

**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

# Is the Europe of Knowledge the talk of the town? Exploring how members of the European Parliament refer to higher education

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**Abstract**

While the European Parliament is increasingly involved in EU governance, its role in policy developments in domains of strategic importance for the EU has not been the focus of many studies. In this article, we analyse a new digital dataset containing more than 10,000 speeches delivered in the European Parliament plenary between 1999 and 2014 and identify patterns related to temporal increase or decrease in the Parliament's focus on higher education, the topics linked to higher education discussions and patterns concerning the country and party group affiliation of the European Parliament members who speak about higher education. Our findings suggest that the total number of speeches, either specifically dedicated to higher education, or mentioning higher education when addressing other issues, did increase over time and particularly during the adoption of action programmes and related budgetary decision. Furthermore, higher education was less referred to in the Parliament speeches as a stand-alone issue than in relation to other policy areas in which the EU has strong jurisdiction. Finally, our findings indicate that the variance in whether a Member of the European Parliament speaks about higher education is more closely linked to country of origin than party affiliation, highlighting the persistent national dimension of higher education discussions at the European level. These findings attest to the increasing – yet largely overlooked – role of the European Parliament in higher education policy making.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Since 2000, the EU has put knowledge at the centre of its strategic endeavours (Pépin, 2011). The aim of the Lisbon Strategy was for Europe to become the most advanced knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010. Hence, during the 2000s, the European Commission published several communications focusing on the role of universities in this process and the need for a university modernisation strategy (European Commission, 2006), culminating with Europe 2020 where knowledge is essential for ensuring smart, inclusive and sustainable growth (European Commission, 2010). Throughout this period, knowledge was 'exported' to other policy areas as a policy solution (Elken, Gornitzka, Maassen, & Vukasović, 2011) and the funding of EU programmes fostering cooperation in this area increased, despite the financial crisis. For example, for the 2014-2020 period, there is a 30% increase of funds allocated to research cooperation and a 40% increase for education. Although these developments have been the focus of many studies,<sup>1</sup> most are concerned with the creation of specific institutions (e.g., the European Institute of Technology), or the Bologna Process and its relationship with the EU initiatives and highlight the individual policy entrepreneurs or the role of the European Commission (and sometimes also the European Court of Justice). Other EU institutions, in particular the European Parliament and its involvement in policy coordination in this area, have received far less attention, which reflects neither the importance of higher education for the whole European project nor the increasing importance of the Parliament in EU decision-making, especially with regard to budgetary decisions.

In order to reflect both the increasing significance of higher education for European integration and the fact that the strategic and financial decisions concerning European cooperation in higher education are taken by the European Parliament, this article focuses on the extent and manner in which higher education has been discussed in the European Parliament since 1999, using a new digital dataset that contains its members' speeches which were delivered during the period under study. The aim is twofold: (1) to provide an overarching view of how they have dealt with higher education as from 2000 and (2) to explore the use of automated content analysis of large-scale textual data (that are increasingly available for social science researchers, including those focusing on higher education). We start by outlining the changes in how the EU approaches the topic of higher education and the overall role of the European Parliament in EU decision-making. From this, we derive expectations concerning how higher education is discussed in the European Parliament. We investigate this by using digital data collection methods and content analysis of over 10,000 speeches delivered between July 1999 and September 2014 which were identified through search terms using 'The Talk of Europe' dataset ([www.talkofeurope.eu/data](http://www.talkofeurope.eu/data)). We analyse the data and identify patterns related to the 'when, who and how' speaks about higher education. We then reflect on our findings, comment on the potential of digital data analysis, discuss the implications for policy-makers at various governance levels and offer directions for future research.

## 2 | WHY DOES WHAT THE MEMBERS OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT SAY MATTER FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN EUROPE?

In the following section, we argue that the way in which members of the European Parliament refer to higher education in their speeches during parliamentary sessions matters for higher education, both with regard to EU policy dynamics and their implications for national level policy processes. Specifically, we argue that: (1) despite formally weak competences in the area of higher education, EU institutions are very much involved in its policy-making and that this also has implications for the national level, (2) within the institutional setting of the EU, the European Parliament plays a crucial role with regard to overall programming and budgetary decisions and (3) members of the European Parliament use their speeches to shape decisions at the EU level and influence policy-making at the national levels.

## 2.1 | Why does the EU matter for higher education?

In the EU context, higher education has largely been considered as a specialised policy area, steered by national ministerial administrations and strongly influenced by expert committees and local sectoral interests. Education in general has long remained an area of national competence, meaning that the legislative bodies of the EU (the European Parliament and Council) do not have regulative competences in the area of higher education (Gornitzka, 2009). Before the Treaty of Lisbon, this was reinforced in the principle of subsidiarity – decisions were taken at the lowest possible governance level, in this case the national authorities. As from 1 December 2009 (when the Treaty of Lisbon came into force) onwards, education has been considered as a supporting EU competence, allowing 'the Union to carry out actions to support, coordinate or supplement Member States' actions' (Article 2 E of the Treaty of Lisbon) in this area. This change offers more leeway to the EU in this domain and continues the trend of increasing its involvement in higher education.

It is well-known that an interest in the European level policy coordination in higher education has existed since the early days of the European project. As Corbett (2005) states, ever since the European Coal and Steel Community, European level policy entrepreneurs in various EU institutions have been pushing for different European initiatives targeting education. Moreover, several rulings of the European Court of Justice concerning the recognition of qualifications (see Corbett, 2005 on the Gravier decision), as well as regulations concerning the recognition of qualifications, in particular for regulated professions (Beerens, 2008) further expanded the EU influence over higher education. More importantly, there are indications that higher education (and research) may increasingly become subject to EU primary law (i.e., EU level regulation) concerning competition because of the blurring of the distinction between its public and private aspects (Gideon, 2015). In addition, given the EU's strategic decision to become a 'Europe of Knowledge' and an 'Innovation Union', one could argue that integration in this area can be considered a *sine qua non* condition of European integration (European Commission, 2010). Higher education is being 'exported' to other policy areas – economic competitiveness, social cohesion, environment, security, foreign relations, etc. – as a policy solution and its modernisation is seen as a key ingredient of political, social, economic and cultural development (Elken et al., 2011). Because of this functional 'spill-over' from areas in which the EU has formal regulative competences higher education is becoming a topic of growing interest for EU institutions, including the European Parliament. Finally, despite the fact that the EU's approach to its coordination relies on a voluntary setting of standards and benchmarks, evidence suggests that the possibility that is inherent in the OMC to 'name and shame' laggards can be a powerful instrument leading to significant changes at both the national and institutional level (Curaj, Scott, Vlasceanu, & Wilson, 2012; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015; Gornitzka, 2014).

In sum, the EU has been increasingly focusing on policy coordination in the area of higher education, either on its own or because of spill-over from other policy areas in which it has explicit competences. Whilst most of the activities in this area have been led by the European Commission, other EU institutions have also focused on higher education, including the European Parliament which is tasked with oversight of the European Commission.

## 2.2 | Why does the European Parliament matter for higher education?

The specification and division of tasks between the different EU institutions have been evolving since the very beginning of the European integration project and this is particularly true for the European Parliament. Already in the 1970s, it had some control over the EU budget. The 1986 Single European Act also gave it increased legislative power and expanded the overall EU policy scope, extending and deepening the EU's competences (Wallace, Pollack, & Young, 2010). Co-decision between the European Parliament and the Council was first introduced in the 1992 Treaty (Maastricht). It was further strengthened in the 2000s by establishing it as the standard operating procedure used for most policy areas (Pollack, 2010). Furthermore, the European Parliament approves the EU budget and discharges the accounts of the previous year (Laffan & Lindner, 2010). Concerning budget approval,

these decisions are important for three reasons: (1) they have a significant influence on what the EU as a whole and the Commission in particular can do, (2) they are contentious, since potential winners and losers amongst the Member States can be clearly identified, and (3) thanks to media reporting and the overall financial constraints in the EU and its Member States, they are more visible than other European decisions. The budgetary decisions allow the European Parliament to influence the macro level concerning multi-annual funding frameworks, as well as the micro level concerning specific programmes and projects. An example of the macro-level influence is the decision concerning the Financial Perspective for 2007-2013 where the European Parliament supported the European Commission's proposal to strengthen expenditure for public goods, effectively positioning itself against some of the Member States (Laffan & Lindner, 2010). Examples of the micro-level influence are the decision concerning the Erasmus Mundus budget in 2003 (Corbett, 2005) and the European Parliament's decision to protect a large part of Horizon 2020 funding from being used for the EU's investment fund ([www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20150420IPR42732/strategic-investment-fund-committees-back-juncker-plan-but-not-programme-cuts](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20150420IPR42732/strategic-investment-fund-committees-back-juncker-plan-but-not-programme-cuts)). Since the multi-annual budget plan has the status of law that is binding for several years, the European Parliament's deliberations and decisions on the budget issues have become even more important.

Overall, the European Parliament is currently in the position to constrain the agenda-setting activities of the European Commission and it can also ask it to deal with specific issues (Young, 2010). Given its role in the co-decision procedure, it can effectively act as a veto player and block decision-making (Finke, 2010). In general, since the early days of the European integration project, it has increased its influence on European level decision-making where the European Commission and the Council have arguably lost some influence. However, none of these institutions are unitary actors and their own internal dynamic is also important.

### 2.3 | What do members of the European Parliament do and why is it important for higher education?

Most members of the European Parliament are organised in European party families (see Table 1). The candidates run at nationally-organised elections where the number of members to be elected from each State depends on the country's population. However, once elected, the members are not grouped according to their countries, but to their partisan affiliation. Their number changed twice in the Seventh Parliamentary term, first because of the Lisbon Treaty entering into force in December 2009 (to 754) and then because of Croatia joining in July 2013 (to 766). The European Parliament holds plenary sessions every month in Strasbourg which serve as an opportunity

**TABLE 1** Number of MEPs across party families and parliamentary terms

Number of MEPs (per party family)	5th term 1999-2004	6th term 2004-2009	7th term 2009-2014
European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE-NGL)	42	41	35
Progressive Alliance of Socialist and Democrats (S&D); formerly PES	180	200	184
Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA)	48	42	55
Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE); previously ELDR	50	88	84
European People's Party (EPP), formerly EPP-ED	233	268	265
Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD), formerly IND/DEM or EFD	16	37	32
European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), formerly UEN	30	27	54
Non-attached (NA)	9	29	27
Total	626	732	736

Source. European Parliament website.

for its members to address each other, as well as other EU institutions and the public (Proksch & Slapin, 2010; Slapin & Proksch, 2010). These speeches serve several purposes: (a) arguing in favour or against a legislative or a budgetary proposal, (b) scrutinising other actors, in particular those over which the Parliament has oversight (e.g., the European Commission), (c) sending signals to national constituents about how their interests are protected (or not) at the European level, and (d) sending signals to other members of the party group or of the Parliament (Slapin & Proksch, 2010). The sessions are sometimes structured around an opening statement or a proposal by the European Commission, followed by an address by a rapporteur of the relevant committee (Proksch & Slapin, 2010). Importantly, as it also has the power to put forward issues, members can speak on a wide range of topics, including those in which the European Parliament has explicit competences concerning the adoption of regulations ('hard law') and those that are subject to softer policy coordination (in this case higher education).

Members of the European Parliament use plenary sessions to deliver speeches to communicate their own positions to the general public and to their own constituents and to coordinate with other actors, relying on discursive practices as instruments of change (Schmidt, 2010). Studies focusing on policy domains in which the EU has strong legislative competences have found that, once in the European Parliament, the decisions are determined by the generic left-right political cleavages between the European party families and their positions concerning the scope and level of appropriate European integration rather than by the members' country affiliations (Finke, 2010; Pollack, 2010). This is partly at odds with the fact that their decisions, in particular those concerning budget, can have significant consequences for Member States. For example, for less economically strong members, European level funding for higher education cooperation and research is an important complement to the limited funding available at the national level.

## 2.4 | Expectations

In light of the above, we expect to observe the following empirical patterns:

1. The total number of members of the European Parliament's speeches referring to higher education increases over time. The most significant is expected in relation to the adoption of EU action programmes and related budgetary decisions.
2. Higher education is more often referred to in the European Parliament speeches in relation to other policy areas in which the EU has regulative competences than as a stand-alone issue.
3. Whether or not a member of the European Parliament makes a speech addressing higher education is more strongly linked to his/her party family affiliation than to the country of origin.

## 3 | DATA AND METHODS

To investigate the role of higher education in the European Parliament we identified speeches delivered in the plenary using 'Talk of Europe', a linked open data infrastructure (van Aggelen, Hollink, Kemman, Kleppe, & Beunders, 2016) which includes speeches from 1999 to 2014 (translated into English) and related data available through the European Data Portal ([www.europeandataportal.eu](http://www.europeandataportal.eu)). 'Talk of Europe' uses semantic queries to retrieve data stored in the Resource Description Framework (RDF), a computer data language (Juric, Hollink, & Houben, 2012). This implies that the data in store can automatically be linked and compiled as one item in a dataset. This automatic search saves researchers substantial time in ensuring that the data are properly inter-connected, i.e., that John Smith in one database is the same as John Smith in the other. To access the data, we developed a set of requests with the Talk of Europe research team in the form of a Prolog programme to identify a set of speeches where key words existed. Thus, we identified a set of terms related to higher education which was then reviewed by

higher education researchers (see Appendix for the list of all terms queried). This returned the speeches in a text format and the related data (if available) on the title of the speech, date of the speech, URL to the original speech, identification of the speaker, speaker's country affiliation, and speaker's party affiliation (if known or applicable). Importantly, the search focused on identifying specific terms used in speeches, not on a description of the entire dataset of speeches. This approach mimics techniques implemented in other studies using this dataset (van Aggelen et al., 2016)<sup>2</sup> which resulted in a set of 10,180 speeches (all including at least one higher education term from our list with duplicates removed) and related data representing all potential discussions on higher education in the European Parliament since 1999. These data – which constitute textual data – were coded in order to allow for a systematic analysis of our expectations, i.e., the temporal, topical and country/party affiliation patterns with regard to speeches about higher education. In addition, we used publicly available information on the number of members of the European Parliament per country and party family during the period studied. The treatment of the data is presented in Table 2.

To efficiently identify topics according to key words in the speech titles, as presented in Table 3, speeches were coded by the second author using a hierarchical pattern: with a title containing one of the higher education terms identified earlier taking primacy, then a non-higher education topic (e.g., geographical determinant, demographic determinant or references to other policy sectors). For example, if the title refers to Roma or the Danube Region but the speech mentions a higher education term, it constitutes a non-higher education topic where higher education has been discussed in relation to another policy topic. Speeches that included 'vote', 'budget' or a reference to a procedural matter were also coded into separate categories (see Table 3). Voting and budget formally represent two different activities, one concerning specific discussion of the budget items, whilst the other concerns voting as a decision-making process of the European Parliament. We acknowledge that in a few cases these may overlap since the European Parliament often votes on budgets. All other formal activities related specifically to procedure and the organisation of the EU in general are considered as procedural topics.

In order to explore the patterns of interest, these coded data and the above mentioned text data (string variables) were transformed into nominal categorical variables. The dataset was then used to explore: (1) the temporal patterns of the use of higher education terms in speeches over time, (2) the topical patterns of the use of higher education terms in the different types of speeches and (3) the role of the country and party in explaining the use of these terms over time and in specific topics.

This approach provided an effective way of obtaining a comprehensive macro-overview of the patterns in the members of the European Parliament's approach to higher education and how these changed over time. Similar digital data, at both European and national levels, are becoming increasingly available for higher education researchers. In the interest of informing similar research in the future, we must also highlight a few methodological considerations that researchers should take into account. The reliability of the data used in this study is related to the accuracy of the EU Open Data Portal and the 'Talk of Europe' infrastructure in both publishing and accurately linking related data. Given the large scale nature of the dataset, it is expected that less significant 'bugs' may occur, but this 'noise' should not significantly influence results. For example, we encountered an unprecedented amount

**TABLE 2** Variables and treatment

Variable	Type of data	Treatment
Title of the speech	Textual data	Manually coded data in relation to the topics, see Table 3.
Date of the speech	Date	Aggregated into 4 month periods
Unique ID of the speaker, given by EP	Nominal	n/a (not treated here)
Speaker's country of affiliation	Textual data	Coded to nominal data
Speaker's party affiliation, if known	Textual data	Coded to nominal data

Source. Authors.

**TABLE 3** Coding scheme

Code	Description
HE	Speeches with a title that included one of our key words and addressed HE as the specific topic
Non- HE	Speeches with the mention of a geographical place in the title (e.g. country, city or region), or a specific group of people in the title (e.g. women, youth, disabled, elderly, Roma), or an issue that is not specifically related to HE (e.g. economy, human rights, employment, labour, resources, security, environment, defence, transportation, and so forth)
Vote	Speeches with the title Vote or Votes
Budget	Speeches with the mention of the word budget in the title
Procedural	Speeches with a mention in the title on procedural matters of the EU itself (e.g. review of EC notes, announcements, and so forth)
Unidentified	Speeches that are not attributable to a topic given the lack of detail in the title

Source. Authors.

of unattributed party affiliations in the 7th EP session which reflected missing data. Thus, to ensure validity, in considering the extent to which members of the European Parliament speaking on issues related to higher education was determined by their country of origin or party family affiliation we did not analyse the 7th term. In the available data we were unable to confirm whether all speakers were members of the European Parliament or guest speakers, although we could safely assume that the number of non-members speaking in the plenary sessions was very low and hence could not distort our findings.

We illustrated some of the patterns identified through such digital data with excerpts from the European Parliament's records of debates.<sup>3</sup> It should be stressed that they provide a very limited insight into the actual content of the speeches because they report these in the language in which they were given, thus including many not-so-widely spoken languages. This ruled out the possibility for a systematic qualitative and quantitative analysis of the content.<sup>4</sup>

## 4 | RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We collected a total of 10,180 speeches containing one or more of the terms in our 'glossary' (see Appendix). Since the output of the search does not contain a list of terms that were found in a particular speech, it was not possible to systematically measure their co-occurrences across all 10,180 speeches and use these data to test the sensitivity of the search to the content of the 'glossary'. Given these limitations, we focused on the potentially most problematic terms in the 'glossary', i.e., terms that may appear in speeches with no link to higher education such as innovation, mobility, science, technology, and training. We queried the 'Talk of Europe' infrastructure for these five terms separately and analysed the overlap between speeches retrieved in this way and those retrieved when searching for 'higher education' and 'university'. The results are presented in Table 4.

Thus, 2,268 speeches (22.2% of the total number in our dataset) contain at least one of the five problematic terms (X), but not 'higher education' (Y) or 'university' (Z), i.e., potentially 22.2% should not be there. However, we must stress that this is the maximum possible value for two reasons: (1) we only explored the co-occurrence of the problematic terms (X) with two other terms ('higher education' and 'university') and not with other terms in the 'glossary' which may also be closely linked to higher education (e.g., student, academic); and (2) we ignored the possibility that there may be co-occurrences of the different X's in the same speech (e.g., 'innovation' and 'technology') and merely added the numbers in the last row of Table 4. Notwithstanding that the proportion of speeches that do not belong in the dataset is probably much lower than 22.2%, we will proceed with our exploration of the data taking this into account. In relation to our expectation that the total number of speeches of the members of

**TABLE 4** Number of speeches containing one or more of the selected terms

Number of speeches...	X				
	Innovation	Mobility	Science	Technology	Training
A: containing one of the terms (X)	923	752	534	973	1011
B: containing X AND 'higher education' (Y)	262	269	180	264	281
C: containing X AND 'university' (Z)	370	322	258	421	403
containing (X AND Y) OR (X AND Z) = B + C	632	591	438	685	684
D: containing Y AND Z	221	221	221	221	221
containing (X AND NOT Y) OR (X AND NOT Z) = B + C-D	512	382	317	509	548

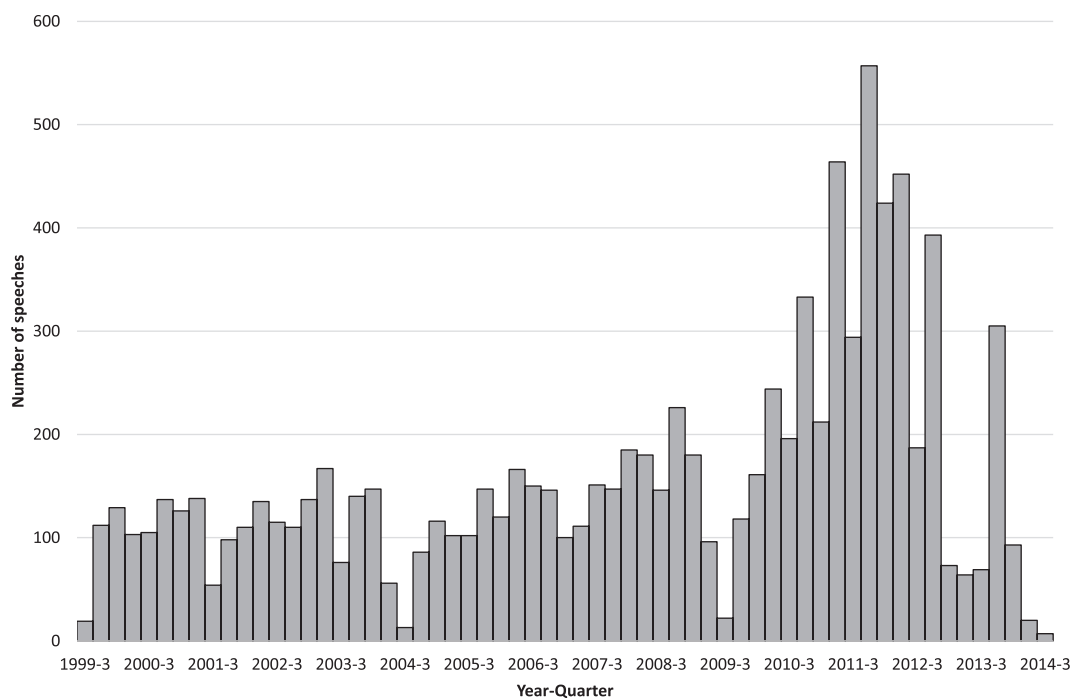
Source. Authors.

the European Parliament that mention higher education will increase over time, Figure 1 presents their frequency for the 5th, 6th and 7th term (aggregated for a four-month period).

As Figure 1 shows, there is an increase in the number of speeches containing at least one of the terms we identified as being attributed to higher education over time. The Figure also helps us to identify greater frequency, such as the end of 2008, parts of 2011 or the end of 2013. A closer look at the dataset reveals that they are related to the activity around the adoption of specific programmes and decisions concerning higher education, such as:

- the 'Erasmus Mundus II' programme – 31 speeches on 20 October 2008 alone, including speeches by members of the committees on Culture and Education, as well as Foreign Affairs, Development and Women's Rights and Gender Equality, and in particular members of the European Parliament who belong to EPP and S&D party groups;
- the 'European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET' – 38 speeches in December 2008, including those by members of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs, other members of the European Parliament, in particular those belonging to the EPP group (15 speeches in total), as well as by Jan Figel (then Commissioner for Education, Training and Culture);
- the report on 'Youth on the Move' (which also includes student mobility programmes, such as Erasmus +) – 57 speeches in May 2011, including those by members of the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy and the Committee on Regional Development, other members of the European Parliament (EPP and S&D dominating the debate with approximately 15 speeches each) and Androulla Vassiliou (then Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth);
- 'Agenda for new skills and jobs' – 53 speeches in October 2011, including those by members of the Employment and Social Affairs Committee, other members of the European Parliament (mostly belonging to the S&D group), Laszlo Andor (then Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion);
- 'Modernising Europe's Higher Education Systems' – 38 in April 2012, including the speeches by members of the Committee on Culture and Education, other members of the European Parliament (with EPP dominating the debate) and Janusz Lewandowski (then Commissioner for Budget and Financial Programming);
- a debate titled 'Is Erasmus in danger?' – 42 speeches in October 2012, mostly by EPP members of the European Parliament, but also two by the President of the Council Andreas Mavroyiannis and the then Commissioner for Budget and Financial Programming, Janusz Lewandowski;
- concerning 'Erasmus +' and 'Horizon 2020' programmes and the strategic agenda of the European Institute of Innovation and Technology – 142 speeches in November 2013, with rapporteurs from the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy, EPP members of the European Parliament dominating the debate and including the then Commissioner for Research, Innovation and Science, Máire Geoghegan-Quinn.





**FIGURE 1** Speeches referring to higher education, over time. *Source.* Authors

This means that the greater frequency cannot be due to the 22.2% potentially problematic speeches in our dataset. At the same time, the lowest frequency pertains to the transition between different parliamentary terms. Moreover, the presence of Commissioners for domains other than (higher) education and the fact that in most cases the rapporteurs were from the European Parliament committees other than the Committee dealing with education suggest that the context in which members of the European Parliament speak about higher education does not concern higher education as a stand-alone issue. This is confirmed by the analysis of our digital data (Table 5): higher education was the main topic for less than 15% of the speeches.

These other policy issues include areas that could be considered closely related to higher education, such as general education, youth issues, recognition of professional qualifications, graduates' employability or the general labour market situation. The many speeches categorised under the 'Vote' topic indicate that higher education-related terms are also referred to when members of the European Parliament explain to the plenary and their constituencies why they voted as they did. For example, a member of the EPP party group linked her vote in the October 2011 session on 'Agenda for New Skills and Jobs' to several issues that were not directly related to higher education (e.g., administrative burden, temporary posting of workers):

I voted in favour of the resolution on the Agenda for New Skills and Jobs. The economic, financial and social crisis now affecting Europe highlights the weaknesses of the European economic and social model. ... I support this proposal, which suggests several improvements; the reduction of administrative burdens and red tape for SMEs, measures to improve the work-life balance, the need to improve the directive on the temporary posting of workers, the need for further progress on the mutual recognition of qualifications as between the EU and third countries and closer cooperation between educational institutions and the world of business.

**TABLE 5** Distribution of speeches referring to higher education in relation to their main topic

Main topic	Number of speeches	% in relation to all speeches including HE terms
Non-HE	3,844	37.76%
Vote	3,131	30.76%
HE	1,358	13.34%
Procedure	1,122	11.02%
Budget	713	7.00%
NI	12	0.12%

Source. Authors.

Whilst the structure of our dataset does not allow for a more refined analysis with regard to how higher education is referred to in relation to other policy issues or voting and the European Parliament records are not translated, it is clear that higher education does not feature prominently as a stand-alone issue, but is most often referred to in relation to other policy issues in which the EU has regulatory competences, even when taking into account that potentially 22.2% of the speeches – all of which would be on topics other than higher education – should perhaps not be in our dataset.

Concerning our third expectation, we focused only on the 5th and 6th term for which we had clear party family affiliation for each member of the European Parliament and restructured the dataset so that the member (and not an individual speech) was the data unit. We then calculated the number of speeches that had higher education as their main topic in relation to the total number of speeches given by the said member of the European Parliament and, based on this, explored the variance in the number of higher education speeches in SPSS with a two-way ANOVA using country and party as fixed factors (Field, 2009). The results show that a statistically significant difference in the number of speeches on higher education only exists for country affiliation (only at  $p < 0.05$  level of significance), whilst the difference for party affiliation is not significant. This can suggest that the country of origin is more strongly linked to the variance in the number of speeches with higher education as their main topic, though primarily a tentative suggestion only tentatively, given the possibility that a certain number of speeches – probably less than 22.2% because this analysis concerns only the 5th and 6th term – should not be considered in this dataset.

## 5 | CONCLUSIONS

Our findings suggest that the Europe of Knowledge is indeed becoming the talk of the town in the European Parliament. The total number of speeches, either specifically devoted to higher education or mentioning it in speeches concerning other issues, increased over time, particularly during the adoption of EU action programmes in the area of higher education and related budgetary decisions. The latter connection to budgetary decisions is particularly important, given the increasing role of the European Parliament in the overall governance of the EU, especially the amount of resources devoted to cooperation and integration in higher education. That said, over the period analysed, higher education was less referred to in the speeches as a stand-alone issue than in relation to other policy areas in which the EU has strong jurisdiction. This demonstrates that higher education is exported as a policy solution to other policy domains in the European Parliament, further reinforcing similar developments in other EU institutions (in particular the European Commission). Whilst both the increasing number of references to higher education and the links between higher education and other policy domains are in line with our expectations, our analysis shows that when a member speaks about higher education this seems to be more closely linked to the country of origin than to party affiliation. This is contrary to findings about policy domains in which the EU has strong legislative competences and in which the European Parliament can make legislative proposals. It

implies that, when it comes to higher education, members use their speeches not only to influence parliamentary decisions, but also to signal their positions to domestic audiences, e.g., when explaining why they voted a certain way. A policy implication of this is that national policy-making may take place not only in the domestic policy arenas involving the usual (national level) actors, but also at the European level, including Members of the European Parliament, and policy instruments (such as cooperation programmes) that, in strictly legal terms, should only support existing initiatives by Member States. More generally, these findings attest to the increasing role of the European Parliament in higher education policy making, which has been largely overlooked in studies that analyse European higher education policy dynamics. Available databases, such as the 'Talk of Europe', offer a necessary foundation for further insight into these matters. This is particularly useful, given the limitations of the document repositories of the European Parliament when it comes to language of documents and coverage.

In this study, we used a large dataset of speeches to indicate possible patterns in the discussions on higher education in the European Parliament. As we have pointed out earlier, this comes with certain limitations. At the same time, however, we should not lose sight of the method's advantages, especially the possibility of having a macro-overview of historical trends which is difficult to obtain with other methods, yet which opens up new directions for further empirical and in-depth investigation.

In closing, taking this into account as well as the foundational analysis we provided, a number of possible avenues for further research become open. First, an in-depth analysis of the selected speeches – as soon as it becomes feasible – would help to further explore their content, e.g., the preferences and positions that members of the European Parliament put forward and how this may change over time within a party family or a particular country. Moreover, relationships between the European Parliament and other EU institutions, such as the European Commission and the Council of the EU can be analysed by examining the extent to which members of the European Parliament refer to higher education when responding to initiatives of other EU institutions compared to speaking about it without an external prompt.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>See Amaral, Neave, Musselin, and Maassen (2009), Chou and Gornitzka (2014), Corbett (2005), Huisman and de Jong (2014), Maassen and Olsen (2007), as well as several issues of the *European Journal of Education* (in particular 45/4/2010 and 47/3/2012).

<sup>2</sup>Given the size of this database and the fact that it is constantly being developed, it is not possible to verify the representativeness of the sample through traditional normalisation procedures. This is common in research using Linked Data stores. Since the final data are very sensitive to the search commands, the specifics of the search influence the data returned (Bar-Ilan, 2001).

<sup>3</sup>For example, the report of the session which took place on 20 November 2013 is available at [www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/seance\\_pleniere/compte\\_rendu/revise/2013/11-20/P7\\_CRE-REV\(2013\)11-20\\_XL.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/seance_pleniere/compte_rendu/revise/2013/11-20/P7_CRE-REV(2013)11-20_XL.pdf).

<sup>4</sup>The European Parliament does provide translations, but with a significant time delay (the latest reports that are fully translated into English are from 2007) and in a rather fragmented manner (only a few are available).

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## APPENDIX. GLOSSARY OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION TERMS QUERIED

(Note: the 'Talk of Europe' data set limits search terms to one or two words)

academia  
 academic, academics  
 bachelor, bachelor's  
 Bologna Process  
 Copenhagen process  
 COST  
 curriculum  
 diploma supplement, diploma supplements  
 ECTS  
 EHEA  
 employability  
 Erasmus  
 Erasmus Mundus  
 Erasmus+  
 European Institute (to identify European Institute of Technology)  
 European Standards (to identify European Standards and Guidelines)  
 European University  
 Framework Programme  
 graduate, graduates  
 higher education  
 Horizon 2020  
 innovation  
 knowledge (to identify knowledge-based economy)  
 learning (to identify lifelong learning issues and Lifelong Learning Programme)  
 LLP  
 master, master's  
 mobility  
 polytechnic  
 quality assurance  
 science  
 skill and skills  
 Socrates

STEM

student and students

technology

Tempus

tertiary education

training

university

VET

vocational training