that represents a policy sector. Thus, this purpose-based principle might not only hinder coordination but also lead to sectoral cleavages with administrative siloisation and turf wars between DGs (Egeberg and Trondal 2016; Trondal 2012). In line with this, studies reveal strong within-unit coordination in the Commission, albeit weak cross-unit coordination (Hartlapp, Metz, and Rauh 2014; Trondal 2011, 2017). Even bureaucrats in the DGs themselves have reported on a perceived 'silo thinking' (Trondal 2012).

Commission Presidents made several attempts to influence the Commission's horizontal and vertical coordination structures. Already under the Barroso I/II Commission, the decision-making system of the Commission became more presidential (Bürgin 2020; Trondal 2012). While Barroso aimed to strengthen the central steering capacity of the Commission and create a more hierarchical organisation (Trondal 2012), Juncker's changes to the cabinet system increased the standing of the Commission President (Bürgin 2020). Following Juncker's reforms, which established a tier of seven Vice Presidents, the Commission was viewed as progressing towards a 'network organisation', with the belief that these reforms could potentially enhance this transformation (Candel et al. 2016).

Vice Presidents have major coordinating responsibilities (S. C. Kassim et al. 2016) and are tasked with ensuring that Commissioners work together, bridging the gap between the political level and the policy operation level. However, interviews with EU officials regarding Juncker's reforms towards a 'political commission' revealed a disconnection between interdisciplinarity at the political level and the persistence of silos at the administrative level (Kassim and Laffan 2019). Despite this, studies on the Commission suggest that internal coordination has increased. Research on the Cabinet system highlights Vice Presidents as crucial figures for policy coordination between the political and administrative levels (Bauer, 2008; S. C. Kassim et al. 2016; Bauer, Kassim, and Connolly 2021). Each Vice President is responsible for coordinating a team of Commissioners and ensuring their initiatives align with the Commission's priority projects (Brooks and Bürgin 2021; Rietig and Dupont 2021), thereby fostering intersectoral or 'multidimensional' policies (Ophey and Schwalbach 2022).

Commissioners have been recognised as significant actors in policy coordination due to their substantial control over the lead DG (Hartlapp, Metz, and Rauh 2014). Studies have examined how Commissioners might act as agents of their national governments and pursue party-political interests (Wonka 2007), as well as the differences in their socialisation at the national level compared to the the Commission level (H. Kassim et al. 2013). More pertinent to this analysis is the research indicating that Commissioners may pursue personal reputation and gain (Dunleavy 1991), driven by a desire to assume greater responsibility (Nugent 2000), which creates fertile ground for 'turf disputes'.

At the policy operational level, policy officers play a fundamental role in policy coordination. Individual officers are depicted as crucial players in policy drafting, primarily due to the fragmented nature of the Commission and its lack of horizontal and vertical coordination mechanisms. This aspect reinforces the significance of individual Heads of Units within the Commission (Bauer, 2008; Cini 1996). In 2021, Vantaggiato et al. examined the role of individual bureaucrats in the Commission and studied their interactions. They

argue that boundary-spanners are very much present in the Commission when focusing on individuals. In the study, the authors could not confirm the presence of silos in the daily work of the Commission's DGs. Officials with purpose-based tasks 'appear as boundary-spanners' or as 'highly collaborative' (Vantaggiato, Kassim, and Connolly 2021). These officials also seem to play a fundamental role in breaking through compartmentalisation via their personal networks (H. Kassim et al. 2013; Candel, Breeman, and Termeer 2016).

Concerning established institutional practices fostering intersectoral coordination, interservice consultation refers to a formalised procedure where each DG in charge of developing a policy proposal receives input from other DGs to ensure effective policy coordination (Candel, Princen, and Biesbroek 2021). Initially perceived as an ad-hoc approach during the 1990s (Bulmer, 1993), soliciting formal opinions from other DGs has evolved into an institutionalised practice within the Commission over the last few decades. This practice is now regarded as a necessary duty to seek and acquire input from DGs with a legitimate stake in a proposal (European Commission 2019), serving to mitigate departmentalism (Spence 2006). The Commission's system of interservice consultations could facilitate intersectoral policy processes, as it compels units, services, and EU institutions to reach agreements (Candel, Princen, and Biesbroek 2021).

Nevertheless, previous literature has also questioned the effectiveness of this practice, noting that leading DGs could act strategically and withhold early policy drafts until the policy reaches a later stage (Schout and Jordan 2008). Others have identified an in-between form of incremental policy coordination, where both negative and positive coordination occur. DGs often try to shield policy processes within their own domain (negative coordination), while also attempting to contribute to the overall outcome, though usually only within their area of responsibility (positive coordination) (Candel, Princen, and Biesbroek 2021). Organisational practices aimed at fostering cross-unit coordination, such as interservice consultations, exemplify incremental policy coordination (Candel, Princen, and Biesbroek 2021). Additionally, interservice groups, chaired by the SG and tasked with preparing drafts of the Commission proposals or acts, impact assessments, and collecting expertise across the Commission policy fields, further indicate incremental policy coordination (European Commission 2019).

Another important practice that could support intersectoral coordination is the internal mobility of Commission staff. Efforts to enforce obligatory mobility across departments among Commission staff (Trondal 2012; Connolly and Kassim 2015) could result in individuals being less loyal to their own department and, due to their personal contacts in other DGs, able to interact across departments relatively easily. However, Connolly and Kassim, in 2015, also note that while Directors-General move, the rates of horizontal mobility among other staff members remain low. This highlights the significance of individual actors in hindering or supporting coordination.

The literature indicates that the Commission's organisation by departments, which are organised by purpose (i.e. oriented towards specific policy fields and corresponding policies), results in strong within-unit coordination but weak cross-unit coordination. Established institutional practices, such as interservice consultations, seem to encourage interactions and suggest that at least negative intersectoral coordination between DGs should be present. Concerning individual actors, political-level reforms appear to have increased coordination due to a commitment to the same larger

political projects across actors. In this context, staff mobility could further enhance interlinkages and foster a professional identity committed to the Commission's overall goals rather than the objectives of a specific unit. Studies have shown that individuals with purpose-based tasks frequently interact beyond their departments, highlighting that individuals play a crucial role in intersectoral policy coordination.

2.2 External dynamics – crises, policy issues, and wicked problems

While existing literature on the administrative and organisational structure of the Commission has extensively focused on internal dynamics to elucidate intersectoral policy coordination and the risk of siloisation, we introduce an additional dimension by considering external dynamics. These include crises, policy issues, and wicked problems, which initially emerge as external factors but eventually require management within the system. Consequently, they can either stimulate or impede intersectoral policy coordination. These external dynamics are particularly relevant because a lack of coordination blocks information flows, hinders the use of full organisational capabilities (Hart and Wille 2012) and reduces the scope for policy innovation (Scharpf 1994). When silo politics or 'siloisation' prevail, this impedes the necessary policy coordination of entities whose collaboration is needed to address policy matters that transcend the mandates or resources of single entities. External dynamics could either hinder policy coordination (e.g. when competing propositions to address them exist in siloed policy sectors) or facilitate it (e.g. when policy problems are seen as solvable through cross-sector collaboration).

The literature extensively acknowledges the impact of crises on European governance, as they influence political objectives and shape the direction of policies through contesting framing (Boin et al. 2009). Crises can either facilitate or impede policy learning (Kamkhaji and Radaelli 2017; Ladi and Tsarouhas 2020) and can also function as a proactive mechanism for policymaking (Rhinard 2019). For example, scholars contend that the European financial crisis of 2008 contributed to advancing European integration as a viable solution (Ioannou, Leblond, and Niemann 2015; Jones, Kelemen, and Meunier 2016; Seabrooke and Tsingou 2018).

Studies focusing on policy issues show that 'messy' policy issues push relevant actors to work together, thereby promoting integrative action across policy fields (Jochim and May 2010). Therefore, policy issues can trigger the emergence of boundary-spanning policy regimes, which Jochim and May (2010) define as government arrangements spanning multiple policy fields and fostering integrative policies. Thus, policy issues act as both attention-focusing mechanisms and integrative forces. As demonstrated by Rauh (2016) and Hartlapp (2018), both crises and policy issues can amplify public focus on EU matters, whether the attention is positive or negative. Consequently, the Commission can leverage on these opportunities to garner greater support for its initiatives.

Wicked problems pose severe governance challenges because consensus on the problem and its solution is lacking, the problem keeps evolving and is interconnected with other issues, the pressure on decision-makers remains high, deadlocks can occur among actors, and different scales (temporal, spatial and jurisdictional) are involved (Candel, Breeman, and Termeer 2016). In 2016, Candel et al. analysed the Commission's ability to cope with governance challenges and a specific 'wicked problem' (food security).

The authors see the compartmentalisation of an overall policy problem into multiple sub-issues as an enabling condition for a coordinated policy process, as the sub-issues are dealt with by specific DGs, units, or even single policy officials in a more technocratic manner.

Overall, exogenous forces such as disruptions, problems, or crises can shift attention to specific issues that necessitate intersectoral responses. External dynamics might influence the affected policy fields and, consequently, the internal organisational dynamics (here: in the European Commission). Therefore, external dynamics, while crucial for explaining processes of policy coordination, depend on the extent to which crises, policy issues, and wicked problems are relevant enough to be included in the policy agenda by the concerned actors and sustained by institutions (Béland 2009). Thus, what appears of interest for this analysis and as a research agenda is the interplay between external and internal dynamics. External factors might have the capacity to fully support or hinder how internal dynamics develop in matters of policy coordination, something that has often been overlooked in the literature.

We next turn to case selection, data and methods.

3 Case selection, data and methods

To study how internal and external dynamics in the European Commission facilitate or hinder policy coordination, and thereby help to break or maintain silos, we have selected the case of the Commission's coordination of education and employment. These are two structurally divided policy fields that are functionally intertwined due to the important role of education in preparing individuals for labour market entry and the need for reskilling in response to changes in employment structures. We consider the case of education and employment a 'most-likely case' (Gerring 2008) of intersectoral coordination, i.e., a case where internal and external dynamics could facilitate coordination and contribute to breaking down silos, given that policy issues between the two policy fields most likely overlap.

So far, studies on EU governance that span education and employment have mainly focused on single policy initiatives and EU responses to specific policy issues, such as the emphasis on 'employability' following high youth unemployment (Lahusen, Schulz, and Graziano 2013) or the rise of the knowledge-based economy (Jessop, Fairclough, and Wodak 2008; Sum and Jessop 2013). This reflects a broader trend in social policy-oriented studies to consider the nexus between education and employment (for instance, regarding active labour market policies) (e.g. Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2018, on the European Semester; Anderson 2015). Limited attention has been paid to the development of intersectoral coordination between education and employment and to the role of the Commission in this endeavour (Graf et al. 2023; Marques et al. 2023). This paper contributes to overcoming a single-sector approach by exploring both internal and external dynamics within the Commission that affect the intersectoral policy coordination in education and employment.

More precisely, by examining internal and external dynamics, we employ a qualitative analysis strategy based on a corpus of 10 interviews with Commission policy actors, later cross-verified with the analysis of EU policy documents related to the European Commission's policy cooperation in education and employment. Our

analysis relies on 10 semi-structured expert interviews (Littig 2009) with EU policy actors. The interviewees were selected based on their extensive experience working within the Commission and their expertise in both policy sectors. The interviews were conducted in late 2021 and early 2022, each lasting approximately 60 minutes on average.

Two interviews were conducted with former Commission officials in the College of Commissioners who worked at the intersection of education and employment, one with the current Commission's Secretariat-General, four with policy officers from the DG EMPL, and three with policy officers from the DG EAC. We employed a saturation strategy during the data collection process, ceasing interviews once no new information emerged.

To explore the relationship between internal and external dynamics in the Commission's intersectoral policy coordination in these two sectors, we surveyed EU stakeholders on the role of actors and established institutional practices for internal dynamics. For the category of external dynamics, while addressing crises like COVID-19, policy issues such as climate change, and wicked problems like the distinct missions of education and employment portfolios, we primarily focus on the effects of European youth unemployment following the 2008 financial crisis. This option was chosen due to the persistence of youth unemployment after 2008 and its enduring impact on policy developments, implying that this issue is likely to provide stronger evidence than more recent developments. In both categories, we explored aspects of positive and negative coordination based on the interviewees' experiences in the sectors of education and employment.

Interviews have been anonymised (with numbers assigned according to their chronological order), transcribed, and analysed with MAXQDA, following a thematic content analysis divided into two overarching themes – *internal dynamics* and *external dynamics*. In total, 223 items related to the the analytical themes were coded, with slightly more than half of the codes pertaining to internal dynamics aspects. To cross-verify the findings from the interviews, we have also analysed EU documents on education and employment (retrieved from the EU legal database and the EC websites). Our strategy was to explore key policies and their intersectoral character in both education and employment to gain a better understanding of the interviewees' accounts of specific policies andunderlying dynamics (e.g. policy issues to be addressed).

Overall, our empirical analysis provides a deeper understanding of both internal dynamics within the Commission and external influences. In this regard, our case-specific approach can inform future studies on intersectoral coordination beyond education and employment at the European and even national policy levels. Thus, it can advance our understanding of the relationship between internal and external dynamics and their effects in the Commission's intersectoral policy coordination.

4 Connecting the dots: how do internal and external dynamics effect intersectoral policy cooperation?

Guided by our research question, the empirical analysis first examines the internal dynamics within the Commission's organisational and administrative structures to understand the extent to which these dynamics hinder or facilitate policy coordination in education and employment. In the second part of the analysis, we turn to external

dynamics and how they contribute to triggering/strengthening or potentially weakening policy coordination (and therefore, increasing or decreasing siloisation). Thus, in the following section, we discuss the interplay between internal and external dynamics in the policy fields of education and employment.

4.1 *Internal dynamics – Findings on the European Commission's actors and established practices*

This section of the paper provides an account of the empirical data in relation to the Commission's internal dynamics in the education and employment policy fields.

In matters of actors, interviews show that the role of the Vice President has gradually strengthened as an important factor in enhancing policy cooperation between education and employment (C2, C4, C7, C8) since its emergence during the Juncker Commission. This is particularly evident in the collaboration between Vice Presidents and the Commissioners (C4, C8), as a way 'to work beyond DG frontiers' (C5), making the cooperation stronger and strategically oriented from the outset (C5, C8). However, while increased coordination efforts and time spent on exchanges are acknowledged, questions arise about the extent to which these processes lead to better outcomes (C4). Legal limitations, such as disagreements on the interpretation of the legal basis of the treaties to act in the policy fields of education and employment, considering the Commission's limited mandate, appear as an institutional obstacle (C2). Given this constrain, the use of soft policy instruments to collect and exchange evidence on member states' progress is crucial. These soft policy instruments operate alongside incentive mechanisms (see Marques, 2018, 2021, 2023) like those aimed at fostering mobility and strategic partnerships through programs like Erasmus+ (C1, C2, C10) (see Marques, Zapp, and Powell, 2022; Marques and Graf 2024). Notably, both the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) and the European Semester play significant roles in facilitating mutual learning and both vertical and horizontal intersectoral policy coordination (C2, C3, C6, C10).

Regarding the role of Commissioners, the data indicates that 'how you do things, it is not neutral' (C1) as each lifecycle of the Commission's mandates triggers a 'turf war' to allocate and connect territories, and to distribute the Commissioners to different policy areas (C1, C8, C9, C10). A conspicuous example in the case of education and employment is the attribution of portfolios during the Juncker Commission to the Commissioners Navracsics (DG EAC) and Thyssen (DG EMP), respectively, with the education portfolio being split in two. While school education and higher education remained in the DG EAC, vocational education and training and adult education moved to the DG EMP (C1, C2, C3, C4, C5, C6, C8, C9, C10). The division of portfolios between education and employment is perceived by interviewees both as a political decision to strengthen Thyssen's portfolio (C1, C8) and as an organisational decision aimed at reinforcing the link between education and employment matters (C10). Nevertheless, there is common agreement among interviewees that this strategic move did not cause major disruptions in the cooperation between the portfolios, primarily due to the institutionalised working relations between the DGs' policy officers (C3, C6, C8, C10). Another important aspect related to the role of the Commissioners is the often difficult balance between the decisions and orientations defined in the College of Commissioners (as legal and institutional obligations) and the

attempt to project the individual public profile of the Commissioners (C8, C9) and of the DG Directors (C2).

The working relationships between policy officers appear as a crucial factor for positive policy coordination between education and employment. While staff mobility between DGs cause temporary disruptions, it is generally perceived as highly beneficial. This mobility not only triggers change within DGs (C1) but also reinforces individual working relationships among staff members (C5, C8, C9), which facilitates cooperation across DGs. Nonetheless, interviewees also noted that such an issue is a fertile ground for siloisation as people tend to collaborate with those in other DGs with whom they have an established affinity (C1, C2, C5, C9). Over time, this can lead to the creation of a community of policy officers with their 'own language', potentially resulting in siloisation (C10).

In relation to established institutional practices, interservice consultation is highlighted as a major institutional practice designed to seek intersectoral vertical and horizontal policy coordination from the outset of a policy that touches upon several policy areas (C1, C2, C5, C7, C8). Before any policy adoption, as part of the interservice consultation,

> The proposal is officially transmitted to all the DGs that may have a stake . . . Then, there is normally a written procedure. So, they have three weeks to take a position in writing (. . .). On the basis of the responses, the Director-General (. . .) in the lead has to update the proposal. And afterwards it is sent to the Cabinet level where again, not only the Cabinet [i.e., the advisory team] of the Commissioner in charge is looking at the text, but basically all Cabinets are informed. (. . .) Again, they would have a second look. So, there are two mechanisms to ensure that everybody knows what's going on and everybody is happy . . . Of course, sometimes the links between different policy areas are more intense than others. (C8)

More than just supporting intersectoral policy coordination across DGs, interservice consultation is considered an important positive feature in the Commission's operations. This instrument has gradually evolved to include prior consultations with the political level (Commissioners) to outline a strategy and work plan from the outset, i.e., before the proposal becomes formal (C2, C7). However, interviewees also reported that sometimes the formal proposals might be shared only at a later stage, which can undermine the purpose of interservice consultation (C2, C5). This issue is evident, for instance, in the 'slightly closed' day-to-day operations of departments within a specific DG, when they seek advice and opinions from other departments (in other DGs) only after they are 'ready to go'. For some, this process reflects a siloisation of the policy working process (C2, C10).

Overall, the analysis of internal dynamics shows a contrasting picture where both positive and negative forms of coordination coexist. On the one hand, actors working at the operational policy level (DGs) primarily demonstrate positive coordination, while those at the political level (VPs and Commissioners) exhibit both positive and negative coordination. This is mediated by institutional factors (e.g. legal interpretations of treaties, in the case of the VPs) and personal agendas (e.g. promoting public profiles, in the case of the Commissioners). On the other hand, established institutional practices also primarily manifest positive coordination but are pervaded by potential negative effects, such as the development of policy communities with their 'own language' (staff mobility) or the retention of formal proposals within DGs (interservice consultation). Notwithstanding, despite the presence of both positive and negative coordination scenarios, there is a general perception among policy actors that the Commission is moving towards

increased cooperation (C5), indicating that internal dynamics are fostering incremental policy coordination within the education and employment policy fields.

We next turn to the analysis of external dynamics.

4.2 External dynamics - findings on crises, policy issues and wicked problems

One of the contributions of this paper is to highlight the role of external dynamics in supporting or hindering intersectoral policy cooperation, an aspect often neglected in the literature. This section demonstrates how external dynamics, such as crises, policy issues or wicked problems, emerge as potentially significant factors that can enhance either positive or negative coordination.

Our analysis yields that crises serve as a major catalyst for triggering policy activities (C1, C2, C3, C5, C6, C8, C9, C10) surrounding certain problems. Thereby, the complexity of the issue determines the intersectoral nature or degree of action required. In the policy fields of education and employment, the rise of youth unemployment following the global financial crisis of 2008 led the Commission to devote more attention to their interconnection (C1). Youth unemployment, inherently intersectoral, spurred the strengthening of intersectoral policy coordination in the fields of education, employment and social policy. This is evident in the development of several initiatives to tackle youth unemployment, such as Youth on the Move (2010), the Youth Guarantee (2012), the European Alliance for Apprenticeships (2013) and the Skill Agenda (2016), later renewed as New Skills Agenda (2018) (C1, C2) (see Graf and Marques 2023).

Regarding whether such crises play a decisive role in the emergence of intersectoral policy coordination, there is a common understanding that crises serve more as 'triggers for why more attention should be paid to certain issues' (C3) or even as 'external incentives' (C10) to pursue policy action in certain domains. Thus, crises do not appear as the source of intersectoral policy coordination itself, as the institutional (internal) mechanisms seem tailored to achieve this aim. They not only target and direct policy attention but also can confer legitimacy to policy action, enabling the justification and prompt allocation of financial resources for that purpose (C4, C8). A recent example of this can be seen in the adoption of the Recovery Plan for Europe following the COVID-19 global pandemic, where issues related to education and employment emerged as one of the main pillars (C1, C8).

In the same vein, policy issues also appear to have the capacity to garner attention that demands intersectoral policy coordination. The emergence of digitalisation and pressing issues related to climate change are considered as policy issues that inherently demand intersectoral policy coordination, as they cut across sectors (C1, C5, C8). In this context, the link between education and employment is bound by the need to build educational and work-based ecosystems that support the digital and green transitions, developing the necessary competencies for this purpose. Thus, the emergence of a digital and green society has prompted concerted action between education and employment, resulting in several policy initiatives such as the European Skills Agenda (2016), the Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027), and the Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition (2018) that demanded intersectoral policy cooperation (C6, C8).

Finally, wicked problems often create tensions in intersectoral policy coordination, considering the distinct missions of education - namely raising and creating

European citizens - and fostering employment to integrate people into the labour market (C1, C2, C4, C5, C6, C7, C8, C9). For instance, the strategic agenda for the EU 2019–2024 stresses that EU member states 'must step up investment in people's skills and education', and the Council Resolution on further developing the European Education Area calls on the member states and the European Commission 'to promote cooperation and sharing of evidence of the benefits of investing in education and training' (European Commission 2020a). This aligns with the perceived need to reskill and upskill people for new skills demanded by employers, addressed in various European policy initiatives over the last decade (European Commission 2012, 2016, 2020b, 2020c). An example of a policy initiative that spans education and employment is the Commission's effort to promote more flexible modules beyond formal degrees to widen learning opportunities, recently putting forward a recommendation for a European approach to micro-credentials. This is discussed as 'a new opportunity for lifelong learning' (CEDEFOP 2022), highlighting the potential of micro-credentials to support responsiveness and flexibility in dynamically changing European labour markets. These credentials certify short-term learning experiences in terms of their learning outcomes and can be developed and provided by various providers in different settings (formal, non-formal, and informal) (European Commission 2022). Without significant coordination between the departments responsible for education and employment, it appears extremely challenging to reach policy solutions, e.g. around re-/upskilling or lifelong learning (Benasso et al. 2022). This is arguably even more relevant at the European level, where further policy issues and public as well as private actors are involved within a complex supranational governance context (Milana, Klatt, and Vatrella 2020).

Despite long-lasting cooperation in matters of education and employment within the Commission, contrasting missions between these sectors still pose significant challenges to intersectoral policy coordination. Education is often perceived as the 'Cinderella' (C10) or the 'scapegoat' (C5) for tackling unemployment-related issues, which are frequently better explained by structural labour market changes rather than by education's capacity to prepare young people for market needs. Thus, there is a perceived tension between the two missions, with education often appearing to be dominated by employment policy (C2, C5, C7). However, this does not mean that they do not coexist in parallel (C3, C4, C8).

In sum, the data suggests that crises and policy issues are important elements for facilitating intersectoral policy coordination within education and employment policy fields. On the one hand, both crises and policy issues have the capacity to draw attention to certain policy domains or act as external incentives that positively impact the development of intersectoral policy coordination. On the other hand, wicked problems intrinsically related to the mission of each policy field have the potential to negatively affect intersectoral policy coordination. However, the data also suggests signs of incremental policy coordination, explained by the gradual work carried out between the two DGs and the intersectoral nature of certain policy issues. It seems clear that the extent to which these external dynamics can be translated into intersectoral policy coordination is intrinsically dependent on the internal dynamics that provide the conditions and mediate the direction of policy coordination.

5 Discussion and conclusion

This paper aimed to discuss how internal and external dynamics related to the work of the European Commission facilitate or hinder European intersectoral policy coordination, focusing on the interaction between the education and employment policy fields. While internal dynamics within the Commission have been extensively studied to understand how actors and established institutional practices facilitate or hinder (intersectoral) policy coordination, less attention has been paid to the role of external dynamics and their interaction with internal ones.

Based on ten interviews conducted with current and former Commission officials in the College of Commissioners, the SG, the DG EMPL, and the DG EAC, along with the analysis of policy documents, our study suggests that both external and internal dynamics exhibit positive and negative forms of intersectoral policy coordination. The analysis of internal dynamics presents a complex picture both at the level of both actors and established institutional practices (see Table 1 for an overview).

Regarding actors, the data shows that the role of Vice Presidents mainly facilitates positive coordination, as it allows for work beyond DG frontiers from the outset. Our findings challenge the assumption that DGs can pursue their own agendas (see also H. Kassim 2008), partly due to the creation of the Vice Presidents' role. Our results align with more recent studies that highlight the importance of Vice Presidents for policy coordination between political and

Table 1. Overview of internal and external dynamics' effects on positive and negative coordination (stylized depiction).

	Positive coordination	Negative coordination
Internal dynamics Actors	Vice-Presidents: Work beyond DG frontiers Reinforce policy coordination between political and administrative levels Policy officers: Boundary-spanners via the institutionalizsation of cooperative work across DGs	Vice-Presidents: Face institutional hindrances, e.g. legal limitations and disagreements on the interpretation of the legal basis of treaties Commissioners: Frequently involved in turf wars Tend to advance individual public profiles
Established institutional practices	Internal mobility of Commission staff: Reinforces working relationships and facilitates cooperation between DGs Interservice consultation: Reinforces positive policy coordination at both vertical and horizontal levels	Internal mobility of Commission staff: Prone to the development of communities with their 'own language' Interservice consultation: Delays in sharing policy proposals is indicative of possible silos in the policy working process
External dynamics Crises & Policy issues	Trigger policy activities and frame attention Provide external incentives to intersectoral policy coordination Confer legitimacy to allocate financial resources	Impact meddled by institutional conditions that internal dynamics offer for either continuing/facilitating a process or blocking it
Wicked problems		Distinctive missions condition the design of policy solutions that integrate both objectives without compromising either one

administrative levels (S. C. Kassim et al. 2016; Bauer, Kassim, and Connolly 2021; Bürgin 2020), supported by *a priori* assessments of policy coherence that foster intersectoral thinking (Brooks and Bürgin 2021; Rietig and Dupont 2021; Ophey and Schwalbach 2022).

Connected to the figure of the VPs, negative coordination seems propelled by institutional hindrances, such as legal limitations that trigger disagreements on the interpretation of the legal basis of the treaties. This is particularly relevant in the fields of education and employment due to the limited EU competences in legislating these matters. This aspect constitutes a further research avenue to explore, considering the division of competences between the EU and its member states into exclusive, shared, and supporting competences among policy fields. Do tightly regulated policy fields, such as common fisheries or commercial policies (exclusive competences), provide a more solid foundation for effective intersectoral policy coordination compared to education and employment? Consequently, are they less susceptible to change when influenced by external dynamics? To what extent are policy fields like industry (supporting competences) or environment and energy (shared competences) better positioned to adapt in response to crises compared to tightly regulated fields?

Commissioners, on the other hand, are manifestly indicative of negative coordination due to turf wars in the changing cycle of the Commission's mandates, as highlighted by Trondal (2012) and Egeberg and Trondal (2016). This is also related to attempts to project the individual public profile of the Commissioners, as previously showed by Dunleavy (1991) and Nugent (2000). Furthermore, our analysis indicates that despite major changes in the division of Commissioners' portfolios between DG EMPL and DG EAC at the start of a new lifecycle of the Commission (2014), policy cooperation between DGs was not affected. Two possible explanations arise. The first is that policy fields conducive to coordination are prone to strong internal coordination within the Commission (Senninger, Finke, and Blom-Hansen 2021). The second points to the relevance of institutionalised cooperative work across DGs through the Commission's lifecyles and the role of policy officers. Our study confirms the importance of the working relationships between policy officials across DGs as boundary-spanners (Vantaggiato, Kassim, and Connolly 2021) or in breaking compartmentalisation (H. Kassim et al. 2013; Candel, Breeman, and Termeer 2016). This is mainly facilitated by staff mobility, which reinforces working relationships and facilitates cooperation between DGs, despite being prone to the development of communities with their 'own language' (C10), an indication of negative coordination. Thus, the diagnoses that hierarchical steering (VPs) and horizontal coordination (DGs) are traditionally weak seem overstated, considering our data and more recent evidence that both positive and negative forms of coordination coexist to varying degrees. More empirical research is needed, especially regarding the role of VPs and their relationship with Commissioners, and to explore in more depth the role of Directors-General and Heads of Unit to pinpoint critical mechanisms that might facilitate or hinder intersectoral policy coordination.

Regarding established institutional practices, our analysis indicates that the progressive institutionalisation of interservice consultations not only enhances horizontal coordination but also provides hierarchical guidance, resulting in predominantly positive outcomes that bolster policy coordination. This process has the potential to mitigate departmentalism by necessitating consensus across various levels (Spence 2006; Candel,

Princen, and Biesbroek 2021). However, signs of negative policy coordination, such as the timing of sharing policy proposals, point to possible silos in the policy working process (Schout and Jordan 2008; Candel, Princen, and Biesbroek 2021).

In matters of external dynamics, the analysis was fruitful in uncovering the role that crises, policy issues, and wicked problems play in facilitating or hindering intersectoral policy coordination, a topic that has been largely overlooked in the literature. External dynamics also exhibit both positive and negative coordination, but their effectiveness in triggering intersectoral policy coordination is largely mediated by how internal dynamics provide the necessary conditions. This finding is crucial for understanding the interplay between internal and external dynamics in supporting or hindering policy coordination. For instance, our data indicates that crises and policy issues can act as 'boosters to trigger policy activities' (C1, C2, C3, C5, C6, C8, C9, C10) or 'triggers for why more attention should be paid to certain issues' (C3), ultimately serving as 'external incentives' (C10) with the capacity to confer legitimacy to policy action and prompt the allocation of financial resources. This aligns with the typical role of crises in framing contests (Boin et al., 2009) and their capacity to bolster public backing for EU policy initiatives (Rauh 2016; Hartlapp 2018), potentially fostering the advancement of integrated measures across policy domains (Jochim and May 2010).

While crises and policy issues appear as positive mechanisms that facilitate policy coordination, they are inherently dependent on internal institutional conditions to either enhance policy coordination or hindering them. Thus, our findings show that crises and policy issues can have a direct impact by serving as catalysts that steer attention to certain issues, confer legitimacy to policy action, and trigger policy activity. They act as external incentives that mobilise resources and galvanise efforts towards intersectoral policy coordination, albeit mediated by the degree of institutionalisation of intersectoral policy coordination within the Commission (internal dynamics). In our case, crises such as youth unemployment and the COVID-19 pandemic appeared as external events necessitating immediate action, whereas issues such as digitalisation were characterized by a more gradual and enduring nature. This observation shows the variability in the capacity of external events to trigger responses, which deserves closer attention from scholarship.

In turn, wicked problems appear as a source of tension that is indicative of a fertile ground for negative coordination since education and employment are inherently wicked problems. This aspect is further reinforced by the distinctive missions of the DGs, which delegate these 'wicked problems' to each policy field – education aims to raise/create European citizens, while employment focuses on integrating people into the labour market. Finding intersectoral policy solutions that balance both missions without compromising one over the other is a challenge. This aspect is mediated not only by the long-lasting cooperation between the DGs but also by the nature of policy problems, or even issues, that demand intersectoral policy coordination from the outset (C6, C9).

In conclusion, the exercise of connecting internal and external dynamics and inferring their role in facilitating or hindering policy coordination proves to be a valuable approach to understanding the complexity of intersectoral policy coordination. Our study shows that the strength of external dynamics in facilitating or hindering policy coordination is intrinsically connected to the conditions provided by internal dynamics. However, the predominantly positive influence of external dynamics in garnering attention, providing legitimacy for policy action, and channelling the

allocation of funds, should not be overlooked. This aspect is crucial in studying the dynamics of intersectoral policy coordination beyond merely focusing on internal dynamics. Moreover, this paper emphasises the need for a better understanding of the extent to which these external dynamics can effectively impact and change internal dynamics. This is an area that policy studies and public administration scholars can integrate in more detail into their future research agendas.

Notes

1. The rationale for the case selection is further elaborated in the case selection, data, and methods section.
2. Trein, Maggetti, and Meyer (2021) differentiate policy integration and administrative coordination. They define policy integration as 'specific cross-cutting policy measures and instruments' (p. 1412) to achieve policy objectives that require cross-sectoral solutions. In contrast, administrative coordination takes place with reforms towards improved interaction and coordination of organisational units.
3. This stands in contrast to an organisation focussed on 'processes', as in the case of the Commission's SG that is the bureaucratic centre and increasingly also the power base of the President (Trondal 2012).

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