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Contribution to a special issue

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Re-articulating the form of the political: Contemporary education governance in the European Union. Introduction to the Special Issue

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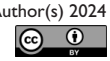
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Tore Bernt Sorensen
University of Glasgow, United Kingdom

Katri Eeva
Tampere University, Finland

Abstract
This article serves as an introduction to a Special Issue focusing on the nature, trajectories, and boundaries of contemporary European Union (EU) education governance. The Special Issue comprises four papers, which draw on original empirical research and employ different theoretical outlooks and methodologies. This introductory article situates these papers in the current scholarship on EU governance and Europeanisation. Arguing that the papers together demonstrate the significant advance of Europeanisation in the governing of European education systems since the late 1990s, we discuss the epistemic gains, complementarities and emphases of the four papers. Finally, we identify pertinent issues for further research.

Keywords
Education policy, European Union, governance, Europeanisation, sociology of knowledge

Objectives of the Special Issue and this introductory paper

The objective of this Special Issue is to provide a theoretically informed and empirically based analysis and discussion of the nature, trajectories, and boundaries of contemporary European Union (EU) education governance. In addition to this introductory paper, the Special Issue is composed of four papers, which are based on original empirical research and employ different theoretical outlooks and methodologies. The papers rely on varying sets of empirical material, including

Katri Eeva is also affiliated with Centre for European Studies, University of Helsinki, Finland.

Corresponding author:
Tore Bernt Sorensen, School of Education, University of Glasgow, 11 Eldon Street, Glasgow, G3 6NH, UK.
Email: tore.sorensen@glasgow.ac.uk

policy documents, research interviews, and ethnographic observations of EU policymaking processes. Focusing especially on developments since 2010, the papers advance the study of EU education governance by reflecting on modes of governance in the EU context, the sets of relations between policy actors involved, as well as pertinent theoretical approaches and methodologies to furthering our understandings of governance in this complex policy space. In doing so, the papers together emphasise the importance of considering and situating education and training as an increasingly prominent EU policy area, which over recent decades has become framed for addressing also economic and social issues (Delanty and Rumford, 2005; Pépin, 2011) and subject to intersectoral coordination via a widening range of mechanisms and instruments (Graf et al., 2023).

As an introduction to the Special Issue, this paper situates the four papers in current scholarship on EU governance and Europeanisation. The next section briefly discusses the concepts of governance and Europeanisation, before the four papers are introduced. Subsequently, we discuss the epistemic gains, complementarities and emphases of the papers, including how their different theoretical vantage points shape the understanding of EU governance and Europeanisation. Finally, we conclude by reflecting on how the papers together contribute to the understanding of the trajectory of EU governance since the 2000s. Given that the papers do not consider the period after 2020, that is, since the launch of the Ursula von der Leyen Presidency of the European Commission, we briefly suggest how recent developments represent continuity and change in EU governance, as well as pertinent issues for further research.

EU education governance and Europeanisation

In many ways, governance and Europeanisation are the concepts that most directly link the four papers together. For our purpose, we understand EU education governance as the main research focus of the Special Issue, and Europeanisation as a theoretical perspective to unpack the nature, dynamics, and orientation of EU governance. Governance and Europeanisation have both been the focus of substantial literatures, and given their ubiquitous use and the sheer number of different definitions it is important to clarify our understanding of the concepts.

Making sense of EU education governance

Since its emergence in the 1990s, the concept of governance has become a preeminent transdisciplinary concept, proving immensely popular across the social sciences, including law studies, political science, public administration studies, sociology, economics, organisational theory, history and education, for instance. In theoretical and methodological terms, governance has thus resulted in an array of different theories and approaches. The ubiquitous application of 'governance' to a wide range of issues has resulted in concept stretching and obfuscation (Assinger, 2020).

For our purpose, we adopt a general definition of governance as referring to '*a broad continuum of arrangements by which the behavior of groups and individuals is guided or coordinated*' (Assinger, 2020: 35). A common entry point for the four papers included in the Special Issue is that EU education governance has become increasingly elaborated and complex over the years, presenting new possibilities, contingencies, and risks for those engaging with and affected by it. Since education and training was first enshrined in the Maastricht Treaty, signed in 1992, the policy area has been subject to the principle of subsidiarity. Yet, some of the EU's activities for the policy area, typically conducted under the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), have proliferated to such a degree that they arguably go beyond the legal foundations in the EU Treaty (Garben, 2011).

Hooghe and Marks' (2001) seminal work still captures key characteristics and workings of EU governance. They highlight the increasing complexity and perpetual evolution of the EU polity,

where one lasting feature involves the dispersion of political competences and decision-making between actors at different levels which are mobilised and brought together by interlocked yet contending institutions. While the EU thus involves a component of multi-level governance, the boundaries between the European, national, and local levels are overlapping and fluid as member states' governments and administrations also relate to European level actors. In addition, a widening array of interest organisations and businesses operate simultaneously in several arenas primarily associated with either domestic or EU policy. Meanwhile, the European Parliament, the European Court of Justice and the European Commission have policy-making capacities that go beyond merely being agents serving national executives or the Council formations of the European Union. These fundamental characteristics of EU governance remind us that the categories inherited from the analysis of nation-states are inadequate for making sense of EU governance (Dale, 2009b; Jessop, 2007; Kjaer, 2010).

Education policy activities have in recent decades become increasingly integrated with major EU frameworks and strategies, reflecting an assumption about the 'dynamic effects' of education, lifelong learning and skills when addressing a range of social and economic issues, as well as novel ways in thinking about policy sectors and intersectoral coordination (Sorensen, 2021). This emphasis on the 'wider determinations' of education (Traianou and Jones, 2019: 5) was reinforced with the 'educational turn' (Delanty and Rumford, 2005) of the mid-1990s, when the European Commission harnessed the ideas of a learning society and lifelong learning as a driver for modernising Europe as a knowledge-based and social market economy (Lawn and Grek, 2012; Milana et al., 2020). In increasing the salience of educational issues, the Lisbon Strategy of the 2000s proved pivotal for bringing education from the periphery towards the centre in EU policy-making, thereby opening the policy area to influences from other areas – and vice versa (Pépin, 2011; Walkenhorst, 2008).

In the specialised literature on EU education governance, the increasing budgets and scope of EU education and training policy activities have been understood as signalling the mutual implications between European integration and the formation of a European education space, evident in the launch of a series of highly profiled 'areas', such as the European Research Area in 2000 and the European Higher Education Area in 2010, the latter building on the Bologna Process (Carter and Lawn, 2015; Dale, 2009a; Harmsen, 2015; Lawn and Grek, 2012; Nóvoa and Lawn, 2002). More recently, the ambition to create a European Education Area was launched in 2017, and the set of strategic goals for the 2021–2030 period indicate yet another step change in the scope of EU education governance (Alexiadou and Rambla, 2023).

In this respect, policy mechanisms like the European Semester, the European Pillar of Social Rights, and the Structural Reform Support Services encapsulate the broader framing and intersectoral coordination associated with educational issues in EU governance over recent decades (Sorensen, 2021). They reflect the evolving ways of conceiving policy sectors, effectively challenging researchers to consider the meaning and limitations of categories such as 'education', 'employment', and 'economy', which are often taken for granted as 'policy monopolies' and distinctive subsystems. In this regard, the generic and tofu-like nature (in the sense of taking on different tastes depending on what it is being prepared with) of key concepts used to frame educational issues, such as the foundational yet notoriously ambiguous EU Treaty provisions on 'quality education', has allowed for considerable amplification and adaptation of the EU's education policy agenda (Dale, 2009c).

The analytical lens of Europeanisation

This leads to the concept of Europeanisation. While the research foci of the four papers in this Special Issue converge around the concept of governance, each of them in different ways also

contribute to the discussion on the Europeanisation of education policy and practice across Europe. In engaging with Europeanisation, the Special Issue follows in the footsteps of numerous research articles and several Special Issues in this journal.[1] For instance, Europeanisation has been employed to examine patterns of privatisation and commercialisation of education in Europe (Simons et al., 2013), curriculum reform and knowledge formation in the steering of European education policy (Sivesind and Wahlström, 2016), the relations between the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the European education policy space (Ozga, 2012), the implications of globalisation for education (Amos et al., 2002), education reform in post-socialist contexts (Seddon, 2005), and the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic for European education (Grek and Landri, 2021).

The different foci of these previous EERJ Special Issues indicate that among the many different theories and approaches pertaining to EU governance, Europeanisation provides a versatile and broad analytical lens concerning the workings and outcomes of governance. Like for the concept of governance, the literature on Europeanisation is transdisciplinary, with scholars applying different definitions and approaches. Compared with concepts like multi-level governance (Hooghe and Marks, 2001), experimentalist governance (Sabel and Zeitlin, 2008), and governance architectures (Borrás and Radaelli, 2011), which tend to emphasise the detailed study of policy-making processes, law and regulations, the literature on Europeanisation is characteristic in the way that the concept might (though this is not always the case) be employed to also address the wider social and cultural implications of EU governance and European integration (Dale, 2009b; Carter and Lawn, 2015; Delanty and Rumford, 2005; Lawn and Grek, 2012; Nóvoa and Lawn, 2002).

A single grand theory of Europeanisation remains illusory given the complexity of the transformations involved. Drawing on Alexiadou (2007), Olsen (2002) and Radaelli (2008), we conceive Europeanisation as a process which embeds not only the politics pertaining to governance arrangements but also the actors and institutions exercising and coordinating the work of governing. Europeanisation is associated with the construction, diffusion, and institutionalisation of formal and informal rules and procedures, policy paradigms and practices, and shared beliefs and norms reflected in the interaction between policy actors and networks engaging with EU governance. In other words, Europeanisation refers to policy definitions at the EU level, the EU as a distinctive system of governance, and the different ways policies are diffused and incorporated within policy making in member states. Europeanisation thus refers to both policy processes and their effects or outcomes, suggesting the mutual adaptation and co-evolution between domestic and European policy-making. At the same time, Europeanisation processes are neither linear nor straightforward, with Brexit providing the most obvious example in recent years.

Accordingly, the study of Europeanisation calls for institutional and discursive analysis which consider the multi-level as well as network features of EU governance. Historically and socially constructed, political institutions are carriers of identity, meaning, and culture, in the way that they provide frameworks for discourses and interaction, the boundaries and legitimacy of which are continuously subject to negotiation and contestation (Alexiadou, 2007).

One major strand of the Europeanisation literature is concerned with the 'top-down' effects of EU level policy 'on' member states. This approach implies studying Europeanisation in terms of the 'domestic impact of the EU', focusing on compliance, transposition and implementation of directives, regulations and recommendations (Radaelli, 2008). Adopting a rather literal view of the EU as a multi-level political entity, the approach tends to emphasise the agency and impact of the EU institutions, while member state governments and other 'lower-level' actors are assumed to be reactive in coping with the demands and pressures coming from 'above'. In the context of EU education governance, this approach to the study of Europeanisation often translates into analysing

the responses in member states to the OMC (Alexiadou, 2007). Along these lines, Antunes (2016), for instance, in her study of Portugal in the early 2010s argues that the Europeanisation of education policies involve that national policies become framed as responses to European financial and economic priorities.

The papers included in this Special Issue adopt a broader perspective on Europeanisation. In line with their understanding of EU governance as complex and orchestrated yet dispersed, the papers have in common that they in their analysis of Europeanisation processes go beyond the debate about whether these are driven from the bottom-up or top-down. In doing so, the papers highlight the boundaries that exist in the realms of knowledge, governance, and politics within the field of education policy research. The papers thus reflect an approach similar to that of Grek and Landri (2021), who in the EERJ Special Issue about the Covid-19 pandemic and European education called for research reassessing the implications of Europeanisation and globalisation for education in Europe by employing the concepts of borders and bordering to analyse the principles and values informing post-pandemic education. This leads us to the next section which introduces the papers included in the Special Issue.

The papers in the Special Issue

This section briefly outlines the main research foci, concepts and findings of each of the four papers. In 'Governing through consensus? The European Semester, soft power and education governance in the EU', Eeva (2021) discusses the workings of the European Semester in relation to the policy field of education. Drawing on a social constructivist perspective on policy work, governing and knowledge, and adopting the concepts of soft power (Nye, 2008) and translation (Freeman, 2009, 2017; Ozga and Dubois-Shaik, 2015), the paper shows how the Semester enables the steering of education policy through the Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs) issued to EU member states. In particular, Eeva's paper focuses on the relationship between three EU institutions (European Commission, Council and Parliament) and member states, examining how the Semester discursively promotes certain approaches to education via the economic and employment-focused CSRs. The construction of CSRs is revealed as policy spaces where European and national interests are brought together in processes of translation and negotiation, enabling shared problem definition and collective learning. Eeva concludes that the CSRs through soft power and translation manage to build convergence and consensus and hence circumvent tensions between the main policy actors involved in the Semester.

Like Eeva's paper, Gain (2023) emphasises the central role of informal policy processes and decision-making in EU education governance in his paper, 'Informality as a resource: A systems-theoretical take on the open method of coordination in education'. Concerned with the Education and Training 2020 (ET2020) Working Groups (WG) established as part of the OMC, Gain argues that it is the very lack of formal power and political mandate which open up a range of possibilities for the EU's influence in education and training. Adopting Niklas Luhmann's systems theory, Gain demonstrates how the informality of the ET2020 WG and the OMC, distinct from the EU ordinary legislative procedure based on voting and implementing collectively binding decisions, comes to be a resource for the development of a European discourse on education, as education sector stakeholders are 'irritated' through the creation and dissemination of reports of 'good practices'. These findings lead to Gain's conclusion that the ET2020 WGs illustrate how politics as an autopoietic functional system transforms itself and redefines its boundaries when it is structured at the European level rather than at the level of the nation-state.

In the third paper, 'Beyond Bologna? Infrastructuring quality in European higher education', Grek and Russell (2023) analyse the growth and complexity of Quality Assurance (QA) databases,

processes and networks of actors in European higher education over the recent two decades, as a way of understanding the multifaceted and continuously unfolding Europeanisation processes. They conceive Europeanisation as an organic entity which develops multiple roots, grows in unexpected ways, and becomes ever more complex and difficult to disentangle (Carter et al., 2015). As the other papers included in the Special Issue, Grek and Russell's paper has a strong focus on the relations between governing and knowledge in EU governance. Employing STS and sociology of quantification, they show that there has been a move from the Bologna Process being the near singular focus for European level coordination and harmonisation of higher education, towards the making of a more diverse and complex quality assurance and evaluation infrastructure. The resulting 'epistemic infrastructure' (Tichenor et al., 2022) involves a range of distinct but interdependent actors and processes, and it is explicitly and implicitly linked with the production of wider policy agendas, such as the rise of the European Education Area, altogether further amplifying the potential for Europeanising education.

The final paper, 'The European Union's governance of teachers and the evolution of a bridging issue field since the mid-2000s' by Sorensen and Dumay (2024), analyses the consolidation and evolution of European Union teacher policy as a bridging issue field (Zietsma et al., 2017) spanning the policy domains of education, employment and economy. Drawing on neo-institutional field theory and an empirical material of policy documents and interviews, the paper demonstrates the non-linear and relatively slow evolution of this field, as it has become elaborated via the strategic issue framing of teacher skills and careers, the mobilisation of actors and networks, and an expanding institutional infrastructure of policy mechanisms and instruments. Thereby, the paper advances the theoretical debate on EU governance by highlighting the epistemic gains of neo-institutional field theory in making sense of soft governance contexts and their trajectories as an outcome of the interplay between issue framings, different types of actors, and institutional infrastructure.

Complementarities and emphases in the Special Issue papers

In this section, we discuss the overlaps and commonalities of the four papers, as well as how their different research foci and theoretical vantage points lead them to emphasise different aspects of EU governance and Europeanisation processes.

Epistemic governance: the mutual implications of knowledge and governing in the EU

A common thread in the four papers concerns the mutual implications between knowledge and governance in the context of the EU. Given its limited mandate in the area of education and training, the EU has experimented extensively with modes of governance that revolve around knowledge and learning rather than law and hierarchy, with the OMC being the most prominent example (Dale, 2009b; Radaelli, 2008). We know from the wider body of scholarly enquiry that the EU's epistemic governance consolidates what kind of knowledge matters in policymaking. This means, on the one hand, that the practices and policies of knowledge steer knowledge production as well as its diffusion, translation and utilisation, and on the other, that this production and dispersion of knowledge create scope conditions for the capacities of the EU to govern (Lawn and Grek, 2012; Nordin and Sundberg, 2014; Normand, 2016). The EU's epistemic governance gained momentum with the Lisbon Strategy which set common indicators and benchmarks for achieving the knowledge-based economy, including also a widening range of policy instruments, that is, '*certain functional models for regulating social interaction and creating commitment to specific courses of collective action*' (Voss and Freeman, 2016: 15).

In particular, the papers in this Special Issue examine how the vocabulary of learning, knowledge production, diffusion, and translation are constitutive of EU governance, with varying implications for education sectors across Europe and the creation of scientific expertise influencing policy (Grek, 2023; Tichenor et al., 2022). Grek (2016) observes that there has been two phases in the EU's governing of knowledge: (i) the early phase, when data and indicators were adopted as a new and alternative way of governing European education; and (ii) the mature phase, revolving around mutual surveillance through performance monitoring and comparison. In this perspective, the four papers are all concerned with the latter phase of mutual surveillance. For instance, Grek and Russell (2023) develop the concept of epistemic infrastructure to analyse how measurement in EU higher education policy, and the European Education Area overall, goes beyond the production and circulation of data and knowledge but also serves a lever for engaging new actors and the creation of new materialities. Importantly, they point out that as the epistemic infrastructure of quality assurance in higher education has expanded, it has also become cyclical and repetitive, with new data routinely feeding into the infrastructure. In a similar manner, Gain (2023: 13) suggests that the '*ET2020 Working Groups aim to generate new horizons of possibilities in the form of a never-ending production of information and knowledge about education policies*'. In this respect, the very predictability and cyclical characteristics of launching WGs, tasked with gathering and discussing thematic information and knowledge from member states, help to consolidate a notion of these groups as being apolitical.

In their studies of the European Semester and the EU's governance of teachers, Eeva (2021) and Sorensen and Dumay (2024), respectively, are concerned with the wider implications of EU's epistemic governance. These two papers are especially concerned with how education sectors have become subject to socio-economic governance, including how knowledge is used to inform a widening range of policy instruments. Both articles suggest that the interaction of policy instruments may result in a relative hardening of EU policy regarding education sectors in member states. In Eeva's paper, this is evident with the conditionalities and requirements that come with the Semester's CSRs. Meanwhile, drawing on Marques' (2021) distinction between 'interpretative' and 'resource' effects of policy instrumentation, Sorensen and Dumay (2024) argue that the widening range of instruments addressing teachers' learning, work, and careers have the capacity to generate both types of effects, concerning the exchange of knowledge and the formation of beliefs, as well as the granting of material and symbolic resources and incentives. For instance, the data and analysis included in the annual Education and Training Monitor provides one of the numerous sources informing the European Semester cycle. Sorensen and Dumay's (2024) reference to institutional infrastructures thus highlights the increasing level of interaction between different types of policy instruments and their various effects.

In their analyses of the EU's epistemic governance, the papers emphasise the sense of contingency, ambiguity, and complexity resulting from the efforts to provide European solutions to European problems (cf. Lawn and Grek, 2012). The dual ambition for the EU to provide tailored solutions and be more sensitive to specific conditions in member states while referring to overarching EU-wide strategies, coupled with the framing of educational issues as matters of social and economic policy, adds to the requirements of the epistemic infrastructures in terms of their capacity to monitor and identify policy issues in member states and at the EU level. In this respect, the papers in different ways demonstrate the social and political embeddings of how data and knowledge are used, negotiated and 'translated' (Eeva, 2021) as part of EU policy processes. Grek and Russell (2023: 8) observe that '*a studied ambiguity*' of standards and guidelines helps to ensure their acceptability in member states, corresponding with Harmsen's (2015) powerful analysis concerning the continuous tension between the drive towards harmonisation and integration and the political impossibility and practical unfeasibility of making this happen in a top-down manner,

given the level of sensitivity in member states about their discretion in the policy area and the diversity of European education systems.

In the attempts to square the circle and overcome these tensions, Eeva (2021) and Gain (2023) both point to the importance of informal policy processes. Analysing the European Commission's ET2020 Working Groups, Gain (2023: 11) thus identifies informality as a critical resource for EU policy-making, arguing that '*the relative informality of the WG is indispensable to their successful functioning: if they functioned as some people describe, with all the actors taking an equal part in drawing up the reports, they would very probably be paralysed by their high internal complexity*'. In other words, informality enables the management of the symbolic resources that form a foundation for the EU's legitimacy in policy-making (Capano et al., 2015: 312). According to Gain (2023), the informal processes of the OMC also involve structures and procedures, often developed and orchestrated by the European Commission, which results in 'functional hypocrisy' (Brunsson, 2007), when a discourse of participation and collaboration meets policy processes dominated by a few actors essentially producing the outcomes. This leads to the question of actor relations and agency in EU education governance.

Interaction, actors, and agency in EU education governance

The papers contribute with insights about the widening range of actors engaging with EU governance and their mutual relations, including the growing importance of non-state actors and public-private partnerships in policy processes (Cone and Brøgger, 2020; Simons et al., 2013; Sorensen, 2021).

In line with the bulk of studies on EU education governance, the papers highlight especially the evolving roles of the European Commission as the main agenda-setter and orchestrator of actor relations and instruments. In doing so, the papers corroborate existing studies about the European Commission as a major knowledge actor in the European education space, often working in partnership with the OECD in the production and circulation of policy knowledge (Grek, 2016). Sorensen and Dumay (2024) show how the EU Treaty's distribution of competences continue to shape the roles and interaction of field actors, including the opportunities and limitations for the European Commission in aligning and creating interaction between policy instruments. In combination, the papers suggest the centrality and breadth of the Commission's activities, from orchestrating the European Semester (Eeva, 2021) and the ET 2020 Workings Groups (Gain, 2023), to its convening power and funding provision in European quality assurance (Grek and Russell, 2023), and as a boundary organisation maintaining and (re-)ordering boundaries towards other fields in the EU's governance of teachers (Sorensen and Dumay, 2024). The papers thus show how the European Commission as a 'purposeful opportunist' (Cram, 1993: 141) has managed over time to create new policy arenas and stimulate demands for EU level action by its agenda-setting, funding incentives and stakeholder mobilisation (Harmsen, 2015). In this perspective, we argue that the papers, together, demonstrate that the capacity of the European Commission to further Europeanisation in education sectors across Europe has increased since the 2000s.

At the same time, the papers emphasise the persistent challenges involved in mobilising different types of actors and ensuring legitimacy around EU education policy activities. In her study of the European Semester, Eeva (2021) thus observes the need for consensus building between member state governments, the European Council, and the European Commission, as a foundation for steering education policy in line with economic goals. The drive in EU policy-making towards promoting the engagement of member state governments and different types of actors is also emphasised in the three other papers. Moreover, their findings point to the co-construction of policy outcomes, such as the CSRs (Eeva, 2021) and final reports of ET2020 WGs (Gain, 2023), although the relevant actors take on different roles in the process. Depending on the theoretical

outlook in the papers, these processes are understood as involving translation (Eeva, 2021), permanent mutual irritation and functional hypocrisy (Gain, 2023), expert brokerage (Grek and Russell, 2023), or field structuration (Sorensen and Dumay, 2024), the latter implying a sense of socialisation among different types of organisations resulting from their interaction over time. These different concepts have in common that they emphasise how different types of actors seek influence across the European education space, characterised by fluid networks as well as a sense of hierarchy and ordering of actors with different status and influence.

Hence, Gain (2023) observes that the processes of the OMC take place in 'the shadow of hierarchy' (Cram, 2011; Peters, 2007). Yet, the papers also resonate with Harmsen's (2015) argument that the very absence of such a shadow of hierarchy – understood in the sense of compulsion and imposed solutions – in fact allows the OMC to operate in the European Higher Education Area. Gain's (2023) analysis of the ET2020 WGs suggests a similar dynamic since their operation hinges upon the merging of two apparently opposing discourses via informal yet structured policy processes.

In pointing to the mobilisation of actors and the creation of EU policy arenas within the context of the OMC, the papers touch upon the issue of democratic accountability and representation (see e.g. Gain, 2023, on 'the public'). The public policy and law literatures have criticised the OMC due to its technocratic nature and the absence of institutions of representative democracy (Börzel, 2012; Garben, 2011). With their focus on education policy becoming subject to cross-sectoral coordination and interaction between policy instruments, the papers by Eeva (2021) and Sorensen and Dumay (2024) suggest that this democratic deficit becomes increasingly pertinent to study. The European Commission's aspiration to 'model' inclusive forms of governance and foster 'buy-in' from the teaching profession (Sorensen and Dumay, 2024) only adds to the relevance of unpacking the issue of democratic representation in EU education governance. While Eeva (2021) and Sorensen and Dumay (2024) give some attention to other EU institutions, namely the Council formations of the EU and the European Parliament, the evolving roles and involvement of these actors in EU education governance merit further research, as does the role of the European Court of Justice (Garben, 2011). In this respect, we propose that the workings of softer and harder forms of governance, understood not simply as a binary distinction, but as a continuum involving varying degrees of obligation, precision, and delegation (Abbott et al., 2000), would offer especially interesting perspectives.

Concluding remarks

Furthering the agenda pursued in previous EERJ Special Issues concerning EU governance, the papers included in this Special Issue together demonstrate the significant advances of Europeanisation in the governing of European education systems since the late 1990s. These developments have been entangled with wider trends of global governance. In this respect, the insights of the papers included in the Special Issue might inspire comparisons with other transnational policy regimes, including the roles of organisations like the OECD, the World Bank and UNESCO, in global education governance. As a multinational regime for education policy and practice, the scale of activity, collaboration and orchestration across the EU – and often beyond, consider for instance, the Erasmus+ Programme Countries and the deepening collaboration between the OECD and the European Commission since the 1990s – would appear to be unprecedented globally.

Reflecting the features of EU governance, the European space of education is characterised by different levels of engagement among key actors, varied policy developments in member states, and settings characterised by different socio-economic conditions. Understanding the complex relationships between European and domestic contexts is crucial in researching education

governance in the current landscape involving the resurgence of the state, the rise of populism, geopolitical shifts, and new emphases on security and migration politics. Although these trends are not unique to Europe, they might indicate a new phase or iteration of Europeanisation, characterised by de-integration, de-regulation and differentiation (Radaelli and Exadaktylos, 2010; Radaelli and Salter, 2019). Simultaneously, the Covid-19 pandemic and ensuing economic crisis resulted in a strengthened commitment to collective policymaking, 'coordinative Europeanisation' (Ladi and Wolff, 2021: 32), and sense of EU territoriality (Coutts, 2022).

Finally, with their focus on policy processes, some of the papers included in the Special Issue also concern the scope for policy learning. However, the outcomes of such learning in EU or member state policy and practice are not traced over time in the papers. Future studies might draw inspiration from Harmsen's (2015: 800–801) argument that the apparent 'ungovernability' of the European Higher Education Area results in an '*openness which needs to be seized and developed so as to facilitate the wider channels of policy learning*'. While Harmsen contends that the potential for policy learning is far from being met in EU higher education policy, tracing and comparing the workings of policy learning pertaining to various educational levels appears pertinent, given their different trajectories in the context of EU governance. Considering the existing evidence, the strategic importance attributed to educational levels in EU governance thus appears to have widened over recent decades, expanding 'downwards' from higher education and vocational education and training towards also encompassing secondary, primary, and early childhood education.

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ORCID iDs

Tore Bernt Sorensen https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0982-5685
Katri Eeva https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8330-4645

Note

1. A word search for 'Europeanisation' on the EERJ article data base in November 2023 resulted in 172 articles, published since 2002.

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Author biographies

Tore Bernt Sorensen is Lecturer in Education in School of Education, University of Glasgow. His work is characterised by three lines of research: Globalisation and education, public policy analysis, and teachers and teaching.

Katri Eeva (DPhil) is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Faculty of Education and Culture, Tampere University, and a visiting scholar at the Centre for European Studies, University of Helsinki. Her work focuses on European education policy and governance at the intersection of public policy, sociology, and politics.