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The European Sectoral Social Dialogue in Education and the strengthening of the European Union's policy regime in education and employment

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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the development of the European Sectoral Social Dialogue in Education since its launch in 2010 and situates it within the context of European Union (EU) governance. The paper adopts a public policy perspective and Ashley Jochim and Peter May's framework for analysing boundary-spanning policy regimes. Based on critical discourse analysis of social dialogue documents and interviews, we argue that the European Sectoral Social Dialogue in Education, as a distinctive institution, has been profoundly shaped by EU's boundary-spanning policy regime of education and employment and at the same time has contributed to its reinforcement. In particular, we demonstrate that the sectoral social dialogue committee since its creation has been embedded in wider institutional arrangements, that it seeks to mobilise education employers and workers on a large scale across Europe, and that it aligns with central issue framings and ideas of EU's boundary-spanning policy regime of education and employment. Thereby, the paper contributes to understanding how institutions, by mobilising interests and channelling attention towards specific issues and ideas, play a central role in structuring and legitimising contemporary EU governance.

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1. Introduction

This paper analyses the trajectory of the European Sectoral Social Dialogue in Education (ESSDE) since its creation in 2010 and situates it as part of European Union (EU) governance. EU governance is characteristic in the way that educational issues tend to be framed as part of broader societal challenges to do also with economics, social affairs and employment. This strategic framing of education governance in the EU, reflected emphatically in the Lisbon Strategy and the subsequent Europe 2020 Strategy, goes back to the 'educational turn' (Delanty and Rumford 2005) of the mid-1990s, when the European Commission (hereafter 'Commission') harnessed the ideas of a learning society and lifelong learning in order to modernise Europe as a knowledge-based and social market economy (Lawn and Grek 2012; Milana, Klatt, and Vatrella 2020; Traianou and Jones 2019). While much has happened since the 1990s, these 'wider determinations' of education have remained prominent in the EU's framing of the policy area (Traianou and Jones 2019).

The paper's entry point is that EU education governance forms part of a wider 'boundary-spanning policy regime' (BSPR), a concept adopted from Ashley Jochim and May (2010) that involves intersectoral policy coordination across, for instance, employment, economics, and social policy, as

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well as education. As shorthand for this BSPR, we will refer to the EU's BSPR of education and employment though it involves other policy areas and is constantly evolving.

The research interest of this paper concerns the ways in which the ESSDE since its establishment in 2010 has strengthened the EU's BSPR of education and employment. Two circumstances form background for our research interest. First, the ESSDE per definition spans employment as well as education policy, since it constitutes a forum for bi-partite social dialogue, involving negotiation and consultation between employers and workers on issues of common interest, associated with all levels of education, from early childhood education to higher education and research. Second, the EU's strategic framing of education has created opportunities for education-oriented organisations in terms of advocacy and profiling themselves as indispensable agents in the pursuit of EU's objectives (Poissonneau and Nolda 2012), raising the question how the European social partners in education, the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) and the European Federation of Education Employers (EFEE), through the ESSDE have related to the EU's BSPR of education and employment.

Based on critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003) of twenty ESSDE joint text outcomes, four Work Programmes, and four semi-structured research interviews, we argue that the ESSDE is profoundly shaped by the EU's BSPR and at the same time contributes to its reinforcement. In particular, we demonstrate that the ESSDE, as a distinctive institution, is embedded in wider institutional arrangements of EU policy-making, helps to mobilise education employers and workers on a large scale, and aligns with central issue framings and ideas of the BSPR concerning synergies between sectors and the need for intersectoral coordination. Thereby, our study provides a pertinent contribution to address the research gap concerning EU level industrial relations and social dialogue in education and how they relate to major developments in EU governance during the 2010s (Stevenson et al. 2020).

2. Education and social dialogue in EU governance

Drawing on research and EU documents, this section clarifies the research problem by suggesting that the ESSDE and European social dialogue more generally have been shaped by a complex interplay of institutional arrangements, interests and issues.

2.a. European social dialogue and the ESSDE

European social dialogue has specific institutional features which differ from national arrangements of collective bargaining. When Commission President Jacques Delors (1985–1995) in 1985 launched the concept of European social dialogue, the primary aim was to create a possibility for the cross-sectoral social partners – the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), BusinessEurope, European Centre of Employers and Enterprises providing Public Services and Services of General Interest (CEEP), and later joined by SMEunited – to make agreements. Such agreements may eventually lead to Community law, though this has only occurred rarely. Social dialogue provisions were inserted into the Single European Act in 1986, and the Social Protocol annexed to the Maastricht Treaty ratified in 1991 introduced the obligation for the Commission to consult social partners on initiatives potentially affecting labour and management in Europe (European Commission 2010; Welz 2008).

Concerning sectoral social dialogue, the Commission in 1998 set out minimum rules for Sectoral Social Dialogue Committees as bi-partite fora for European social partners. Currently, 43 of such sectoral committees are in operation. The first committees to be established cover industrial sectors in which the EU enjoys full political competence, later followed by committees for sectors where the EU has only partial competence. Launched in 2010, the ESSDE is part of the most recent wave of committees to be created, associated with public service sectors for which the EU does not have any binding competence (Léonard, Perin, and Pochet 2011; Poissonneau and Nolda 2012).

The establishment of the ESSDE should not be understood as inevitable or a mere administrative exercise but as the result of political choices, involving discussions and internal divisions on the side of both employers and unions. With roots going back at least to 1975, ETUCE was built on a confederation model of trade unionism, that is, unions joining together across borders to build solidarity.[1] ETUCE has historically been entangled in international teacher union politics, which, for instance, saw the creation in 1993 and subsequent rise of Education International as the major global federation of teacher unions. In 2010, the year that the ESSDE was launched, ETUCE became a Regional Structure of Education International. As a result of the merger, ETUCE's membership expanded with numerous members joining from EU candidate countries, neighbourhood area and the former Soviet Union (ETUCE 2007, 2023). In the context of European integration, ETUCE during the 1990s primarily conceived its role as one of engaging with the EU institutions and national governments (Gumbrell-McCormick 1996). Recognised by ETUC in 1993 as one of its European Industry Federations, ETUCE constituted an integral part of the European education policy field that was burgeoning in the wake of the Maastricht Treaty. For illustration, the first ETUCE General Secretary (1990–91) subsequently became a Director in the Commission's Eurydice Network and a lead coordinator of the 'Education and Training 2010' process (ETUCE 2007). Following internal reform and consolidation, and in the context of the major EU enlargements in 2004 and 2007, the ETUCE secretariat from 2003 onwards built its capacity to lobby more intensively as well as pursue its longstanding aim to create a European sectoral committee, thereby extending its role in terms of relations with employers. For this to happen, a European employer federation in education had to be established as a counterpart for social dialogue. Supported by EU funding, ETUCE collaborated with CEEP to organise such a counterpart, and EFEE was eventually created in 2009 (ETUCE 2007; Poissonneau and Nolda 2012).

The ESSDE is a bipartite forum, yet the Commission has played an important role by financially supporting the idea of creating EFEE and the ESSDE, processing the formal application submitted by EFEE and ETUCE, and authorising the establishment of the committee in 2010. Like for other sectoral committees, the secretarial costs are borne by the Commission's Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (European Commission 2017). Furthermore, the authorisation of the ESSDE required the Commission's recognition of ETUCE and EFEE as European social partners for the education sector, granting them rights of consultation on policy initiatives potentially affecting labour and management in the sector (Poissonneau and Nolda 2012; Sorensen 2021).

In this respect, the notion of 'representativeness' encapsulates how institutional arrangements and classification criteria of agents are interwoven in European social dialogue. The EU agency Eurofound thus prepares 'representativeness studies' assessing whether European sectoral federations of trade unions and employers consist of organisations which form part of established social partner structures in several different member states. These representativeness studies tend to be difficult to undertake, given the scarcity and quality of data as well as the complexity of mapping the relevant sector (Welz 2008). For education sectors, the two representativeness studies conducted so far have highlighted the 'pronounced pluralism' (Eurofound 2011, 54–55) among member organisations and continued differentiation along occupational, professional and institutional lines. ETUCE was found to have a large and relatively stable membership, currently representing around 11 million education workers affiliated with 132 education trade unions in 51 different countries, including 89 trade unions across all EU member states. While ETUCE's membership is much larger and stretches far beyond the EU, the organisational profile of EFEE members is much more diverse and remains focused on the EU space. The EFEE membership, initially a platform of government employers in education, is thus now a mixture of government bodies, agencies and ministries as well as private employer organisations. EFEE membership has increased markedly, from 21 employer organisations in 16 Member States in 2010 to 48 members in 23 EU member states in 2020 (Eurofound 2011, 2020). In July 2023, 58 member organisations were listed on EFEE's website (EFEE 2023).

In summary, the ESSDE has since the outset formed part of the institutional arrangements for European social dialogue and EU policy-making. This is a dynamic landscape, where the main agents, their capacities and memberships are evolving, and where the large differences between institutional arrangements for social dialogue across the EU shape the interplay of employers and trade unions and their capacity to define a common agenda (Léonard, Perin, and Pochet 2011).

2.b. The relative stability of issues in EU education governance

We know little about how the substantive interests of the ESSDE have developed over time, and the ways in which they have related to the EU's BSPR of education and employment. The committee's Rules of Procedure, agreed upon by ETUCE and EFEE, allows them to engage with a wide range of strategic policy issues, including social affairs, employment and labour market issues as well as more pedagogically and professionally oriented issues (Poissonneau and Nolda 2012; Sorensen 2021). Specifically, the Rules provide a mandate to 'advise the European Commission on initiatives concerning education and social policy and broader developments in European policy which might have implications on the Education sector' (RULES, 1),[2] at all levels within education sectors, from early childhood education to higher education and research. The first stages of the ESSDE's work have been partly documented, including that the post-2008 economic crisis dominated its agenda and that the first biannual Work Programme for 2010–2011 included three themes (Quality in Education, Demographic Challenges, the European Education and Training Policy Process after 2010) and five topics (education and the economic crisis; stress, violence and harassment; public/private education developments; promotion and development of social dialogue in education; mapping selected issues in the different countries' education systems) (Poissonneau and Nolda 2012).

However, apart from these tentative observations, there is little evidence about the trajectory of the ESSDE. Sorensen (2021) hints at thematic overlaps in the ESSDE body of documents and Commission Communications focused on schools and teachers, but this apparent overlap does not reveal much about the committee's agenda and substantive interests over time.

With regard to the EU's BSPR of education and employment, the evidence suggests that the key issues have remained relatively stable since the 1990s. Dale (2009) identified a set of tenets underpinning a European space of Knowledge Economy and Lifelong Learning: i) a lifelong system of learning provision rather than educational institutions; ii) competences rather than curriculum contents; iii) the imperative of engaging with ICT; and iv) focus on employment rather than social policy or nation-building. Likewise, Sorensen (2021) identified a stable set of key issues in Commission Communications focused on schools and teachers since the mid-2000s: i) the need for investment; ii) the imperative of lifelong learning and professional development; iii) the increasing demands placed upon teachers; iv) teacher shortages, recruitment and retention; and v) improving the attractiveness of the teaching profession.

In line with this thematic continuity, we note that the education-related objectives and indicators of the EU 2020 Strategy were similar to those of the preceding Lisbon Strategy (Pépin 2011; Poissonneau and Nolda 2012). However, while the framing of the EU's BSPR of education and employment has remained stable, the means of EU governance have developed significantly, including for instance, the Commission's capacities for data collection, performance monitoring and intersectoral coordination, the launch of the European Semester as the major mechanism for socio-economic governance, and the introduction of the European Pillar of Social Rights in 2017 (Grek 2016; Sorensen 2021; Stevenson et al. 2020).

For our purposes, we are interested in the implications that the establishment of the ESSDE has had for the EU's BSPR in education and employment, including: What are the issues discussed in the ESSDE and have they developed over time? How has the ESSDE related to EU policies? What do the multi-level characteristics of EU policy-making mean for ESSDE activities? How has the bi-partite sectoral dialogue in education related to the tri-partite cross-sectoral social dialogue over time? In order to make sense of such questions, the next section introduces the concept of BSPR in more detail.

3. The constituents of boundary-spanning policy regimes

We combine concepts from public policy, organisational theory and political sociology to examine the trajectory and workings of the ESSDE. We conceive the political field as 'complex and densely structured institutional environments' (Hay 2002, 57), where there is capacity for agency, choice and deliberation, and where the framing of issues and ideas helps to constitute political fields and mediate the relationship between strategic agents and their structured contexts (Hay 2002). Accordingly, the contestation of competing issue framings (Furnari 2018), or ways of representing the world, which serve as premises for reasoning about goals and actions, is of particular interest to us. The key attributes of issues include that they are represented as important, unavoidable, and salient, therefore calling for action in the near future. Issues thus do not represent a single-objective meaning but are assigned meaning via issue frames, that is, schemata of interpretation that agents employ to label issues in ways intended to mobilise critical mass of support, including agents that might not agree with the interpretation of the issue at hand (Furnari 2018).

Jochim and May's (2010) approach to analyse BSPR resonates with the propositions above. They emphasise issues as providing an impetus for action, and the need for taking into account the dynamics between the framing of issues, ideas, the role of agents or interest-based representation, and institutional arrangements such as legislation that allow such regimes to emerge and take hold or wither. Issues come and go and so do the policy regimes addressing them.

Accordingly, policy regimes are dependent on problem-setting and the framing of issues and do thus not necessarily reflect the most pressing problems. The four factors or forces that shape BSPR according to Jochim and May (2010) – issues, ideas, interests and institutions – provide analytical lenses in making sense of the particular ways that the ESSDE forms part of EU policy-making. Our entry point is that the ESSDE constitutes a distinctive institution, subject to norms and regulations about European social dialogue, which by addressing employment and social affairs in education sectors in itself has BSPR features, while also helping to constitute the EU's more wide-ranging BSPR of education and employment.

Following Jochim and May (2010), institutions serve as integrative forces which incorporate the other influences underpinning policy regimes, since they garner attention towards issues perceived to be salient, they are invested with authority by agents, and they include flows of information, altogether contributing to the cohesion of the policy regime. In this respect, agency matters, because the raising of awareness, issue framings, and the mobilisation of interests across policy subsystems, are necessary for the legitimisation and strength of the BSPR.

Based on these theoretical insights and existing evidence, we conceive the ESSDE as an institution which seeks to address specific issues deemed important for education sectors and beyond; an institution for the exchange of ideas concerning the 'wider determinations' of education (Traianou and Jones 2019) binding education sectors to the socio-economic governance of the EU; an institution that through its apparent inclusion of trade unions and employers in EU policy-making may help to legitimise the EU's BSPR of education and employment.

In summary, we are interested in whether and how the ESSDE since its establishment in 2010 has strengthened the EU's BSPR of education and employment. In this respect, 'strength' relates to the 'ability of a given regime to bring about the integration of elements of relevant subsystems and to reduce policy fragmentation with respect to a particular messy problem' (Jochim and May 2010, 317). It follows that institutions constitute a necessary but not sufficient factor in strengthening a given BSPR. Accordingly, the analysis of institutions cannot stand alone when making sense of such regimes. Importantly, Jochim and May (2010) thus understand institutions as either facilitating or hindering the formation and evolution of policy regimes, in combination with prior interest relationships and on the power of the coalescing ideas and issues. In other words, institutions do not operate independently of the other factors; the outcomes for institutions as well as the relevant BSPR, in terms of strengthening and weakening, depend on the interaction of issues, ideas, interests and institutions.

4. Research design

In pursuing our research interest, we conduct a processual analysis of the ESSDE's trajectory as a particular institution forming part of EU governance. In a sense, we adopt a dual focus since we seek to understand the ESSDE as a distinctive institution as well as situate it as part of the EU's BSPR of education and employment. Importantly, since the ESSDE was only launched in 2010, our analysis cannot address the emergence of the EU's BSPR of education and employment in the 1990s. Moreover, we do not claim that our analysis, with its specific focus on European social dialogue, forms a robust basis for assessing the durability of the BSPR as a whole. Rather, our analytical focus concerns how the ESSDE has contributed to strengthening the BSPR by mobilising interests and agents, reinforcing alignment and cohesion across policy subsystems, thereby potentially representing a 'field settlement', characterised by common frameworks of action revolving around shared issue framings (Furnari 2018, 328).

The paper draws on extensive desk research as well as a detailed analysis of the twenty joint text outcomes issued by ESSDE in the period 2009–2020, and four biannual Work Programmes for the ESSDE (together covering the period 2014–2021). In addition, we have conducted four interviews with representatives of ETUCE and EFEE (see Appendix A for overview of empirical material, and Online Appendix for a detailed overview of ESSDE joint texts).

As methodology, we employ critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003) of the policy documents and the four interviews in order to trace how the ESSDE helps to reproduce, contest and strengthen the EU's BSPR.

For this purpose, we focus on the semiotic aspects of issues, ideas, interests and agents, and institutions, distinguishing between three co-constitutive types of text meaning: i) ways of representation through the discursive construction of ideas, circumstances, reality, what we know about the world and how we may control it; ii) ways of action and interaction through genres which enact relations 'with others' as well as 'on others', for instance, in the form of advice, setting out obligations or recommendations; and iii) ways of (self-)identification and identities, including judgements and the degrees of commitment to propositional assumptions regarding 'truth' and factual circumstances ('epistemic modality'), actions to take and obligations ('deontic modality'), and values (Fairclough 2003, 168–173).

By focusing on these three major types of text meaning and their interplay, critical discourse analysis brings 'a social perspective into the heart and fine detail of the text' (Fairclough 2003, 28). In combining the concept of BSPR and the methodology of critical discourse analysis, we understand each of the four forces shaping policy regimes – issues, ideas, interests and institutions – to be shot through by the three types of text meaning – representation, action and identification. In our operationalisation, we draw on selected resources of critical discourse analysis and find it constructive to distinguish between the sets of questions guiding the analysis of institutions and interests and issues and ideas, respectively (see Table 1).

5. Analysis and findings

The presentation of findings reflects our analytical approach where we have emphasised the detailed analysis of documents, while we draw on the four interviews for nuance, elaboration, and discussion of specific points. The findings are presented in two separate sub-sections focusing on institutions and interests and issues and ideas, respectively. While the order of subsections corresponds with the operationalisation, the account below does not address the analytical foci strictly in turn (see Table 1), due to matters of presentation and given that these foci complement each other.

Table 1. Operationalisation of empirical analysis (definition of concepts based on Jochim and May 2010).

Factor	Concept	Operationalisation for empirical analysis
Institutions	*Institutions* contributes to the strength and governing capacity of a BSPR by structuring and channelling authority, attention, resources and information flows In contrast, weak and fragmented institutional designs are less likely to support regime strength.	Action: • Analysing the mode of intertextuality in the ESSDE documents, that is, the ways in which other texts are incorporated. • Tracing what the ESSDE documents seek to do in terms of action and relations to institutions and agents in the field, including the membership of EFEE and ETUCE, at European, national at local levels.
Interests	*Interests and agents*: the mobilisation of agents and interests in support of the BSPR, considering whether ties are fostered across relevant subsystems and in the wider community. The mobilisation of memberships helps to sustain a BSPR and the ability to overcome conflicts.	Representation: • Tracing which institutions, interests and agents are represented in the ESSDE documents, and how relations to them are represented in terms of alliances and antagonism. Identification: • Analysing how the ESSDE, EFEE and ETUCE identify themselves as part of European social dialogue and EU policy-making, including the use of personal pronouns.
Issues	*Issues* act as an attention-focusing mechanism and integrative force across subsystems. Issues are concerned with problem-setting, that is, the definition of problems and challenges, which form premises for reasoning about actions to take.	Action: • Analysing how the ESSDE texts relate to main EU strategies and cross-sectoral social dialogue and coordination. Representation: • Based on information from the European Commission social dialogue database, ESSDE Work Programmes, and analysis of the representation of the background, follow-up and events in the joint texts, we identify and trace the emergence and continuity of issues and ideas addressed by the ESSDE.
Ideas	*Ideas* serve as motivating purpose, represented as objectives, solutions or actions to address a particular issue. In BSPR, they provide direction for agents across subsystems. The uptake or buy-in of ideas is indicated by whether they are strongly or weakly embraced by agents.	Identification: • Analysing propositional assumptions and degrees of commitment represented in the ESSDE texts, focusing on epistemic modalities ('truths') regarding dynamics between sectors and deontic modalities ('necessity') concerning the need for European intersectoral coordination. • Identifying the value commitments of the ESSDE.

5.a. Institutions and interests

We trace institutional alignments and cohesion, as well as the mobilisation of agents and interests. First, we analyse the mode of intertextuality in the ESSDE documents, highlighting which other texts, agents and policy initiatives have been mentioned. Subsequently, we demonstrate what the ESSDE documents seek to do in terms of action, before showing how the ESSDE, EFEE and ETUCE identify themselves as part of European social dialogue and EU policy-making.

5.a.a. The European Commission as the main point of reference

Our analysis of intertextuality indicates the embeddedness of the ESSDE in a political field represented as predominantly defined by its territorial focus on EU member states, and to a lesser extent the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) and EU candidate countries. Other texts brought into the ESSDE texts are primarily issued by political organisations. The Commission stands out as the major point of reference (see Table 2). The ESSDE texts refer specifically to numerous Commission Communications and Staff Working Documents, and the Commission is often acknowledged as a funding source for projects. Texts issued by the European Council formations are also referred to frequently. Research incorporated into the texts are essentially adopted from joint EFEE/ETUCE projects. Thirteen of the twenty ESSDE documents are based on such joint projects (with a total of sixteen references to joint projects), with nine of the texts acknowledging support from the Commission in funding these projects.

Table 2. Number of text references in ESSDE joint texts ($n = 20$).

Author	References
Texts issued by EU institutions	
European Commission	20
European Commission agencies (Eurofound, EACEA/Eurydice, European Agency for Safety and Health at Work)	6
Council of Ministers	9
European Parliament	1
Joint text Council and European Parliament	1
EU legislation – Treaty and Directives	15
Social dialogue texts	
ESSDE joint texts	18 (including 10 for Work Programmes)
Other joint texts issued by ETUCE and EFEE	2
Cross-sectoral social dialogue texts	6
Other texts	
UN and UN agencies	9 (since 2018)
Council of Europe	1
Other research references (OECD, McKinsey)	2
Individual researchers	3

Furthermore, the ESSDE documents continuously refer to the context of EU policymaking, including current strategies and mechanisms such as Europe 2020, the European Semester and the European Pillar of Social Rights. The Education and Training 2020 Strategic Framework is only mentioned once in the body of ESSDE texts, indicating the strong orientation of the committee towards socio-economic governance and cross-sectoral issues (see Table 3).

5.a.b. ESSDE activities and outcomes are embedded in EU institutional arrangements

The activities of the ESSDE are deeply embedded in institutional arrangements for European social dialogue, defined by the EU Treaty and Commission guidance (2010, 2017). In particular, three institutional features have shaped the ESSDE. First, the term 'social partner' is ubiquitous in the ESSDE texts. The interviews also stress several important aspects of EFEE and ETUCE being recognised as European social partners in education. Regarding relations to EU institutions, the status comes with institutionalised rights of consultation, as a co-legislator, and to apply for social dialogue funding once a social partner has a certain amount of assets. Moreover, the status of social partner and the associated representativeness studies have contributed to make EFEE and ETUCE stand out vis-à-vis numerous interest organisations and professional associations with claims in the field, including also competing trade unions and public sector employer federations, some of whom employ teachers. In this way, the very creation of the ESSDE helped to differentiate ETUCE and EFEE from other agents in an increasingly crowded political field (A1, A2, A3, B1).[3]

Table 3. Number of references to ESSDE joint projects, EU strategies and instruments in ESSDE joint texts ($n = 20$).

	References
ESSDE joint projects	16
EU strategies and instruments:	
– project funding for ESSDE projects	9
– Europe 2020 Strategy	8
– ERASMUS+, Lifelong Learning Programme, Leonardo and Erasmus	3
– European Semester	2
– European Pillar of Social Rights	2
– European Qualifications Framework (EQF)	2
– Education and Training 2020 Strategic Framework	1
– Open Method of Coordination	1

Second, the EU Treaty's definition of competences is vital for understanding the institutional constraints of the ESSDE in terms of power capacities and actions. The three policy areas directly addressed by the ESSDE, employment, social policy, and education, have in common that they allow for the Union to support, coordinate and complement member states, yet without harmonisation of member state laws and regulations (EU 2016, Article 149–165). Accordingly, the ESSDE documents continuously state the need for respecting the discretion of member states in making decisions for education systems while promoting the idea that European level coordination and collaboration help to address issues more effectively.

This point is supported by the third institutional feature, associated with the text types issued by the committee, where the high frequency of Declarations suggests that the ESSDE activities since its launch have remained focused on mobilising the memberships of EFEE and ETUCE. Importantly, outcomes of any sectoral social dialogue committee refer to a formal text typology, which classifies such outcomes according to their binding or non-binding character and the obligations for implementation or follow-up. Apart from fundamental Procedural Texts (cf. RULES), the typology includes the categories of Agreements, Process-oriented Texts, and Joint Opinions and Tools. Each of them has sub-categories. The three text types involve decreasing levels of formal obligation. Only Agreements involve legal obligations, whereas Process-oriented Texts spark procedures for monitoring implementation and follow-up. Joint Opinions and Tools are concerned with the exchange of information, either from social partners to European institutions and national authorities or by explaining implications of EU policies to national members. They do not involve obligations of implementation or follow-up provisions (European Commission 2010).

The text outcomes issued by the ESSDE since 2010 are composed of, in addition to the Procedural Text, sixteen Joint Opinions and Tools, and three Process-oriented Texts. More specifically, the Joint Opinions and Tools include four Joint Opinions, ten Declarations[4] and two Tools. This distribution indicates a defining feature about ESSDE activities since Declarations are usually directed at the social partners themselves and outline intended future activities. Meanwhile, Joint Opinions represent a response from social partners to the European institutions concerning a European policy or consultation (European Commission 2010). In short, the joint texts issued by the ESSDE so far target the EFEE and ETUCE memberships to a relatively large degree. According to an ETUCE policy officer, the distribution of texts at this stage indicates that the ESSDE has been established relatively recently and that it is a slow and time-consuming process to build trust and common understanding of certain wordings and standards among the social partners (A1).

The embedding of ESSDE activities in wider institutional arrangements, as indicated by the three features highlighted above, is reflected in the ways that the ESSDE texts pursue strategic action to shape and rescale relations between agents and activities. A large majority of the joint texts call for different forms of action at European, national and local levels, depending on the text type and main addressees. In this respect, the ten Declarations have in common that they set out priorities for social partners, including their national and local memberships. This defining feature is reflected textually in the seven Declarations issued since 2013 that all include (with minor variations) the following phrasing, which also acknowledges the principle of subsidiarity:

> *The European social partners in education are committed to actively promote this statement at European, national, regional and local level, respecting national and regional structures in the education sector* (DECL10, 4)

In addition, some ESSDE Declarations call for the European institutions to pursue specific priorities (for instance, 'commit to an extraordinary public investment plan', DECL10, 4). Meanwhile, the four Joint Opinions target the European institutions and member state governments and two other texts (TOOL2, GUIDE3) set out detailed guidelines for social partner actions at European, national, and local levels.

In short, these institutional features of the ESSDE indicate, on the one hand, that the joint texts involve a limited degree of obligation for EFEE and ETUCE memberships as well as EU policy-making, and, on the other hand, that the two social partners through the ESSDE seek to promote a multi-level European space for social dialogue by mobilising their memberships as well as calling on the European institutions and member state governments to undertake specific actions. Interestingly, recent Declarations (DECL8, DECL9) emphasise the ambition to create a Framework of Action (a specific type of Process-oriented Text) which would imply a higher level of obligation for the social partners.

5.a.c. The self-identification of ETUCE and EFEE as social partners responsible for building a comprehensive European space of education

The ESSDE texts signal that the interests represented by the committee have remained stable from the outset. Underlining their status as social partners representing the interests of employers and workers in European education sectors, the joint texts continuously use 'we' or 'they' when representing EFEE and ETUCE as part of European social dialogue and EU policy-making. More specifically, the most recent text outcome (DECL10, 1) states these interests, in addition to employers, to include 'teachers, trainers, school leaders, academic staff and other education personnel'. Correspondingly, the recent Work Programme (2020–2021) refers to the same broad definition of education sectors as the Rules of Procedure, including early childhood education, primary and secondary education, higher education and research, and vocational education and training, suggesting that 'these levels are inter-linked and have a pivotal contribution to make in preparing people for living, working, and acting as active and critical citizens in our today's and future society' (5).

These broad definitions of interests and education sectors bolster the idea of a single comprehensive European space of education, reinforced by the claim that European level coordination and collaboration help to address issues more effectively (see next subsection). In building this space, the joint texts continuously represent the roles of ETUCE and EFEE, including their memberships, as fundamental. This point is most directly evident in the early Declarations, which state that it is 'the responsibility of the European social partners to work together to influence European initiatives so as to ensure that they are useful and practical' (DECL1, 3) and that the 'sectoral social partners need to live up to their full responsibility towards the entire education system' (DECL2, 2).

By pointing to the responsibilities and institutional status of ETUCE and EFEE as European social partners, the ESSDE texts imply their legitimacy as political agents in EU policy-making. In doing so, the joint texts also continuously emphasise the ESSDE as a work in progress, including mentions of EFEE's growing membership (JO1, JO2, DECL10). Importantly, the interviews highlight the separate identities of EFEE and ETUCE, and the multiple ways in which they, in addition to the ESSDE, seek to advance the interests of their memberships and influence EU policy-making, including, for instance, representation in the Commission's ET 2020 Working Groups, engaging with cross-sectoral social partners, applying for European projects, mobilisation of memberships via the European Semester, and general lobby activities targeting the EU institutions (A1, A2, A3, B1). Moreover, the EFEE senior representative especially stressed the ambition to prepare more 'employers-only policy' as the federation and its secretariat grow (B1).

5.b. Issues and ideas

In this sub-section, we first demonstrate the continuity of issues addressed by the ESSDE since 2010. Subsequently, we analyse how the ESSDE texts in their representation of ideas and issues relate to EU strategies and policy-making. Finally, we establish key assumptions underpinning the joint texts regarding dynamics between sectors and the suggested need for cross-sectoral coordination and social dialogue as part of the EU's BSPR in education and employment.

5.b.a. The range of boundary-spanning issues on the ESSDE's agenda

The ESSDE has, in line with its mandate (cf. RULES), addressed a broad range of issues associated with education, economics, social affairs and employment. These issues have been relatively stable though they have become elaborated over the period, in response to events and discursive shifts in EU policy-making.

The on-line Social Dialogue Texts database of the Commission[5] assigns a single theme for each ESSDE text, leaving an impression of fragmentation in terms of the issues on the committee's agenda since 2010. However, the joint texts overlap much more in substance than the Commission database would suggest. For an initial overview, we clustered the documents based on the themes assigned by the Commission (see Online Appendix).

We find the ESSDE Work Programmes to be more useful for tracing the issues on the committee's agenda. Setting out planned ESSDE activities, these Work Programmes have become more substantial over time, reflected in the increasing level of elaboration about policy context and selected themes. Based on the description of themes in the Work Programmes, we identify six key issues at the centre of ESSDE activities: i) Governance; ii) Investment, public and private interests; iii) Skills, competences, labour markets, and societal transformation; iv) Inclusion, integration, democratic citizenship, and equality; v) Employment, working conditions and careers in education sectors; vi) Sub-sectors of vocational education and training and higher education (see Figure 1).

Together, these issues suggest the boundary-spanning problem-setting of the ESSDE, where challenges confronting education sectors, including particular issues for employers, staff and students, are framed as related to multiple policy areas, including employment, social affairs and economics. In other words, this representation of issues calls for attention and integrative responses across several policy areas.

Our clustering of key issues demonstrates a high degree of continuity in ESSDE activities. All key issues have been addressed since 2014, except 'Inclusion, integration, democratic citizenship, and equality' and 'Sub-sectors'. Apart from those focusing on higher education and vocational education and training, the key issues tend to be represented as applying to education sectors as a whole. Furthermore, especially recent texts represent the key issues as mutually dependent (DECL8, DECL9, DECL10), bringing together, for instance, governance, investment, labour markets, digitalisation, educational equity, teacher well-being, recruitment and retention, career progression, and fair pay. According to an ETUCE policy officer, *Towards a Framework of Action on the attractiveness of the teaching profession* (DECL8) stands out in the way it integrates issues of education policy, employment, working conditions and industrial relations (A1).

<table>
<tr><th>Key issues</th><th>WP 2014-2015</th><th>WP 2016-2017</th><th>WP 2018-2019</th><th>WP 2020-2021</th></tr>
<tr><td></td><td>6 themes</td><td>12 themes</td><td>14 themes</td><td>11 themes</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="4">Governance</td><td>Cooperation with DG EAC</td><td colspan="2">Cooperation with DG EAC and DG EMPL</td><td>Education in the European Semester and the European Pillar of Social Rights</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Promotion of Social Dialogue</td><td rowspan="2">Social dialogue promotion and capacity building</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Monitor follow-up ESSDE outcomes</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td>Communication Strategy</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Investment, public and private interests</td><td colspan="2">Public/Private developments in education</td><td>Education investment patterns and public/private developments</td><td>Investments and public-private developments</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="4">Skills, competences, labour markets, societal transformation</td><td>Opening Up Education</td><td>Open and innovative education and training</td><td>Innovative teaching and learning in the 21st century</td><td>Education in the digital age</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3"></td><td rowspan="3"></td><td rowspan="3"></td><td>Innovation in education</td></tr>
<tr><td>Education and environment</td></tr>
<tr><td>How education supports employment</td><td>High-quality skills and competences</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Inclusion, integration, democratic citizenship and equality</td><td rowspan="2"></td><td>Paris Declaration and facilitating integration</td><td>Paris Declaration and inclusive education</td><td rowspan="2">Inclusion, equality and democratic citizenship (including migration)</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td>Integration of migrants and refugees in education</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="5">Employment, working conditions and careers in education sectors</td><td>Schools of the 21st century</td><td colspan="2">Supporting teachers, trainers and school leaders</td><td rowspan="2">Attractiveness of the teaching profession</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="4"></td><td colspan="2">Making the teaching profession more attractive</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2"></td><td>Enhancing effective school leadership and professional autonomy</td><td>School leadership</td></tr>
<tr><td>Promoting occupational health and safety in education</td><td>Sustainable quality employment and working conditions, including occupational health and safety</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td>Promoting gender equality in education</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Sub-sectors</td><td rowspan="2"></td><td>Vocational education and training and Apprenticeships</td><td>Quality Vocational Education and Training and Apprenticeships</td><td rowspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Higher Education & Research</td></tr>
</table>

Figure 1. Key issues and themes in ESSDE Work Programmes.

While characterised by relative stability, the ESSDE's agenda has over the period involved the merging as well as the elaboration of themes (see Figure 1). In this way, the trajectory of the ESSDE reflects an adaptation to political and societal developments. Certain events stand out in the way that they have been recontextualised in the ESSDE texts to frame specific issues and particular circumstances associated with them. First, the prolonged economic recession and budgetary constraints following the financial crash in 2008 remained a point of reference until 2016 (DECL7, also mentioned in DECL1, DECL2 and TOOL1). Second, the ESSDE's framing of the governance issue has drawn on Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker's (2014–2019) priority to create 'a union of democratic change' (JO2) and the 'new start for social dialogue' announced in March 2015 (DECL7, DECL8). Third, the emergence of the key issue 'Inclusion, integration, democratic citizenship, and equality' on the ESSDE agenda around 2016 was associated with the 'Paris Declaration', indicated by the Work Programme 2016–2017. Issued by EU education ministers in 2015, the Paris Declaration promoted citizenship, tolerance and non-discrimination, and it was subsequently endorsed in ESSDE texts (DECL8, DECL9). Fourth, the plans for a 'European Green Deal' presented in December 2019 by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (2019-) provided the background for the emergence of the 'Education and environment' theme in the most recent Work Programme. Finally, the implications of the 'health, social and economic crisis' caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic for education sectors was highlighted in the Work Programme 2020–2021 (5) and formed basis for the most recent joint text (DECL10).

5.b.b. The pursuit of cross-sectoral coordination in European social dialogue and policy-making

Employing the lens of intertextuality, we find that all ESSDE texts address strategies, frameworks and institutional arrangements that are central for the EU's BSPR of education and employment. We understand these as representing ideas, in Jochim and May's (2010) sense of suggested solutions and actions that provide direction for agents across subsystems. Three findings should be highlighted regarding these ideas.

First, references to EU Directives and cross-sectoral social dialogue outcomes indicate that a specific set of issues involves a higher level of cross-sectoral coordination and obligation for member states and social partners to implement and follow up. These issues concern harassment (TOOL1, GUIDE2), health and safety (TOOL2), teacher mobility (JO1), and European social dialogue as a component of EU employment and social policy-making (DECL8).

Second, the ESSDE's interest in cross-sectoral coordination goes beyond these specific issues. The overarching Europe 2020 Strategy stands out as the main point of reference, yet the ESSDE has since 2016 referred specifically to more recently introduced instruments, such as the European Semester (launched in 2012 and first mentioned in DECL7), the European Pillar of Social Rights, the European Education Area (both launched in 2017), as well as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (first mentioned in DECL8) and different European funding programmes. These EU frameworks and initiatives have in common that they suggest objectives, solutions and actions with a multi-sectoral scope, including, for instance, employment, social and education policy. This point is supported by the ESSDE Work Programmes, which began to mention, for instance, the European Semester from 2016. Furthermore, and as noted above, the Work Programme 2020–2021 included the specific theme 'Education in the European Semester and the European Pillar of Social Rights' with the associated methodology (10):

> *Discuss in the ESSDE context the involvement of the European (Sectoral) Social Partners in the European Semester, the European Pillar of Social Rights implementation, and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in Europe and the Education and Training related initiatives, including the European Education Area 2025.*

While the ESSDE texts tend to focus on how the European social partners should be involved in EU policy-making, the trend towards specifying aspects of EU policy-making suggests a critique. In fact, the 2018 Declaration (DECL8, 2–3) refers to EU 'multi-level governance systems' as a specific challenge:

> *. . . the sector is confronted with a number of challenges to make high quality, equitable and inclusive education systems fit for the future and key drivers for sustainable development. These include: demographic changes, technological changes, societal changes and political changes (namely, multi-level governance systems, e.g. the European Semester, the Europe 2020 Strategy and the Education and Training 2020 Strategic Framework, the European Education Area 2025).*

However, the ongoing issue for social partners to be included in EU policy-making, not least via the European Semester (A1, A2, B1, see also Sabato, Vanhercke, and Spasova 2017; Stevenson et al. 2020), should not be understood as a critique towards cross-sectoral coordination or the BSPR as such. Our third analytical point thus concerns that numerous ESSDE outcomes in fact are calling for additional policy coordination in EU policy-making to address issues more effectively. Such requests for more coordination, which reflect assumptions about what is deemed necessary (that is, assumptions associated with 'deontic modality'), tend to come in two varieties, including: i) cross-sectoral coordination between social partners (DECL2, JO4); and ii) policy coordination in EU policy-making with regard to specific issues, such as employment and vocational education and training (DECL1), migration, inclusion, and coherence and solidarity of European funding (JO4, DECL9, GUIDE3). The latter set of joint texts also calls for a more holistic and structured approach among Directorate Generals of the Commission, European Council formations and governments to better consider synergies between policy fields (JO4, GUIDE3).

5.b.c. The consensus orientation and commitments of the ESSDE

The general endorsement of the institutional arrangements for EU policymaking and the calls for deepening European cross-sectoral coordination are put into perspective by the commitments and assumptions underpinning the ESSDE texts. We wrap up the analysis by highlighting the consensus-oriented nature of joint texts and the strong commitment to a set of values and propositional assumptions concerning the dynamics between sectors. The findings below are synthetic in the way that they support and elaborate specific parts of the previous analysis.

In terms of their orientation towards difference (Fairclough 2003, 42–43), the ESSDE texts are predicated on the communication of consensus between EFEE and ETUCE, including within their memberships (cf. the uniform representation of these organisations as 'we' and 'they'). Emphasising commonality and shared interests also with other cited agents, references to the Commission and the European Council of Ministers tend to serve as entry points or issue frames for the specific ESSDE text in question. However, while the texts include little critique of EU policy making, they cannot be said to normalise the status quo of governance relations and dominant discourses, given the continuous calls for social dialogue to have a more prominent role in policy-making.

The ESSDE texts are explicitly committed to multiple priorities and values, including democracy and deliberation, competitiveness and economic growth, human rights, equality, inclusion, social cohesion and active citizenship, sustainability, investment, and quality education. Given the embedding of the ESSDE in wider institutional arrangements, we understand some of these preferences as an expression of intertextuality. This is, for instance, the case with the ambiguous and ubiquitous term 'quality education', which is also found in the EU Treaty provision on the EU's contribution to quality education (EU 2016, §165, article 1). Importantly, the wide range and general nature of the numerous stated values and preferences hint at the boundary-spanning nature of the policy regimes that the ESSDE is concerned with.

The ESSDE texts are also characterised by a high level of commitment concerning the representation of circumstances and the state of the world. These assumptions are associated with epistemic modality and the representation of 'truth'. In textual terms, the ESSDE outcomes mainly consist of categorical assertions, that is, statements of fact and predictions, where modal verbs and other explicit markers of modality are little used in the representation of the world and actions to take. This also means that causal links between the issues at stake and what to do about them, in terms of action, are represented as relatively unambiguous.

This leads to the propositional assumptions regarding the dynamics between sectors. In this respect, the ESSDE texts assume that developments in different sectors or domains of societies are interdependent, and therefore that objectives and targeted actions in education sectors might be conducive also to economic and social aims, and in fact the wide range of values and preferences mentioned above. In other words, it is a central assumption that economic growth will be better served by thriving and well-funded workplaces with decent working conditions and centred on learning for students as well as professionals, and where teachers enjoy a certain level of professional autonomy and channels for influencing their work through meaningful industrial relations and social dialogue. This point implies what is referred to as a 'holistic' view in recent ESSDE documents (DECL9, GUIDE3), where employment, education and other policy areas are represented as potentially mutually supportive, depending on the level of coordination and inclusion of the cross-sectoral and sectoral social partners in policy-making.

Three points should be added to qualify the analysis above. First, the ESSDE texts emphasise that cross-sectoral coordination among social partners cannot stand alone, since ETUCE and EFEE also need to continue to build the trust required for social dialogue between employers and trade unions, improve coordination and communication between European, national and local levels, and mobilise their memberships through 'capacity-building' of member affiliates (DECL8).

Second, the ESSDE texts advocate a European space of education, employment and social dialogue that is decentralised. While the texts tend to focus strongly on European level circumstances and dynamics, countries are routinely mentioned as examples of case studies in projects as well as city locations for project meetings, in line with the emphasis on membership mobilisation. This representation of a decentralised European space corresponds with the preferences for professional autonomy and bottom-up development, as well as the EU Treaty's distribution of competences.

Finally, while the ESSDE texts with their calls for action per definition are future-oriented, we understand the increasing deployment of the specific term 'future' in predicting needs and challenges as an expression of strengthened commitment in terms of epistemic modality. In other words, 'future' is adopted as a particularly assertive discursive resource in framing the state of the world and actions to take here and now. After being used in the 2011 and 2012 Declarations (DECL1, DECL2), the term has recently returned (DECL8, DECL9, DECL10), especially evident in the Work Programme 2020–2021(4):

> *A strong dialogue between social partners in the education sectors based on good will and mutual trust is key to achieving quality education that is future proof.*

6. Discussion

This section discusses the findings considering our research interest concerning the extent to which, and how, the ESSDE has strengthened the EU's BSPR of education and employment. Our analysis of how three types of meaning – representation, action and identification – are evident in the empirical material sheds light on the dynamics between the four forces shaping the BSPR, that is, issues, ideas, interests and institutions.

The findings demonstrate that the ESSDE since the very outset in 2010 has been concerned with a wide range of issues and ideas spanning education, employment, social affairs and economics. In doing so, we argue that the ESSDE has supported a European BSPR, which frames educational issues as part of broad societal issues that cannot be addressed effectively by education policies in isolation but requires coordinated responses involving economic, employment and social policies. In wider terms, the ESSDE might be understood as part of a strategy whereby the EU, and the Commission in particular, seeks to expand its influence in policy areas where it has limited competences.

Our analysis highlights the ESSDE's institutional features in the way that the committee has sought, to paraphrase Jochim and May (2010), to structure cohesion by channelling attention, authority, and information flows in support of the EU's BSPR. Jochim and May's (2010) concept of institution appears apt in making sense of the ESSDE, considering the committee's activities, self-identification and alignment with the EU's issue framings. Launched in 2010 after 6 years of

preparation by ETUCE and CEEP (Poissonneau and Nolda 2012), the ESSDE constitutes a pertinent case of an institution established in a distinctive European political space, structured and given momentum by the EU's educational turn and the emerging BSPR of education and employment. This analysis illustrates Jochim and May's (2010) point that a policy regime should not be confused with institutions per se and corroborates recent research (Milana, Klatt, and Vatrella 2020; Stevenson et al. 2020; Traianou and Jones 2019) showing that the EU's BSPR of education and employment is characterised by a thickening of institutional arrangements with implications for multiple sectors at European, national, and local levels.

We have shown that the ESSDE involves specific features yet conforms with general institutional arrangements applicable for other European Sectoral Social Dialogue Committees. The particular combination of general and specific institutional features has shaped the trajectory of the ESSDE and its capacity to influence the EU's BSPR, and it also suggests the fundamental differences between European and national sectoral fora for social dialogue between unions and employers.

These institutional features were largely defined from the outset. The establishment of the ESSDE in 2010 came with a set of implications, which have continued to shape its actions, discursive representations and self-identification. The first general institutional feature concerns the provisions for social dialogue as defined by the EU Treaty and guidance issued by the Commission (2010, 2017), including the typology for joint text outcomes and the status, rights and requirements associated with the recognition as European social partner. Regarding the latter, the claim for projecting the particular organisations of EFEE and ETUCE as universally representing employees and employers in European education sectors is predicated on the formal recognition – and indeed institutionalisation – of EFEE and ETUCE as European social partners. In this way, the discursive representation of EFEE and ETUCE as 'European Social Partners' in the ESSDE texts encapsulates how interests, institutions and (self-)identification come together to underpin legitimation strategies for the social partners themselves as well as for EU socio-economic governance more generally.

This point leads to the second general institutional feature, which entails that the ESSDE has a dual nature, forming part of a subsystem as well as a boundary spanning policy regime. Albeit defined as 'sectoral', the ESSDE thus binds together issues and ideas that concern multiple policy areas, and as an institution for the representation of interests, it is woven into cross-sectoral arrangements. The ESSDE's dual nature means that the committee is concerned with the specifics of education sectors but also how education sectors are affected by and contribute to wider developments. The aspiration to engage with cross-sectoral social partners is indeed evident in ESSDE texts and the activities of EFEE and ETUCE, in line with Sorensen's (2021) observation that the coordination between sectoral and cross-sectoral social partners has deepened over time within the context of European Semester.

Meanwhile, specific institutional features include the EU Treaty's provisions for the education policy area and a broad definition of education sectors, including levels from early childhood education to higher education and research, thereby seeking to mobilise and bringing together a wide range of organisations that in their respective member states would not tend to meet.

The latter point is important for assessing the extent to which the ESSDE has strengthened the EU's BSPR of education and employment. In this respect, our analysis aligns with Poissonneau and Nolda's (2012) argument that the very creation of the ESSDE amounts to an achievement in its own right, and that each joint text as an expression of buy-in and commitment to develop common points of view constitutes a successful outcome, considering the complexities involved in creating a European space for social dialogue in education. In this perspective, the creation and trajectory of the ESSDE suggest a strengthening of the EU's BSPR. Furthermore, our findings demonstrate the common ambition of the social partners to progress towards a higher level of obligation to monitor and follow up on developments in terms of joint outcomes, indicated by the commitment to work towards a Framework of Action. While the ESSDE outcomes are characterised by a relatively high frequency of Declarations, the overall composition of text types in the ESSDE corresponds with the general pattern of sectoral committees, which tend to first collaborate on projects, issue Joint Opinions and Tools, and subsequently move towards Process-oriented Texts (Degryse 2015; European Commission 2010; Léonard, Perin, and Pochet 2011).

Regarding the framing of issues, the ESSDE texts and Work Programmes appear aligned with the EU institutions. These should not be understood as mere overlaps, since the propositional assumptions underpinning the ESSDE texts, associated with the 'dynamic effects' of lifelong learning for societal and economic progress, as well as the calls for more cross-sectoral coordination, demonstrate a strong commitment to ideas similar to those informing the 'educational turn' in the mid-1990s (Delanty and Rumford 2005). We understand the relative stability of the ESSDE's agenda as an indication of an apparent field settlement (Furnari 2018) related to the EU's BSPR, which simultaneously frames education sectors as central for the competitiveness and modernisation of European societies and instrumentalises them in the service of the 'wider determinations' of learning and teaching (Traianou and Jones 2019).

The alignment of the ESSDE with the wider policy regime is also indicated by the pursuit of actions and general endorsement of EU strategies and initiatives. While it may appear unrealistic to assume that employers and trade unions would agree on proposals questioning EU governance, we find it remarkable that EU strategies and initiatives to such a high degree provide the direction for the committee's activities. The critical calls in the ESSDE texts for more involvement in EU policymaking, especially the European Semester (Sabato, Vanhercke, and Spasova 2017; Stevenson et al. 2020), are associated with a questioning of the processes of deliberation rather than EU's objectives per se. The finding that governance has remained a central issue for the ESSDE since its launch indicates that 'process' is deemed fundamental by the committee for its capacity to influence the EU policy regime. In this respect, we should add that the interviews with EFEE and ETUCE representatives suggest acute awareness concerning how the European Commission via the use of soft power and cross-sectoral coordination in socio-economic governance seeks to expand its influence in policy areas subject to limited EU competences, including education and training. In particular, an EFEE senior representative observed that European social dialogue and the ESSDE, when combined with, especially, the European Semester and the European Pillar of Social Rights, might be understood as a vehicle for such a strategy (B1).

The relative alignment with EU policymaking might be understood as related to the young age of the ESSDE and the importance of building trust and common understanding before more contentious issues, such as rewarding working conditions and fair pay, can be addressed. In this respect, we also note that the longstanding ESSDE key issue of privatisation has not yet been addressed in any joint text. Since the issue has been on ETUCE's agenda for years (Sorensen 2021; Stevenson et al. 2017), and the interviews with ETUCE representatives confirm concerns about private sector and commercial interests making inroads in education sectors via the European Semester (A1, A2), its absence from ESSDE texts might reflect a lack of interest on the side of EFEE or disagreements between the social partners.

Our analysis indicates that the legitimacy of EFEE and ETUCE as European social partners, including their work in the ESSDE, depends on being able to show their memberships that European social dialogue in education brings results and influence. The continuous emphasis on mobilisation and capacity-building in ESSDE activities suggests that this is a slow and incremental process shaped profoundly by the complexity and challenges created by the surrounding institutional environment (cf. Hay 2002). While the findings overall suggest that the establishment of the ESSDE has helped to clarify the role of EFEE and ETUCE as European social partners in education, the interviews especially corroborate existing studies observing that mobilisation of critical mass support remains a challenge in European social dialogue (Léonard, Perin, and Pochet 2011; Stevenson et al. 2020).

There are several reasons for this. First, the memberships of both EFEE and ETUCE are characterised by very different levels of human and financial resources as well as commitment to engage with EU policy-making. Second, the constant evolution of EU governance means that memberships have to adapt. Among several other developments, the European Semester stood out as the major innovation – and challenge in terms of governance and seeking influence – during the 2010s, and ETUCE and EFEE sought to engage their member organisations in the Semester processes and facilitate contact between them and the Commission (A1,

B1; see also Stevenson et al. 2020). Third, as the most recently established organisation, EFEE faces particular challenges in terms of mobilisation, capacity-building and the ongoing efforts to increase its membership base. The latter involves finding ways to attract member organisations in federal member states and other systems where regional authorities enjoy high levels of autonomy (such as Germany and Spain) as well as developing more inclusive fee structures responsive to the very different sizes and capacities of potential EFEE members (B1). Interestingly, ETUCE was also confronted with the latter issue in the mid-2000s when the EU enlargements gave momentum to incorporating new members in Central and Eastern Europe (A3). However, the very diverse membership profile as well as overlaps with public sector employers arguably compound the challenges for EFEE in expanding its membership. ETUCE is also invested in these issues since the ESSDE's relevance and influence would appear to depend heavily on EFEE's ability to expand its membership and foster ties in the wider EU policy community over the next years. In other words, ETUCE and EFEE's mobilisation of interests have implications for both federations, their mutual relations and capacity to influence and strengthen the EU's BSPR.

By way of conclusion, this paper demonstrates that the ESSDE is simultaneously fundamentally shaped by and contributing to the reinforcement of the EU's long-standing yet evolving BSPR of education and employment. The ESSDE aligns with the central assumptions about the synergies between sectors, and it is embedded in the wider institutional arrangements of EU policy-making, which involve constraints as well as access to resources for the committee and the social partners. Finally, the ESSDE has strengthened the EU's BSPR by giving momentum to the mobilisation of increasingly large groups of employers and education personnel in a space which is nothing if not European.

Notes

1. We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for making this point.
2. For readability, we use codes when referring to ESSDE joint texts. Please see codes provided in Appendix A.
3. See Appendix A for details and codes for interview data.
4. DECL9 is categorised as a Joint Opinion in the European Commission database. However, the document conforms to the Declaration text type. The reported numbers consider this point.
5. See website https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=521&langId=en

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Appendix A. Empirical material

Policy documents

Joint text outcomes from the European Sectoral Social Dialogue in Education (ESSDE) issued between 2010 and 2020, and four Work Programmes for the ESSDE (2014–2015, 2016–2017, 2018–2019, and 2020–2021)

Overview of ESSDE joint text outcomes

(available on the Social Dialogue Texts database https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=521&langId=en)

Year	Title	Text type	Code
2009	*Rules of Procedure - Education*	Procedural text	RULES
2011	*Joint Guidelines on Trans-regional cooperation in Lifelong Learning among education stakeholders*	Process-oriented texts - Guidelines and codes of conduct	GUIDE1
2011	*Investing in the future. A joint declaration on education, training and research*	Joint opinions and tools - Declarations	DECL1
2012	*Statement on the amendments of the Professional Qualifications Directive (2005/36/EC)*	Joint opinions and tools - Joint opinions	JO1
2012	*A European Project by ETUCE and EFEE: "Recruitment and retention in the education sector, a matter of social dialogue". Joint recommendations to the ESSDE*	Joint opinions and tools - Declarations	DECL2
2013	*How to Prevent and Mitigate Third-Party Violence and Harassment in Schools: Implementation Guide for the Education Sector of the Multi-Sectoral Guidelines to Tackle Third-Party Violence and Harassment Related to Work*	Joint opinions and tools – Tools	TOOL1
2013	*ESSDE Outcome Joint Declaration EFEE/ETUCE on "The promotion of self-evaluation of schools and teachers"*	Joint opinions and tools – Declarations	DECL3
2013	*Joint report from the Social Partners in the Education sector on the Implementation of the Multi-Sectoral Guidelines to Tackle Third-Party Violence and Harassment Related to Work*	Process-oriented texts - Guidelines and codes of conduct	GUIDE2
2015	*ESSDE Outcome Joint Declaration EFEE/ETUCE On "Supporting Early career researchers in Higher Education In Europe"*	Joint opinions and tools – Declarations	DECL4
2015	*ESSDE Outcome Joint Declaration EFEE/ETUCE On "School Leadership"*	Joint opinions and tools – Declarations	DECL5
2015	*Joint position EFEE and ETUCE: The Contribution of sectoral social dialogue to the strengthening of social dialogue*	Joint opinions and tools - Joint opinions	JO2
2016	*Joint Practical Guidelines on How to Promote Joint Social Partner Initiatives at European, National, Regional and Local Level to Prevent and Combat Psychosocial Hazards in Education: Promoting decent workplaces in the education sector for a healthier working life*	Joint opinions and tools – Tools	TOOL2
2016	*Joint ETUCE/EFEE Declaration on Preventing and Combating Psychosocial Hazards in the Education Sector*	Joint opinions and tools – Declarations	DECL6
2016	*Joint ETUCE/EFEE Statement on Promoting the potentials of the European Sectoral Social Dialogue in Education*	Joint opinions and tools – Declarations	DECL7
2017	*Joint ETUCE and EFEE Statement on improving Vocational Education and Training in Europe*	Joint opinions and tools - Joint opinions	JO3
2018	*Towards a Framework of Action on the attractiveness of the teaching profession*	Joint opinions and tools - Declarations	DECL8
2019	*ETUCE-EFEE Joint Practical Guidelines on how to promote effective integration of migrant and refugee learners in the education and socioeconomic environment of the host countries through joint social partner initiatives at national, regional and local level*	Process-oriented texts - Guidelines and codes of conduct	GUIDE3
2019	*ETUCE and EFEE Proposal for a Quality Framework for an Effective Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees in Education*	Joint opinions and tools - Joint opinions	JO4
2019	*Joint ETUCE/EFEE Statement on Multiculturalism, Democratic Citizenship and Social Inclusion in Education. Quo Vadis Europa, Quo Vadis Education*	Joint opinions and tools - Declarations	DECL9
2020	*Joint ETUCE/EFEE Statement on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on sustainable education systems at times of crisis and beyond*	Joint opinions and tools - Declarations	DECL10

Interview data

4 semi-structured research interviews, conducted February – August 2019, with individuals with current or recent experience from working in ETUCE or EFEE. The interviews were conducted face to face, except A3 (online meeting). Before the interviews took place, interview guides, including main themes and assumptions, were shared with interview participants, and they provided voluntary informed consent. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Interview participant's role in organisation	Interview code
European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE)	
ETUCE policy officer	A1
Senior representative	A2
Former senior representative	A3
European Federation of Education Employers (EFEE)	
Senior representative	B1