

# 8 Navigating higher education policymaking in the European Parliament

*Katri Eeva, Jaakko Kauko, Joni Forsell,  
and Cherry Miller*

## Introduction

The book's theoretical focus is on the construction of knowledge and power in social relations (see [Chapter 1](#)). In this chapter, we focus on one key actor in the construction of European higher education policymaking: the European Parliament's Committee on Education and Culture (CULT). CULT's role in higher education is worth investigating because it is not primarily responsible for legislation under the Treaties of the European Union. Previous research has not therefore focused on CULT as an actor exerting power. In our analysis, we adopt a broad lens on power outside the direct legislative influence, asking how CULT exercises power and what kind – if at all.

We draw on [Carstensen and Schmidt's \(2015\)](#) framework on ideational power. They synthesise theories on power, separating views on (1) “compulsory,” or “direct control” over an actor, (2) the “structural” approach, examining the broader frame of resources and position in society, and (3) the “institutional power” of formal and informal institutions ([Carstensen & Schmidt, 2015](#), pp. 319–320). [Carstensen and Schmidt \(2015\)](#) argue for a new framework to understand the ideational power that is key for *discursive institutionalism (DI)*. In this framework, “power through ideas” is a form of compulsory power through reasoning; “power over ideas” concerns the ability to structure ideas; and “power in ideas” builds on which ideas are seen as viable. The synthesis resembles some earlier ones such as [Haugaard and Ryan's \(2012\)](#) conflictual (associated with domination), consensual (actors' capacity to realise their aims), and constitutive (ontological) power.

Regarding this book's goals, the DI approach contributes a new perspective to our Foucauldian ([Foucault, 1977; 1986](#)) understanding of power and knowledge, which we identified as the dimensions of relationality, normative effects, and power effects in [Chapter 1](#). We acknowledge, however, that blending Habermasian-influenced underpinnings of DI with the Foucauldian-inspired approach is contested ([Bacchi & Rönnblom, 2014](#)) and can pose challenges in conceptualising concepts such as power, discourse, and *ideas*. Taking the view that a “discursive practice is not a blueprint” ([Bacchi & Rönnblom, 2014](#), 175), we can accommodate

DOI: [10.4324/9781032712024-8](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781032712024-8)

This chapter has been made available under a CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license.

broader interpretations under the DI umbrella – including productive power. While Carstensen and Schmidt acknowledge Foucauldian power only in the “power in ideas” (2015, p. 330) domain, we take the view that productive power is exercised concurrently through and over ideas – as “power through ideas” and “power over ideas” induce forms of knowledge and resistance. Ultimately, actors coordinate and communicate these forms of power through the available discourses, which means they are not entirely voluntary.

DI and its perspective on ideational power can help us further analyse the construction and contestation of CULT’s actorness – that is, *inter alia*, its autonomy, authority, recognition, cohesion, and capacity in higher education policymaking. Researchers recognise that education as a policy field is in flux, and that there are negotiations and contestations of its competence within and between EU institutions (e.g. Alexiadou & Rambla, 2023). We are concerned with the interaction and tension constructed in CULT’s everyday work. As we understand them, discourses produce political authority within the committee and among committee members but also allow external actors to act politically (Lynggaard, 2019). Discourses reveal to us how politicians assign meanings to their committee work, knowledge making, and political positions, which generate compromises, conflicts, or consensus. Political authority can, in turn, be an ideational conduit of power, as ideas are communicated through discourses. We therefore explore the discourses in committee meeting debates and generally around the committee’s attempts to order and negotiate its role – not only intra-institutionally in the European Parliament, but also inter-institutionally with the European Union (EU) institutions and extra-institutionally with policy stakeholders. We explore CULT’s boundary disputes about policy terms by analysing the politics of knowledge making, power, and ideas.

Our research aim is to understand *contestations of CULT’s role as a European higher education policymaking actor*. If we only pay attention to the legislative powers inscribed in the EU Treaties for education, we may omit other types of power that CULT may exercise in education policymaking. CULT can therefore be considered weak in terms of legislative powers, but in examining its actorness, we find it important to broaden the analysis to alternative perspectives such as ideational power. We pose the research question: How is the role of the CULT committee constructed ideationally?

We next outline our research context, European Parliament’s committees, and how CULT sits in this landscape. A section discussing our approach to discourse and its analysis in the context of CULT follows, presenting our analytical framework of DI. We then provide an outline of our data and methods and present our findings. We conclude that while CULT’s perceived role is contested in all dimensions of ideational power, committee members resist its impotence by ideationally constructing a consensual education policy atmosphere.

## Research context

Committee work plays a major role in the European Parliament's daily life, as it is a working parliament (Lord, 2018; Miller, 2023) in which most of the parliamentary powers of delay and amendment are exercised (Corbett et al., 2024). Committees interact with other actors in the EU system, such as approving Commissioner appointments (Hix & Høyland, 2013). Furthermore, since the Lisbon Treaty, the European Parliament's co-decision role with the Council of the European Union (hereafter referred to as the "Council") has been expanded into a new ordinary legislative procedure (Whitaker, 2011). Committees' legislative involvement is uneven, however. Taking a historical view, Whitaker shows (2011, p. 32) that although CULT has not been the least active committee in processing co-decision reports, it has "far less legislative involvement" (2011, p. 70). Whitaker (2011) also notes that the perceived importance of CULT's co-decision legislation is not factored into statistical analysis. Single indicators of committee importance can therefore neglect the views of policy actors themselves (see also Aula & Raunio, 2022).

The European Parliament's committees are composed of several influential actors, including national parties (Whitaker, 2011), political groups (Roger & Winzen, 2015), rapporteurs, coordinators (Obholzer et al., 2019), and committee chair leaderships (Chiru, 2019). Committee assignments have therefore been a considerable area of research (Yordanova, 2013). Whitaker (2011) found that in 1982 and 2002, professional and ministerial experience was not well represented in CULT, and that in 1999 and 2004, CULT had an overrepresentation of new Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). MEPs may therefore not perceive CULT as a prestigious committee or an arena to advance policy change – they may question its actorness.

Despite CULT's low legislative activity and historical differences in its membership, they do not determine behaviour or ideas around it. Some actors have recognised CULT's potential and have sought influence within it (Armangau, 2024). This suggests CULT's power may be exercised through means other than its legislative activity. Institutional actors not only negotiate formal rules and informal practices but also prevailing ideas about CULT's importance in education policymaking and the construction of political interests within it. Furthermore, in committees with less legislative involvement, committee members can exploit parliamentary rules and routines to maximise their committee's influence (Ahrens, 2016).

The scope of policy issues within CULT has changed since the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. Education as a policy sector was an "area of conflict and controversy": the European Parliament was in dispute with the European Commission (hereafter referred to as the "Commission") and Council, but also with the Committee of Regions and the Economic and Social Committee about competences and national subsidiarity (Field, 1998, p. 57). In principle, the EU dimension in education meant supporting Member States' actions in education and training in student and staff mobility, for example. However, the European

Parliament gained more powers in education with its extended budgetary powers and the legislative process of co-decision with the Council (Pépin, 2006). The European Parliament, namely CULT, was thus able to introduce amendments to vocational education policies (Field, 1998). The European Parliament and CULT have since expanded their powers. Indeed, during the current parliamentary term, the tenth legislature, CULT is responsible for all cultural aspects of the Union, including cultural heritage, cultural and linguistic diversity, and artistic creation; the European higher education area and the promotion of the system of European schools in addition to lifelong learning; and the Committee also plays a role in developing policy in the key audiovisual, information and media, youth, and sport areas (European Parliament, 2024).

In terms of internal cohesiveness, coalition patterns in winning votes seem to have been favourable for CULT when the two big political groups, the European People's Party (EPP) and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), have been in coalition with the Renew Europe group (Hix & Noury, 2024). Hix and Noury (2024) have analysed the 2024 European Parliament Elections, examining the coalitions and voting cohesion of the political groups within the European Parliament. They report that party cohesion is high among almost all political groups in CULT, but lower than the average percentage of all votes per political group: the Greens/EFA parliamentary group has the highest voting cohesion (86.7%), and other groups' cohesion is higher than 56 per cent. The European Conservatives and Reformists Group's cohesion was higher than in CULT only in the Committee on the Internal Market and Consumer Protection and the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality. The exception is the Left group, with 32.8 per cent of political group cohesion, the lowest of all committees. Two political groups have jointly chaired CULT – the centre-right EPP and the S&D – with each having a two-and-a-half-year term in the ninth legislative period. However, from 2009 to 2022, a German representative of the EPP held the chair. This highlights not only the influence of national party delegations in securing chair positions within groups (Elomäki et al., 2023) but also the EPP's broader dominance in committee policy leadership and its implications for the kind of leaders selected (Kantola & Miller, 2022). However, the chair works with coordinators – MEPs each political group appoints. In addition to the variety of political backgrounds and affiliations, all members come from different European countries, bringing diverse perspectives on education and education systems.

CULT is thus an interesting case among the European Parliament's committees because it has gained little attention in education policy research despite its ability to draw power from sources other than legislation – and over the years this capacity seems to have broadened its scope of work. Its work is organised to gain negotiated support from broad parliamentary coalitions.

### **Discursive institutionalism**

We draw on DI (Schmidt, 2010) because it fits the overall EU higher education policymaking frame well. As we have noted in the previous chapters (see e.g. Chapter 6), networks' power is constructed in social interaction and

in the build-up of common language and practices. DI helps us emphasise actorness in this networked setting. DI marries with our concern to explore how sentient parliamentary actors involved in and around the CULT committee construct and enact its “power in ideas,” and how they are carried in coordinative discourses that offset perceptions of the committee’s institutional marginalisation. We therefore explore interactive processes in and around the CULT committee (Siefken & Rommetvedt, 2022, p. 22). Regarding DI’s application to the policy sphere, Schmidt (2015, p. 171) notes that policymaking should be understood “in context,” and its relationship with ideas takes “different forms, types, and levels.” For example, education policy scholarship has adopted DI to analyse school evaluation practices (Wallenius et al., 2018), curriculum studies (Wahlström & Sundberg, 2017), and education reforms (Nordin, 2014). Moreover, Bussi and Milana (2024, p. 150) stress the “central role of ideas and their communication” in their study of the EU’s adult learning and skills policy trajectories. As ideas are expressed through discourse, we explore the broad discursive context in which actors “outside” the committee construct CULT, and how the committee and its members discursively interact within the EP, inter-institutionally and extra-institutionally with stakeholders, to increase its “actorness.”

We agree with Schmidt (2015, p. 171) that DI is an umbrella concept that overlaps with other new institutionalisms. However, DI focuses not only on substantive ideas but interactive processes and the operation of power relations within them in its different guises. In this chapter, we therefore focus on Carstensen’s and Schmidt’s (2015, p. 320) concept of ideational power. Ideational power is “the capacity of actors (whether individual or collective) to influence actors’ normative and cognitive beliefs through the use of ideational elements” (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2015, p. 320). This allows us to explore how CULT is created, contested, and maintained through three ideational mechanisms. These are, first, *power in ideas* – that is “institutions imposing constraints on what ideas agents may take into consideration” and that “plays into processes of structural and institutional power”; second, *power over ideas* – that is “related less to persuasion and more to agents’ imposition of ideas and the power of actors to resist the inclusion of alternative ideas into the policy-making arena”; and third, *power through ideas* – that is, “the capacity of actors to persuade others to accept and adopt their views of what to think and do through the use of ideational elements” (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2015, pp. 320–321). All three mechanisms can function “positively” or “negatively” and can interact with other types of power such as institutional power. Furthermore, Carstensen and Schmidt (2015, p. 321) argue that although these types of power differ, “they combine and intersect in concrete instances” – it is therefore also important to study their interaction (Table 8.1).

DI distinguishes between coordinative discourse and communicative discourse. Generally, the agents in coordinative discourse are actors involved in the policy process, including “policymakers” or government officials, policy

Table 8.1 Ideational power and analysis of CULT

<i>Ideational power dimension</i>	<i>Definition by Carstensen and Schmidt (2015)</i>	<i>What we searched for in the data in relation to CULT</i>
Power through ideas	The capacity to influence actors' beliefs with cognitive or normative arguments (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2015, pp. 320–323)	Descriptions of persuasion: how an actor changed position after cognitive or normative argumentation Evidence of storytelling, framing, or rhetoric influencing decision making
Power over ideas	The capacity of actors to control and dominate the meaning of ideas (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2015, p. 326)	Explicit mentions of who controls or prioritises ideas Descriptions of conflicts over defining concepts, ideas, or facts
Power in ideas	The authority certain ideas enjoy in structuring thought at the expense of other ideas (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2015, p. 329)	Implicit assumptions or norms shaping engagement with CULT Hierarchies and discourses on what is viable or reasonable

consultants, experts, lobbyists, and business and union leaders. They generate policy ideas and arguments with various degrees and kinds of influence. They also organise themselves as discursive communities in a variety of groupings to influence the generation, shaping, and adoption of policies, often activated by entrepreneurial or mediating actors and informed by experts (Schmidt, 2015, p. 180). Although coordinative discourse can be a deliberative process, it is not devoid of power, and full consensus may not be inevitable. “Communicative” discourse is a discourse between political actors and the public. Political actors defend, deliberate, and disseminate these policy ideas (see Schmidt, 2002). The distinction between coordinative and communicative discourse is less clear-cut, as politicians’ public speeches can communicate with the public while also trying to signal to and influence their peers. We do not distinguish between coordinative and communicative discourses in our analysis because our data include ethnographic material collected in CULT committee meetings, which are public. In this context, this discourse’s target is difficult to discern (Table 8.1).

### Methods and data

Discourses construct and carry political interests, ideological values, and meanings. Ideologies are embedded in discourse’s features and are often seen as “matters of common sense” (Fairclough, 2001). We apply political discourse analysis (PDA) (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012) to understand CULT’s role as a European higher education policymaking actor. PDA provides an analytical lens for analysing CULT’s actorness by emphasising *decision making*

and *action* in discourse through which power is produced, reproduced, and contested (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, p. 17). PDA understands political discourse as context-dependent and existing in institutions. Our focus on CULT therefore locates higher education policy discourses in the European Parliament's institutional context.

In an edited book on parliamentary committees, Siefken and Rommetvedt (2022, p. 10) recommend delving into the “black box” of committees. In addition to studying “the microcosm of political actors in committees,” actors should be embedded in their wider institutional environments and policy processes (Siefken & Rommetvedt, 2022, p. 10). This circumscribes the “field” of the CULT committee to include inter-institutional relations (with the Council and the Commission) and extra-institutional relations (with educational stakeholders) as relevant actors in the policy ecosystem:

[I]t is necessary not only to “zoom in” and see what goes on inside committees, but also to “zoom out,” moving beyond the walls of the parliament building and look at the relevant governance processes in the respective policy networks. It needs to be determined where committees are within the political systems and how relevant they are.

(Siefken & Rommetvedt, 2022, p. 10)

Various observational methods have been used in studies of the EU institutions. These have included the parliamentary ethnography of actors such as MEPs and political groups (Busby, 2013; Miller, 2022), ethnographies embedded in a cabinet of the Commission (Mérand, 2021), multi-sited EU lobbying (Mikkonen, 2024), and conversational interviews to “soak and poke” the inner world of trilogue processes (Roederer-Rynning & Greenwood, 2020, p. 492). Turning to parliamentary committees specifically, a notable interpretivist ethnography (Geddes, 2019) combines observations with interviews to emphasise “the power of ideas and interpretation” in the daily enactment of accountability (Geddes, 2019, p. 138). This ethnography challenges assumptions about how committees work – often differently from their institutional design. Behaviouralist observational studies of televised committee hearings have also explored committee deliberation and accountability (Schonhardt-Bailey, 2022). Geddes and Schonhardt-Bailey both studied select committees in the UK context – with less relative legislative power (cf. Fenno, 1973). In exploring accountability, they zoomed in on committees' scrutiny and deliberation functions, respectively. Given that our aim is to understand contestations of CULT's role as a European higher education policymaking actor, the committees' legislative function constitutes an important backdrop for our work. We thus draw on insights from policy ethnography. This approach analyses “policy settings, agents, practices, organizations and processes” (Dubois, 2015). It includes arenas where policymaking claims are both articulated and challenged.

In this chapter, we analyse CULT and its embeddedness in the European Parliament as a policy setting, the inter-institutional actors and extra-institutional

stakeholders involved in the higher education policy system, and their practices, organisations, and processes. Policy ethnography is an umbrella term for several metatheoretical and political approaches that explore policymaking as a lived process. Although we share in the scepticism concerning positivist approaches to policymaking, the desire to confront common-sense views of policymaking, and the notion that policymaking is rational and top-down as in [Dubois's \(2015\)](#) critique, our approach is more Foucauldian (see also [Shore et al., 2011](#)). A Foucauldian approach explores how power and knowledge are socially constructed in everyday interaction and practices; how power and knowledge are mediated through actors; and how ideational power coexists with resistance.

In following our Foucauldian approach, we acknowledge the researcher's role in studying policymaking practices, and that assumptions about power and authority are manifested in education policy elite interviews. As [Ozga \(2020\)](#) notes about researching the powerful in education policy contexts, the changing nature of policy and research itself affects the relationship between policymakers and researchers. In practice, this means interviewing powerful EU policymakers entails gaining knowledge of policymaking settings before interviews and, as [Field \(2019\)](#) suggests, careful management and navigation of access and time to gain credibility. Epistemologically, in a Foucauldian sense, this means both researchers and policymakers operate within knowledge epistemes – delimiting the ideational analysis of CULT. As four social scientists, we adhere to our disciplinary ways of knowing in education and political science and can be influenced by the existing knowledge frameworks within our scholarly communities. Moreover, in this chapter, we are participating actively in knowledge production while creating insights to evaluate the conditions for knowledge formation. As our research contribution attempts to reflect the boundaries of current scholarly debates and intellectual paradigms, we therefore acknowledge that according to our Foucauldian interpretation, power is “rooted in the systems of social networks” ([Foucault, 1982](#), p. 793), and its conduct cannot be simply reduced to a study of a single institution such as CULT.

We draw on a body of interview and observation data we report in more detail in [Chapter 2](#). In this study, we focused on interviews with EU policymakers, officials, and stakeholders working closely with the European Parliament, and observations and summary fieldnotes based on what we witnessed in CULT committee meetings over a year, from the autumn of 2021 to the autumn of 2022. We observed nine CULT committee meetings (of which three lasted two days) online and in person, yielding a total of 30 hours of observations and 155 pages of fieldwork notes (see [Chapter 2](#)).

### **Power through ideas: CULT's capacity as a “bridge” between people and politics**

This form of ideational power draws on persuasion and actors' influence on and co-option of other actors to their worldview using ideational elements – such as persuading actors of both the normative and cognitive validity of arguments

(Carstensen & Schmidt, 2015, p. 323). Our analysis of interviews and CULT committee meetings suggested that power was enacted through discourses of CULT's relevance and the committee's ability to gain empowerment in education policy, which largely assumed the integrity and coherence of policy problems.

The most direct way in which CULT's members exercised power was to attempt to persuade others of its importance. This was carried out discursively by promoting ideas of CULT's capacity to bridge the different voices and actors in the policy field. Constructing "successful" policy was in effect seen as derived from conversations and interactions with people, educational professionals, citizens, students, and constituents. One politician explained why Commission-made policy needed CULT's and the European Parliament's contribution:

We bring in what we experience, what we hear from groups, from people who have a project under Erasmus. If you hear about the problems there were, then you analyse the reason for it, and you then also have an exchange with the Commission on these things to improve the programme and raise the awareness of where the problems in practice may be. Because making a programme is one thing in theory. Looking at how it works on the ground is totally different. And I think that's important, and as parliamentarians you are, let's say, the bridge between the people in the constituencies and the Parliament and the big process bubble.

(Politician)

Another attempt at bridging was filtering the (knowledge) input from political groups based on the similarity of priorities (Politician). Policy priorities that were a shared interest of the committee members and political groups were incorporated into the committee's work programme.

Extra-institutionally – that is, in fora beyond the EU institutions – this would often entail persuading Member States of CULT's normative value, despite its lack of competence, as a key actor responding to the needs of citizens, various non-governmental stakeholders, end users such as students, and local and regional actors. The ideational power was embedded in the argument that CULT guided Member States in what they should provide for their citizens (Politician). For example, the construction of the European Education Area (EEA) lay in Member States' competence, but according to several CULT interviewees, its implementation was not advancing sufficiently quickly. CULT's ability to "give a little power to the process" was therefore demonstrated by defining policy priorities and problems surrounding the advancement of EEA and proposing solutions to tackle them (Politician): CULT organised expert hearings and an exchange with national policymakers and representatives, simultaneously gaining knowledge and expertise from these interactions to empower CULT's policy vision (Politician).

Despite the apparent cognitive validity of arguments, in our observation data CULT members were unable to convince Member States or even all their colleagues that CULT had the capacity to bridge the gap between people, Member States, and the political agenda. This was also demonstrated in inter-institutional relations, and even intra-institutionally within CULT.

Yet even inside CULT MEPs resisted the idea that European values would supersede national values, and that value questions could not be harmonised due to Member States' competence.

(Eeva observation diary, 13 January 2022)

One MEP argued that the European Union was intended to overcome nationalistic interests, emphasising that the EU was meant to complement and help its Member States, not eradicate national identities – noting that while education was indeed Member States' competence, this did not prevent going forward with their work.

(Kallunki observation diary, 13 January 2022)

These observations from the same meeting illustrate the apparent division between political groups. MEPs on the right could enact ideational power through the normative value (and power in the idea) of subsidiarity and Member State competences within a set of like-minded MEPs, while political groups on the left could persuade another like-minded group of colleagues of the democratic value of CULT that was not limited by the idea of competence. This shows how power through ideas and power in ideas intersect. CULT therefore featured internal contestation that may also have affected its capacity to appear to be a bridging actor in education policy.

There were also other direct attempts to argue for CULT's parliamentary power in relation to other EU institutions. Inter-institutional contestation concerning which body had the power to generate, develop, and impart ideas was observed in both the Council and the Commission. An example was in a CULT meeting, where the Vice Chair criticised the Council Presidency for not allowing CULT to play a prominent role during its term:

MEP Kammerevert [Vice Chair] scolded the Member State holding the Presidency [of the Council]: the Member State in question constantly referred to conferences during the Presidency. The MEP demanded that they (CULT) should be invited to speak, not just to observe as guests.

(Eeva observation diary, 7 January 2022)

Vice Chair Kammerevert's reference to tangible invitations may indicate that she interpreted them as a method of inclusion or exclusion enacted by the Presidency. These invitations were an opportunity for inter-institutional forms of bridging and asserting CULT's power over ideas (see below). CULT's

ideational power appeared to be based first on persuading others, Member States, and the EU institutions of the consensual idea that CULT was working towards expected policy goals; second, that CULT could also enact ideational power by providing interpretative lenses that shaped the values and preferences of the actors involved, thereby having the capacity to translate complex political and economic interests into tangible policy actions.

An official discussed their role in supporting CULT power efforts:

But we're not powerless – okay, we have our ways I would say, but that's, sometimes it's, it requires a bit more thinking, and strategic thinking to push something through. And we help with this. ... We're happy to provide as much support as we can, and if our thoughts are heard and taken into account, we're even happier.

(Official)

The committee also dealt with certain policy areas that were not at the core of education policymaking, such as audiovisual policy. This demonstrated that actors working in CULT could reinterpret the institutional setting and use it strategically to adopt new policy goals – perhaps to gain more competence or relevance. Yet CULT's attempts to persuade Member States of this capacity failed, and it was therefore unable to use power through ideas. For example, when discussing the Digital Security Act, one MEP remarked that Member States had not implemented it, despite the work the European Parliament and CULT had done (Eeva observation diary, 26–27 January 2022).

To summarise, CULT's ability to enact power through ideas was more successful internally within the committee than with external actors. The cognitive validity (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2015, p. 323) of its role in democratic policymaking was also contested internally by claims of subsidiarity, while certain CULT members and political groups supported it. Similarly, bridging did not seem to extend as easily to inter-institutional relations: bridging to the Council and Commission (who were seen to hoard power over ideas) was less successful, but it was more successful in constructing a narrative responding to “real world” (policy) problems that were attentive to the voices of education professionals, stakeholders, and citizens. CULT's actorhood was therefore constructed through perceived ideational elements that defined the committee as an underrated player in the field. This construction reflected the internal frustration within the committee, but simultaneously presented it as a united front, making policy in response to agendas supported by a wide range of societal actors and primary user stakeholders.

### **Power over ideas: CULT's autonomy – “Whose waters are you fishing in?”**

Power over ideas refers to the imposition of ideas and the power to resist the inclusion of alternative ideas in the policymaking arena (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2015, 326). We examined explicit mentions in the data of who

controlled or prioritised ideas, and descriptions of conflicts concerning who could legitimately define concepts, ideas, or facts. In our data, we found examples of CULT resisting ideas the Commission proposed and attempting to impose its ideas on the Commission in return.

CULT members also guarded their area of competence. This included challenging other committees for not respecting CULT's competence (Politician). An MEP explained that other committees might attempt to "fish in the wrong waters" by drafting a report on a topic within CULT's competence (Politician). An interviewee explained the struggle to claim competence within the European Parliament:

For some people a non-legislative committee has nothing to say, but we also have legislative competences when it comes to media law, for example. Or in the programmes for education. You very often also have to fight for your competences, especially when other committees think they are, let's say, overruling everyone.

(Politician)

Reclaiming competence was thus a way for CULT to prioritise its ideas. By enacting power through ideas, MEPs also emphasised that their expertise was valuable to others, proposing themselves as speakers – not observers – at conferences (Kallunki observation diary, 7 February 2022). Yet, as within the previous subsection, CULT's internal conflicts – for example, in relation to domestic policymaking – could undermine efforts to prioritise their ideas. Ministerial hearings often become entangled in domestic politics when MEPs from the minister's country, especially those representing an opposition party, could exploit an opportunity for politicking (e.g. Eeva observation diary, 26–27 January 2022). Language politics – often in the context of French versus English – could also dilute CULT's efforts to impose its ideas as a united front (Politician), meaning the language in which ideas were to be conveyed became more important than the ideas themselves (e.g. [Erdocia et al., 2022](#)). In the extreme example, a political group was excluded from everyday committee work. A politician reported how Identity and Democracy was excluded when they did not align with shared ideational understandings of parliamentary work (Politician).

The Commission's proposals are of course a significant way of imposing ideas on the European Parliament. Interviewees across the spectrum emphasised the importance of affecting these proposals beforehand, which was evident in officials' trust in Commission fact-checking (Official), and in how stakeholders prioritised Commission outputs – for example, work programmes and recommendations.

Placing Commission proposals under the microscope was one way for CULT to reclaim power over ideas and emphasise its importance as an actor. For example, the Commission's data were questioned in CULT meetings. In our observation material, when a Commission representative was presenting

the results of the European Year of Youth 2023 for CULT, an MEP criticised the Commission for not taking any legislation into account that a youth panel for the year had suggested. The CULT chair MEP Verheyen supported this view, noting that European youth had not been informed of the events (Kauko observation diary, 25 October 2022). A little later, the chair was also sceptical of the attendance numbers for the theme year's events given by a representative from the Commission because they were not compared with a regular year (Kauko observation diary, 25 October 2022). On another occasion, when MEPs expressed eagerness about Commission outputs, there was hesitancy about their relevance (Eeva observation diary, 13 March 2022).

Taken together, we observe that CULT strove to impose its ideas and resist the inclusion of alternatives: first, by putting Commission proposals under the microscope and emphasising MEPs' expertise; second, by reinforcing CULT's boundaries and territory in terms of competence.

### **Power in ideas: CULT's recognition as a megaphone without a voice?**

The DI view on power in ideas analyses the structuring constraints on which ideas are considered at the expense of others (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2015). In CULT's case, this was connected in our data with CULT's recognition. This included attempts to define the committee's role and contestations concerning it, and how the committee was recognised differently, depending on the observer. Our interviews revealed there was some discursive struggle about its importance.

CULT was discursively constructed by external actors as lacking influence – and this was a recurring idea in the data. This was observed in the comments of MEPs who were not members of CULT, for whom it did not seem a priority. In the ninth parliamentary term of 2019–2024, Finnish MEPs actively chose not to engage in CULT, instead attempting to participate in committees with more legislative power. In some descriptions, CULT was seen as a world of its own, with no real influence:

[CULT] lives a life of its own [laughs], of sorts. ... It plays a role where it gives statements for different topics, but it seldom has the main responsibility for something, and others give statements. That CULT committee doesn't really play a big role in our decision making.

(Politician)

The politician's unspoken expectation was that power could be enacted only through legislative authority in parliamentary committees. Based on this, CULT was thought to be a secondary priority. MEPs outside CULT reminded interlocutors that science and research was the third-largest EU budget item and an important tool for the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE), which was the committee responsible for the Horizon

Europe programme. An MEP with ITRE experience said there was little cooperation with CULT, which signified CULT's exclusion from budgetary decisions. However, an MEP did recognise CULT's importance in the Erasmus programme (Politician).

Similarly, our stakeholder interviewees raised CULT's lack of legislative authority. They generally perceived higher education as belonging to Member States' purview, and something that could not be accessed or influenced effectively through CULT. Ideas related to national sovereignty thus worked to diminish CULT's importance. Yet the Erasmus and other mobility programmes, as well as the Commission's quality assurance recommendations, for example, were perceived as important. By extension, parliamentary venues such as CULT were seen as a megaphone, a place to voice ideas, while lacking any real power.

The problem is that the Parliament, like the EU, only has supportive competences. So the Parliament is crucial for Erasmus, for example, and if you're talking about budgets, if you want to put something in the budget, but the fact that they don't have, let's say, real power because in this case the European Education Area is also a process of the Member States. ... Parliament can act as a megaphone, or they can perhaps amend things[.]

(Stakeholder)

The committee's internal views of "outside" narratives responded to a dominant construction of CULT as a relatively powerless committee. These narratives appeared to be leveraged inside CULT – sometimes drawing on affective discourses – to cultivate a consensual working environment in the committee, emphasising its work's importance:

But because this isn't such a heavy legislative committee, we have maybe a bit more leeway, so people are just like ah, yes, they can do whatever they want – it's very nice because it's very like "yay, education, yay, young people!" It's very positive. And you know... And then we have the rising cost of living, the Ukraine crisis, the energy crisis, so no one cares about [laughs] what we do in CULT.

(Politician)

Across the board we really have a consensus that we want better education for people, more inclusive, higher-level, not excluding anyone, so it's something everyone agrees on. About culture, we all want to support European culture, of course. Each Member State has its own priorities, but we all want, you know, more money for culture, more support for artists and creators, and so on. It's the same with sport and young people, it's all, like, very consensual. The difference is how we get there, so this is where we can differ because we all agree, maybe not agree on...

we don't agree on everything, but in general we agree most of the time about the end goal.

(Politician)

Interestingly, another way of enacting power in ideas was to attempt to reduce CULT's importance. Participants noted that higher education and science questions were not seen as highly politicised. This was also reflected in lobbying's low intensity (Politician). Nevertheless, the higher education lobby was an important source of knowledge in understanding a complex field (Politician). The same discourse was reflected in stakeholder accounts. CULT was not seen as prioritising higher education, and parliamentarians were seen as lacking the time to deal with "fluffy" questions related to higher education (Stakeholder).

The committee's internal views thus reflected the discourses of outsiders such as stakeholders who constructed CULT as a weak entity. Yet CULT was active in responding to this rhetoric, attempting to level up its influence in institutional relations with other EU bodies by actively finding ways of increasing actorness in the policy areas in CULT's field. In higher education, this was shown by enticing interlocutors through the "cognitive validity" (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2015, p. 323) – and building power from the idea – of the importance of money in emphasising the focus on the EU budget dedicated to higher education. We observed that policy instruments, funding schemes, and EU programmes were arguably the main building blocks for generating authority in CULT in the exchange of views on the *External dimension of the new EU strategy for higher education – protection of students, researchers, and academics under threat* in 2022 (Eeva, 24 October 2022). A CULT official described the balancing of attempts to level up the committee's legislative role while depoliticising this very idea:

We're a legislative committee of, course – we have legislation to deal with, we have the funding programmes, Erasmus, Creative Europe, European Solidarity Corps, we have huge pieces of legislation like the Audiovisual Media Services Directive, which is also highly controversial, you know, but we don't deal exclusively with legislation because in particular as you know, education policies are primarily the Member States' domain. And... The Parliament can, can give some incentives, you know, the Parliament can try to push some, via resolutions, to put the things in, in the right direction, but of course in the end it's the Member States having the major say on how education policies are going. We have the European Education Area, you know, and we have a view on this, the Parliament as an institution has a view on this, and we also have some influence, you know, and we can push, but of course there are also other actors in this policy field which simply have more power, which comes from the treaties, yeah.

(Official)

Other interviewees said the Council Presidency also played a role in determining different committees' importance. An official saw the importance of deciding into which category each policy fell: higher education topics could sometimes be a grey area, and it was up to the Council Presidency to decide if they would be dealt with in the Education Committee (and Education, Youth, Culture, and Sports Council) or in the Working Party on Research (and the Competitiveness Council). This could then be reflected in which committee – CULT or ITRE, for example – dealt with the matter in the European Parliament.

So a powerful idea that CULT was not an especially important player existed among MEPs outside CULT, and some stakeholders and officials. This was mainly because CULT had scarcely any direct influence on legislation. However, interviewees recognised the importance of using the European Parliament to voice ideas. CULT's relationship with the Council especially, and with the Commission to some extent, seemed to cause tension, as CULT was attempting to gain more prominence. The idea of CULT as a relatively powerless committee therefore had “real” effects in report allocations and conference invitations, but also notably affected the committee's consensual culture. However, the committee was quite successful in building a consensual voice that embedded political dissonance – often due to issues of competence – yet depoliticised them through narratives of the “greater good.”

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we set out to understand how CULT's role was ideationally constructed, and how its actorness – its capacity, autonomy, and recognition – was negotiated in the European policymaking space's inner life. In all the dimensions of ideational power (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2015), we analysed that there was a degree of contestation of power from both inside and outside CULT.

Returning to our analytical framing, we showed that combining DI and Foucauldian insights could also provide tools for understanding ideational power beyond the concept of *power in ideas*. We suggested that these interactions also *produced* the actorness of CULT and knowledge, illustrating power's productive effects (Foucault, 1977, 1986).

By enacting ideational power “through ideas” (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2015), CULT attempted to persuade others of its capacity to bridge different views and actors such as education professionals and stakeholders, as well as citizens. This bore CULT members' self-understanding as an aggregate voice for different education communities. In attempting to find ways to exercise power, CULT needed to confront, consult, and interact with others in the policy domain – the Commission, for example. There were direct confrontations with the Council and Commission in public hearings, and as previous studies have noted, attempts to maximise power through parliamentary processes (Ahrens, 2016) and by ensuring CULT was invited to events to

voice opinions. Internal contestations within the committee also arose when there was a hint that CULT might touch the principle of subsidiarity.

In relation to the ideational power “over ideas” (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2015), CULT’s autonomy in determining ideas’ meaning was contested. CULT scrutinised Commission proposals closely, making various attempts to question and influence them. It also safeguarded its policy territory if other committees were found to be inching towards it. For example, CULT actively sought to reinforce its competence by insisting that legislation concerning audiovisual policy and the media was the committee’s remit.

Concerning power in ideas, we observed a discursive struggle for CULT’s relevance and recognition. Outsiders, especially politicians not on the committee, perceived it as lacking influence given its limited legislative capacity and its dealing with seemingly somewhat non-political questions. CULT again tried to find ways to access related policy areas that could fall within its remit and attempted to gain influence in relation to the Council and Commission. CULT also boosted a depoliticising narrative of its striving for a greater good. In this narrative, it argued that it was a forum for public discussion. Using the terminology of DI, CULT argued that it was a forum for communicative discourse, and it used this as a tool for its coordinative discourse.

Our analysis revealed that CULT’s main influence tool was its argument concerning its capacity to build its actorness’s shared deliberation in “bridging” people – policymakers, stakeholders, and educational professionals – and policymaking realities. Discourses that worked to increase CULT’s actorness attempted to persuade others to think of the policy as a shared interest and for the benefit of all. Such discourses contained ideas of a wide array of “European” values, beliefs that MEPs were experts who should be heard, and arguments for being on the side of “people,” for example. As its legislative competences were limited, the committee had to work for political aims with the tools at hand and make the case for access to present and disseminate its ideas in different fora.

Discourses that worked to diminish CULT’s actorness in terms of recognition and autonomy included ideas of education and culture as “fluffy”; that the lack of legislative authority meant there was no impact; that the Commission was more important; and that education belonged to Member States. Moreover, CULT often needed to attempt to convince a majority of others to embrace its consensus discourse. This was demanding: our analysis revealed counterreactions could be provoked if CULT was seen to overreach its mandate.

However, with Carstensen and Schmidt (2015), we note that ideational power dimensions have fluid boundaries, overlap, and are mutually interconnected. When persuasion was insufficient to convince others (power through), CULT attempted other means to increase its actorness by imposing its ideas (power over) and criticising Commission proposals. Power also seemed to be related to legislative authority. Although the DI view of power emphasises discourses and narratives, it also emphasises institutional power. Does

the legislative authority associated with a committee and the responsibility for decisions pertaining to substantial monetary resources carry more weight than imaginaries of the common good?

Looking forward, new institutionalism and especially DI often claim to explain stability and change, but tackling the question of change in this chapter may need a more elaborated analytical scope. Even as discourses unfold in everyday interaction, some meanings and arrangements are established institutionally and are thus more resistant to change (e.g. Lynggaard, 2019). Yet change can also sometimes be achieved by “working with the grain” of existing institutional discourses: CULT seems to have found some soft spots in existing institutional discourses and to have worked with them – emphasising its consensual rather than politicised forms of decision making, for example.

We found that a combination of policy ethnography, interview, and ethnographic data was powerful for exploring CULT as a higher education policymaker and knowledge producer. This enquiry would also have provided a window into the coordinative and communicative discourse within DI and ideational power. We did not focus on these aspects in this study, however, because we did not follow a specific policy process or topic, even though CULT presents an interesting case for reviewing how far the coordinative discourse of CULT’s importance has successfully translated into a communicative discourse with the public and those outside the European Parliament. Moreover, to further develop our analysis, we believe our research data on language politics would prove a fruitful topic for future enquiry.

## References

- Ahrens, P. (2016). The Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality in the European Parliament: Taking advantage of institutional power play. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 69(4), 778–793.
- Alexiadou, N., & Rambla, X. (2023). Education policy governance and the power of ideas in constructing the new European education area. *European Educational Research Journal*, 22(6), 852–869. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14749041221121388>
- Armangau, R. (2024). Far-right patriots want to lead Parliament’s culture committee: What would change?. *EuroNews*. Retrieved July 23, 2024, from <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/07/23/far-right-patriots-want-to-lead-parliaments-culture-committee-what-would-change>
- Aula, V., & Raunio, T. (2022). The conditions of committee importance: Drawing lessons from a qualitative case study of Finland. *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 1(23). <https://doi.org/10.1080/13572334.2022.2153995>
- Bacchi, C., & Rönblom, M. (2014). Feminist discursive institutionalism: A poststructural alternative. *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 22(3), 170–186. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2013.864701>
- Busby, A. (2013). ‘Bursting the Brussels bubble’: Using ethnography to explore the European Parliament as a transnational political field. *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, 14(2), 203–222. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15705854.2013.785260>
- Bussi, M., & Milana, M. (2024). The ideational policy trajectory of EU adult learning and skills policies up to COVID-19. In M. Milana, P. Rasmussen, & M. Bussi (Eds.), *Research handbook on adult education policy* (pp. 147–163). Edward Elgar Publishing.

- Carstensen, M. B., & Schmidt, V. A. (2015). Power through, over and in ideas: Conceptualizing ideational power in discursive institutionalism. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 23(3), 318–337.
- Chiru, M. (2019). Loyal soldiers or seasoned leaders? The selection of committee chairs in the European Parliament. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 27(4), 612–629.
- Corbett, R., Jacobs, F., Neville, D., & Černoch, P. (2024). *The European Parliament* (10th ed.). John Harper Publishing.
- Dubois, V. (2015). Critical policy ethnography. In F. Fischer, D. Torgerson, A. Durnová, & M. Orsini (Eds.), *Handbook of critical policy studies* (pp. 462–479). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Elomäki, A., Kantola, J., Ahrens, P., Berthet, V., Gaweda, B., & Miller, C. (2023). The role of national delegations in the politics of the European Parliament. *West European Politics*, 47(6), 1251–1275. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2023.2275387>
- Erdocia, I., Nocchi, S., & Ruane, M. (2022). Ideas, power and agency: Policy actors and the formulation of language-in-education policy for multilingualism. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 45(7), 2848–2862. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2022.2077352>
- European Parliament. (2024). *Rules of procedure. 10th parliamentary term*. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RULES-10-2025-01-20-TOC\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RULES-10-2025-01-20-TOC_EN.html)
- Fairclough, N. (2001). *Language and power* (2nd ed.). Longman.
- Fairclough, I., & Fairclough, N. (2012). *Political discourse analysis: A method for advanced students*. Routledge.
- Fenno, R. (1973). *Congressmen in committees*. Little Brown and Company.
- Field, J. (1998). *European dimensions: Education, training and the European Union*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Field, M. (2019). Conducting elite interviews to explore variations in attitudes to transparency among Members of the European Parliament. In *Sage research methods cases part 2*. SAGE Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526464378>
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Allen Lane.
- Foucault, M. (1982). The subject and power. *Critical Inquiry*, 8(4), 777–795.
- Foucault, M. (1986). Truth and power. In C. Gordon (Ed.), *Michel Foucault: Power/knowledge* (pp. 109–133). Harvester.
- Geddes, M. (2019). *Dramas at Westminster: Select committees and the quest for accountability*. Manchester University Press.
- Haugaard, M., & Ryan, K. (2012). *Political power: The development of the field*. Barbara Budrich Publishers.
- Hix, S., & Høyland, B. (2013). Empowerment of the European Parliament. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 16, 171–189. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-032311-110735>
- Hix, S., & Noury, A. (2024). *The 2024 European Parliament elections: Potential outcome and consequences*. Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies.
- Kantola, J., & Miller, C. (2022). Gendered leadership in the European Parliament’s political groups. In H. Müller & I. Tommel (Eds.), *Women and leadership in the European Union* (pp. 150–172). Oxford University Press.
- Lord, C. (2018). The European Parliament: A working parliament without a public? *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 24(1), 34–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13572334.2018.1444624>
- Lynggaard, K. (2019). *Discourse analysis and European Union politics*. Palgrave Studies in European Union Politics.
- Mérand, F. (2021). *The political commissioner: A European ethnography*. Oxford University Press.
- Mikkonen, S. (2024). *EU lobbying through everyday practices: An ethnographic study on relational power in transnational in-house EU lobbying in Helsinki and Brussels*. <https://trepo.tuni.fi/handle/10024/155292>

- Miller, C. (2022). Ethno, ethno, what? Using ethnography to explore the European Parliament's political groups. In P. Ahrens, A. Elomäki, & J. Kantola (Eds.), *European Parliament's political groups in turbulent times* (pp. 245–266). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Miller, C. M. (2023). Between Westminster and Brussels: Putting the 'parliament' in parliamentary ethnography. *Politics & Gender, 19*(2), 533–559. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X22000071>
- Nordin, A. (2014). Crisis as a discursive legitimation strategy in educational reforms: A critical policy analysis. *Education Inquiry, 5*(1). <https://doi.org/10.3402/edui.v5.24047>
- Obholzer, L., Hurka, S., & Kaeding, M. (2019). Party group coordinators and rapporteurs: Discretion and agency loss along the European Parliament's chains of delegation. *European Union Politics, 20*(2), 239–260.
- Ozga, J. (2020). The politics of accountability. *Journal of Educational Change, 21*, 19–35. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-019-09354-2>
- Pépin, L. (2006). *The history of European cooperation in education and training: Europe in the making – An example*. Publications Office.
- Roederer-Rynning, C., & Greenwood, J. (2020). Black boxes and open secrets: Trilogues as 'politicised diplomacy.' *West European Politics, 44*(3), 485–509. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2020.1716526>.
- Roger, L., & Winzen, T. (2015). Party groups and committee negotiations in the European Parliament: Outside attention and the anticipation of plenary conflict. *Journal of European Public Policy, 22*(3), 391–408.
- Schmidt, V. A. (2002). *The futures of European capitalism*. Oxford University Press.
- Schmidt, V. A. (2010). Taking ideas and discourse seriously: Explaining change through discursive institutionalism as the fourth 'new institutionalism. *European Political Science Review, 2*(1), 1–25.
- Schmidt, V. (2015). Discursive institutionalism: Understanding policy in context. In F. Fischer, D. Torgersen, & M. Orsini (Eds.), *Handbook of critical policy studies* (pp. 171–189). Routledge.
- Schonhardt-Bailey, C. (2022). *Deliberative accountability in parliamentary committees*. Oxford University Press.
- Shore, C., Wright, S., & Però, D. (2011). *Policy worlds: Anthropology and the analysis of contemporary power*. Berghahn Books.
- Siefken, S. T., & Rommetvedt, H. (2022). A black box that deserves more light: Comparative findings on parliamentary committees in the policy process. In S. T. Siefken & H. Rommetvedt (Eds.), *Parliamentary committees in the policy process* (pp. 9–37). Routledge.
- Wahlström, N., & Sundberg, D. (2017). Discursive institutionalism: Towards a framework for analysing the relation between policy and curriculum. *Journal of Education Policy, 33*(1), 163–183. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2017.1344879>
- Wallenius, T., Juvonen, S., Hansen, P., & Varjo, J. (2018). Schools, accountability and transparency: Approaching the Nordic school evaluation practices through discursive institutionalism. *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy, 4*(3), 133–143. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20020317.2018.1537432>
- Whitaker, R. (2011). *The European Parliament's committees: National party influence and legislative empowerment*. Routledge.
- Yordanova, N. (2013). *Organising the European Parliament: The role of committees and their legislative influence*. ECPR Press.