

Emancipatory and Instrumental Perspectives in Erasmus+ Vocational Education and Training Mobility: An Analysis of the Programme Guide

Perspectivas Emancipadoras e Instrumentales en la Movilidad de la Formación Profesional Erasmus+: Un Análisis de la Guía del Programa

José Carlos Bronze

Centre for Research and Intervention in Education, Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, University of Porto, Rua Alfredo Allen, s/n, 4200-135, Porto, Portugal
ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1165-4563>
Email: up202103147@edu.fpce.up.pt

Carlinda Leite

Centre for Research and Intervention in Education, Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, University of Porto, Rua Alfredo Allen, s/n, 4200-135, Porto, Portugal
ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9960-2519>
Email: carlinda@fpce.up.pt

Angélica Monteiro

Centre for Research and Intervention in Education, Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, University of Porto, Rua Alfredo Allen, s/n, 4200-135, Porto, Portugal
ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1369-3462>
Email: armonteiro@fpce.up.pt

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Abstract: The progressive influence of the Erasmus+ Programme (E+) can be gauged from increased available funds and demands broadly and systematically exceeding availability. Its popularity translates directly into increased participation in its actions, including international mobility in vocational education and training (VET). To know how the Programme is conveyed to the VET sector, particularly concerning international mobility, a study of the Programme Guide was carried out to uncover elements aggregated to either emancipatory or instrumental perspectives that may impact the final beneficiaries. Regarding the methods, a document analysis of the 2014 and 2022 Erasmus+ Programme Guides was carried out, focusing on identifying the emancipatory perspective within concepts related to 'soft skills & digital literacy,' 'cooperation & active citizenship,' and 'EU citizenship & social inclusion.' The instrumental perspective was examined by looking for references related to 'market,' 'management,' and 'performativity' as drivers of the labour market's demands. The content analysis's results point to concepts associated with an emancipatory perspective gaining ground compared to those feeding the instrumental perspective. While both perspectives have grown in importance over the years, some bypass concepts emerge, bridging them and generating or emphasising hybridism. This hybridism incorporates tensions and amenities between a socioemotional orientation, resorting to social inclusion, and the strength of prescriptive demands based on the labour market's needs. Those results are worth further research through empirical studies focused on E+ enactment on VET.

Keywords: Vocational Education and Training, Erasmus+ Mobility, Emancipatory Education, Soft Skills, Labour Market.

Resumen: La influencia progresiva del Programa Erasmus+ (E+) puede calibrarse a partir del incremento de fondos disponibles y de una demanda que, de forma amplia y sistemática, excede la oferta. Su popularidad

se traduce directamente en una mayor participación en sus acciones, incluyendo la movilidad internacional en la formación profesional (FP). Para conocer cómo se vehicula el Programa en el sector de la FP, particularmente en lo concerniente a la movilidad internacional, se llevó a cabo un estudio de la Guía del Programa con el fin de desvelar elementos agregados a perspectivas emancipadoras o instrumentales que puedan impactar en los beneficiarios finales. En cuanto a la metodología, se realizó un análisis documental de las Guías del Programa Erasmus+ de 2014 y 2022, centrándose en la identificación de la perspectiva emancipadora dentro de conceptos relacionados con las 'competencias transversales y la alfabetización digital', la 'cooperación y la ciudadanía activa' y la 'ciudadanía europea e inclusión social'. La perspectiva instrumental se examinó buscando referencias vinculadas al 'mercado', la 'gestión' y la 'performatividad' como impulsores de las demandas del mercado laboral. Los resultados del análisis de contenido señalan que los conceptos asociados a una perspectiva emancipadora ganan terreno en comparación con aquellos que alimentan la perspectiva instrumental. Si bien ambas perspectivas han aumentado en importancia a lo largo de los años, emergen algunos conceptos de puente, que las conectan y generan o enfatizan el hibridismo. Este hibridismo incorpora tensiones y convergencias entre una orientación socioemocional, recurriendo a la inclusión social, y la fuerza de las demandas prescriptivas basadas en las necesidades del mercado laboral. Estos resultados merecen una investigación más profunda a través de estudios empíricos centrados en la implementación de E+ en la FP.

Palabras clave: Formación Profesional; movilidad Erasmus+; educación emancipadora; competencias transversales; mercado laboral.

1. Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the Agenda 2030 highlight the importance of education as a means of inclusion and equity, stressing that: 'No education target should be considered met unless it is met by all' (UNESCO et al., 2016, p. 30). Within the broad education umbrella, the vocational education and training (VET) sector represents a traditional milestone in the EU educational approach: 'The objective set by the Treaty [of Rome, signed in 1957] was nothing less than the development of a "common policy for vocational training" (article 128)' (Pépin, 2007, p. 122), and a target of growing attention from EU policies. This is shown by the increasing reinforcement of the European Qualifications Framework and European funding programmes, particularly Erasmus+ (E+), emphasising the sector's relevance for different targets at different levels:

Vocational Education and Training is going to play a key role in achieving results during the present decade: training of youth, retraining of adults and development of new skills for future jobs, VET is the engine that enables the transformations (de Olagüe Smithson, 2017, p. 193).

The VET sector is an education model oriented to preparing youngsters for a technical profession (initial VET) and fine-tuning and improving adults' lifelong learning skills (continuing VET), able to incorporate skills acquired within a transnational mobility context that fits the global labour market. To consider an initial VET cycle, addressed to youngsters, as a strict response to the labour market's needs without broadly considering the fundamental value of education as laying the foundation of 'character' and 'personality' may imply and bring about an instrumental vision which may raise additional concerns, namely low self-esteem, social undervaluation, discrimination or social stigma (Doroftei & Marques da Silva, 2024). The effects of such a vision may threaten an approach to education aligned with SDGs directly addressing inclusion and equity, particularly goal number 4, 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (United Nations, 2015, p. 19).

The presented scenario sets the problem of the weight of education, particularly VET, within a strictly instrumental approach, embodying a conforming position of the

subject. On the contrary, the approach may represent a questioning position of the subject within an emancipatory perspective, enabling the claim for autonomy and agency, driving active citizenship and ultimately leading to equity and social inclusion (Esteban Tortajada, Novella Cámara & Martínez Martín, 2022).

Since the European Education Area in general, and the Erasmus+ Programme in particular, shape or influence the current education policy and its accordant achievement of goals in national and transnational terms (Pépin, 2007), it is relevant to know how these two viewpoints, emancipatory and instrumental, are balanced therein (Veiga, 2021). To do so, the study presented in this article was carried out.

The analysis was strictly conducted in the ‘mobility’ dimension of the Erasmus+ Programme, Key-Action 1 (KA1), not moving further to other dimensions (‘cooperation’, ‘policy’ or other, respectively Key-Action 2, Key-Action 3 and others) since international mobility requires the direct participation of the target groups themselves, not possible without it. Therefore, Key-Action 1, whose designation, “Learning Mobility of Individuals”, focus this ‘individual centred approach’, aspires participant’s centred outcomes, namely: improved learning performance; enhanced employability and improved career prospects; increased sense of initiative and entrepreneurship; increased self-empowerment and self-esteem; improved foreign language and digital competences; enhanced intercultural awareness; more active participation in society; enhanced positive interactions with people from different backgrounds; better awareness of the European project and the EU values; increased motivation for taking part in future (formal/non-formal) education or training after the mobility period abroad (European Commission, 2022, p. 37). In the case of E+ mobility in VET, those participants are mainly students/trainees and, to a lesser extent, trainers and staff who engage in mobility processes. Such direct involvement represents a deeper level of engagement, facilitating the expected effects on participants over time, more directly reflecting the possibilities of *policy enactment* (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012) extended to this set of relevant actors in VET: students/trainees and their families, teachers/trainers, other educational staff and, ultimately, reflecting on VET institutions themselves.

This study highlights the weight of both perspectives, emancipatory and instrumental, faced by the promoters of E+ international mobility projects in the VET sector while designing and implementing their projects, or, rephrasing it following Ball et al.’s (2012) concept, when ‘enacting’ the E+ Programme as a policy guide, setting the basis for additional and empirical studies on this ‘policy enactment’ at VET schools - a particular focus on the ‘context of practice’ (Ball, 1994).

1.1. *The Emancipatory Perspective*

This study proposes to oppose a normative and conforming position of education policy enactment with a questioning position derived from “learning to be” and “learning to live together” (Meza Cortes & Gajardo Espinoza, 2024) that enables self-determination and leads to emancipation. Humanistic-oriented concepts within both these individual and social dimensions emerge to set such a possibility. Accordingly, *soft skills and digital literacy, cooperation and active citizenship, and EU citizenship and social inclusion* were selected. This approach led to ascertaining which devices facilitate a humanistic-driven policy enactment within E+ VET international mobility settings.

When researching VET policies’ history in the European Union, de Olagüe-Smithson

elicits a clear connection between VET, technical skills, soft skills, and digital literacy enshrined in the Europe 2020 Strategy (2011–2020):

Education focuses on key competences that include “traditional” skills such as communication in one’s mother tongue, foreign languages, digital skills, literacy, and basic skills in maths and science, as well as horizontal skills such as learning to learn, social and civic responsibility, initiative and entrepreneurship, cultural awareness, and creativity (2017, p. 193).

Such an endorsement fits our conceptualisation of some emancipatory drivers, such as *soft skills*. To propose a strict definition for soft skills risks narrowing the subject (Cimatti, 2016; Matteson, Anderson & Boyden, 2016) while considering their scope under the domains of intrapersonal (self and knowledge), interpersonal (social interaction), and emotional competence seems relatively consensual (Cimatti, 2016; Escolà-Gascón & Gallifa, 2022; Matteson et al., 2016). Such dimensions may then be unfolded into underlying interconnected concepts such as *skills*, *dispositions*, *attitudes*, *beliefs*, and *values* (Matteson et al., 2016). Accordingly, they may be described as:

The ability to understand, manage, and express the social and emotional aspects of one’s life in ways that enable the successful management of life tasks such as learning, forming relationships, solving everyday problems, and adapting to the complex demands of growth and development (Elias et al., 1997, p. 2).

Soft skills and their intrinsic character directing to ‘competencies’ risk, for such a reason, an instrumentalisation towards labour market demands, potentially limiting students’ ability to develop the adaptable, critical thinking skills needed for long-term career growth. Recent reports (World Economic Forum, 2025) point out the increasing relevance of soft skills from the employers’ point of view, concerning the requirements they consider relevant for employees. However, our approach takes soft skills as transversal to the individual’s personal, social, and emotional traits and, therefore, simultaneously preceding and going beyond a perspective purely fitting the labour market’s demands.

Being imbued by the emotional dimension, soft skills are required and necessarily activated in social relationships. In the school context and education pathways, soft skills represent a relevant leverage for social inclusion (Leite, 2002; Leite & Sampaio, 2020; Lopez-Cassa, Perez-Escoda & Alegre, 2018). Although permeated by the labour market’s concerns, VET pathways are no exception to such an effect of soft skills, which development or enhancement may also be sought in relation to engaging in E+ mobility (Bronze, Leite & Monteiro, 2025). In its relationship with the E+ Programme, soft skills thus leverage the ability to relate to and understand others.

Notwithstanding and moving beyond the soft skills dimension, the perspective mentioned above by de Olagüe Smithson (2017) points out additional cross-cutting dimensions in the history of VET, particularly *digital literacy*. In the current digitally driven society, the placing of new forms of exclusion, such as digital exclusion, caught our attention as we questioned the extent to which our emancipatory perspective entails such a dimension.

According to Ahmad et al. (2025), “digital literacy goes beyond essential technological use, encompassing critical skills like information processing, digital communication, and media literacy” (p. 79). Embracing Castellanos Sánchez, Sánchez Romero and

Calderero Hernández (2017) approach of assuming it as an *individual right* (p. 2), digital literacy might be defined as ‘a set of technical-processual, cognitive, and socioemotional skills needed to live, learn, and work in a digital society’ (Gutiérrez Ángel et al., 2022, p. 1). Pointing to social inclusion, this approach emerges as a definitive link between *soft skills and digital literacy* and, consequently, to its relevance within education systems: “The digitisation of educational systems constitutes one of the main challenges confronting nation-states within the educational domain.”¹ (Espejo, Lázaro Herrero & Álvarez López, 2023, p. 46).

Moving to the concepts of *cooperation and active citizenship*, they were looked upon in a combined way to consider the social and the individual dimensions of proactivity as contributing to greater perception, knowledge, and respect for the ‘other’. Active citizenship is the possibility to act freely and be driven by critical thinking (Piedade et al., 2020) toward participation in society, pursuing civic or political engagement aims, or both (Golubeva, Gómez Parra & Espejo Mohedano, 2018). These two spheres, activism for civic causes (social, environmental, human rights, or other) and political activism (joining political parties, trade unions, participating in demonstrations, advocating political ideas or ideologies, or others), present interconnections and are shaped into different possible combinations, allowing distinct views (Macedo, Santos & Araújo, 2018; Ribeiro, Neves & Menezes, 2017). This perspective enforces the connection between cooperation, active citizenship, and the previous approach to soft skills and digital inclusion, feeding the emancipatory field. Vocational training programs may emphasise technical skills, but, since being part of national education systems (initial VET), also include such dimensions, fostering a holistic approach to education and social participation. These directly lead to *EU citizenship* as a specific civic settlement of individual and social values, premises, and possibilities for participation and, ultimately, we argue, leveraging social inclusion.

Social inclusion has been considered a compromise in recognising and respecting the ‘difference’ on others (Magalhães & Stoer, 2005; Stoer, Magalhães & Rodrigues, 2004). Such a commitment takes ‘difference’ not as an inhibiting factor but as a factor contributing to human dignity. In other words, as Habermas (2012) points out, human dignity, as inherent to the human being, cannot constitute an exclusion criterion driven by moral codes, shared social class ethos, or other factors. On the contrary, individuals must recognise and respect it as incorporating socially added value, thus constituting a unifying element for social cohesion. In this meaning, the state of ‘equality’ is driven by two conditions: (i) every individual has equal human rights, and (ii) all other individuals recognise such conditions. Those conditions lie in the scope of democracy, which, as the author stresses, is equiprimordial to human rights, each needing the other, expanding from active citizenship and able to nurture from educational settings.

From this standpoint, this study adds the premise of including economic equality as a required principle within a work-based society. As Zajda (2020) points out (with a specific case focus on the effects of globalisation in higher education), the risk of ‘distinction, privilege, excellence and exclusivity’ (p. 290) endangers equity-driven reforms, expectedly leading to equality and economic opportunity. Other studies bring this idea into the specific sphere of the EU approach to education (Mikelatou & Arvanitis, 2018), questioning the position of the individual subject within a more extensive scope of market-led institutional practices. This might be particularly sensitive

1. Translated by the Authors.

when applied to the VET domain due to its character being relatively permeable to the instrumentalisation of knowledge, a purely market-driven orientation of education, which particularly affects underprivileged groups (Lörz, Netz & Quast, 2016) who are highly vulnerable to a 'meritocratic' rewarding system (Piketty, 2014). Considering the contextual position of VET – and of international VET mobility – within local, regional, and global changes in the labour market, such risks point to a particularly fragile position of such groups, at risk of failing to achieve possibilities of social mobility (Avis, 2018). In line with such concerns, Sampaio and Leite (2018) linked social inclusion to *equity* and *democracy*, two dimensions formally affiliated with the concept of *European citizenship*. This latter must then be considered not only through its legal meaning, establishing the conditions, *lato sensu*, for the exercise of rights and the practice of duties within the geographic scope of the EU, but also through a political meaning(s) (Cruz Rodríguez & Diestro Fernández, 2024) expanding it and subjectively shaping everyday social living, within and beyond that specific geographic scope. The two spheres, legal and political, are combined when the moral and ethical dimensions are embodied in legally binding texts. In the case of the EU citizenship, such a combination is provided by Article 2, Title I, of the Treaty on European Union:

The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail (European Union, 2016, p. 17).

In this study, the concept of European citizenship was considered concerning this broad set of dimensions that shape it at both these intertwined levels, the formal and the moral.

1.2. The instrumental Perspective

The self-determining position facilitated by the emancipatory perspective described above may be endangered by a normative and conforming position of policy enactment, enabled by an instrumental perspective of E+ international mobility in VET, further researched in this study.

Aligned with Ball's (2008) perspectives, the study considered the *policy technologies* of 'market', 'management', and 'performativity' as devices of prescription that (re) shape actions and results within education settings. This character is defined by the continuous and renovative effect experienced within systems under its submission: 'Policy technologies involve the calculated deployment of forms of organisation and procedures, and disciplines or bodies of knowledge, to organise human forces and capabilities into functioning systems' (Ball, 2008, p. 41). Ball refers to some inner characteristics of the policy technologies, further resumed to clarify the conceptual and problematic body shaping this study and concerns. 'Market' is shaped by *survivalism*, leading to *self-interest*, an environment of *competition* aiming to attract and retain the *consumer*, ensuring proper allocation of *profit*, that is, creating a 'commercial civilization' (Ball, 2008, p. 45). In addition, it is characterised by its inner totalitarian tendency to self-regulate the conditions for its establishment. If and when the market does not respond appropriately, the variables in place must and will adjust accordingly since 'there is no one to blame for failure but failures themselves [...] faults must lie in the culture, the family, or the individual'

(Ball, 2006, p. 37). This idea subscribes to a ‘meritocratic’ view (Young, 1961) over the individual that reduces or exempts political, social and other conjunctural conditions as factors shaping education pathways and social mobility (Piketty, 2014).

Following Ball’s perspective, ‘management’ (and ‘performativity’) emphasise the ‘enterprise culture’ (2008, p. 59). Management implies a reform of the traditional systems of control and their replacement by user-centred systems based on elements of self-success, such as ‘entrepreneurial capacity’ and the ‘flexibility’ to adapt to changes and reach ‘high quality’ or even ‘excellent’ results. In the logic of human resources management, the first variable in place is the individual and his/her capacity to move from a ‘professional-ethical regime’ to an ‘entrepreneurial-competitive regime’ (p. 58). In this sense, *flexibility* ensures quick shifts according to the market’s fluctuating character and permanently emerging needs.

Table 1: Resume of the Emancipatory and Instrumental Drivers Selected in this Study.

EMANCIPATORY Determinants Selected	INSTRUMENTAL Determinants Selected (policy technologies (Ball, 2008))
<i>SOFT SKILLS</i> , in particular the socioemotional dimension related to attitudes, beliefs and values (Matteson et al., 2016) influencing individual character and social relations and DIGITAL LITERACY extended beyond basic technology use, encompassing the critical technical, cognitive, and socioemotional skills essential for individuals to effectively live, learn, and work in a digital society, recognized as an individual right (Castellanos Sánchez et al., 2017).	MARKET as a policy technology driven by survivalism and self-interest fostering a competitive “commercial civilization” that self-regulates and attributes failure solely to individual shortcomings, promoting a meritocratic view disregarding broader societal influences on education and social mobility.
COOPERATION and ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP as intertwined concepts where individual and social proactivity foster increased understanding and respect for others, enabling individuals to freely engage in society through critical thinking and pursue civic and political involvement	MANAGEMENT as a policy technology that shifts from traditional control systems to user-centered models prioritizing individual “entrepreneurial capacity” and “flexibility” to achieve “high quality” results, transitioning individuals from a “professional-ethical” to an “entrepreneurial-competitive” regime.
EU CITIZENSHIP as a specific civic settlement of individual and social values, premises, and possibilities for participation formally described in legal texts (European Union, 2016) and SOCIAL INCLUSION as a commitment to recognizing and respecting the inherent ‘difference’ in others (Magalhães & Stoer, 2005; Stoer et al., 2004) and a contribution to human dignity, ensuring that no individual is excluded based on moral codes, social class, or other factors (Habermas, 2012)	PERFORMATIVITY as a policy technology regulating and interpreting performance through judgment, evaluation, comparison, and visibility, fundamentally reshaping professional identities, especially within education systems, by demanding continuous self-re-enactment to achieve “high-quality” or “excellent”, efficiency-driven outcomes.

‘Performativity’, in its turn, is a device of performance interpretation and, inherently, of performance regulation, that is, ‘the management of performance’ (Ball, 2003, p. 222). It is oriented by mechanisms such as evaluation standards, judgments, comparison, and, lastly, visibility. Its action can operate such significant changes in systems (including, but not limited to, the education system) that it works as a *normative force* (Locke, 2015), a reconstruction force affecting the deep level of (professional) identities. Most particularly, within education systems, the identity of teachers is necessarily impacted, affecting students (Bravo Cuevas & Prats Gil, 2021) and reflecting on the system as a whole. If and when the performance is insufficient (to reach the ‘high-quality’ level of rankings, ‘evaluation standards’, or predefined goals), the performer needs to give up and redo or rebuild his/her enactment. The notion of ‘performativity’ is rescued from Lyotard’s (1979) theory, being addressed

here in particular, as Locke (2015) points out, as a 'quest for efficiency: the very best input/output equation' (p. 248). This *input/output* adjustment relationship also requires high *flexibility*, a concept to which we shall return.

These dimensions can reflect how these policy technologies can influence or even determine educational policy enactment (Ball et al., 2012) by individuals and institutions. Following the conceptual framework described above and summarised in Table 1, this study aims to ascertain the relevant level of emancipatory dimensions based on soft skills, such as autonomy and self-empowerment, and on social inclusion, among others, by eliciting the concepts used in the Erasmus+ Programme Guide able to feed such dimensions. In addition, it aims to establish whether a counterpart scenario based on an instrumental approach to VET may endanger it. In this case, Ball's (2008) approach to the *policy technologies* of 'market', 'management', and 'performativity' was followed. These *policy technologies* set an instrumental approach that justifies questioning their penetration level in broader education tools and policies. This process showed the tendency of both dimensions over time, enabling comparisons.

2. Methodology

The method followed in the study was document analysis (Bowen, 2009; Denscombe, 2014) using the content analysis procedure (Krippendorff, 2004). It applied previously defined categories arising from the theoretical framework followed. The analysed documents were the E+ Programme Guides, the latest original versions available in English for 2014 (European Commission, 2014) and 2022 (European Commission, 2022). Given the different nature of the two sets of concepts under analysis and, as it was argued, of their corresponding effects, conforming or questioning, how indicators of these concepts and perspectives were presented in the two documents was sought, that is, how they emerged to the 'enactors' of the E+ Programme. The reasons for choosing these two versions of the Programme Guide lay in the fact that they both correspond to initial versions of the Programme for the respective funding periods of implementation, 2014–2020 and 2021–2027.

The analysis has been conducted using the full extent of 'Part A – General information about the Erasmus+ Programme' and only a partial extent of 'Part B – Information about the actions covered by this guide'. Since 'Part B' covers all the programme's actions, as well as all education and training sectors and also additional dimensions (such as youth and sports), only the part dedicated to the programme's Key-Action1 (KA1) – International Mobility – and exclusively covering the VET sector, has been analysed.

The deductive approach used the concepts previously attributed to the emancipatory and instrumental perspectives for analysis, aiming to identify their prevalence and the nature of their presence in the programme. The emancipatory perspective was searched for in concepts related to 'soft skills and digital literacy', 'cooperation and active citizenship', and 'EU citizenship and social inclusion'. The instrumental perspective was searched for in references conforming to the *policy technologies* that Ball (2008) enunciated, 'market', 'management', and 'performativity' as neoliberal tone drivers of education based on the labour market's demands. Looking for a clearer perception and potential additional insights over the possible effects of findings in the programme's enactment, results were distributed according to three angles: the 'subjects/actors' positions', the 'use/application's devices', and the 'values/principles'. This follows some of the viewpoints used by Ball (2003), except in the case where the author used

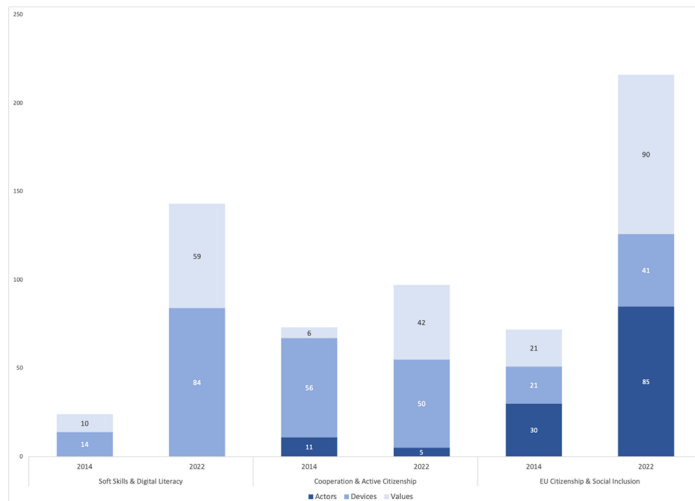
‘discipline’, where we opted for using ‘devices’, considering it more responsive to our study and aligned with the nature of the data extracted from policy guidelines. The references attributed to each category were identified with the support of the software NVivo release 1.7.1. The comparison was made through a quantitative display of references by perspective and year, and the identification of main qualitative changes in the concepts used or in their nature.

3. Results

The findings are presented in Figures 1, 2, and 3, respectively addressing the emancipatory, the instrumental, and the comparison between these two perspectives. This presentation aims to clarify how sparse, moderate, or frequent their occurrence is in the analysed documents.

As shown in Figure 1, a significant change occurred concerning ‘soft skills and digital literacy’ from 2014 to 2022 in ‘devices’ and ‘values’. ‘Devices’ increase as an exclusive consequence of ‘digital literacy’ related to concepts such as ‘online learning’, ‘remote working’, ‘virtual classrooms’, ‘digital traineeships’, ‘digital platforms and tools’, or ‘digital technologies’, and other similar concepts. Concerning ‘values’, the significant increase is also caused by an additional factor: while in 2014, the few references found are exclusively related to the soft skills mindset (‘intercultural awareness’, ‘personal development’, ‘sense of initiative’, ‘self-empowerment’, and ‘self-esteem’), in 2022 the digital dimension emerges within it (with a total of 18 references to ‘digital skills’). Nevertheless, ‘soft skills’ remain prevailing (with 41 references) and are now expressed in a rather extensive and diversified list. This includes references in 2014, now being added to by many others, such as ‘creativity’, ‘motivation’, ‘talent development’, ‘social competencies’, ‘leadership’, ‘sense of initiative’, ‘commitment’, ‘participatory skills’, and ‘green skills’, among others.

Figure 1: Emancipatory Perspective Drivers in 2014 and 2022.



Concerning ‘Cooperation and active citizenship’, there is a minor change in the ‘actors’ standpoint. In 2014, all 11 references were to ‘volunteers’ but decreased to

only four in 2022, while one reference to ‘communities of practice’ emerged. In line with this, the ‘devices’ standpoint slightly decreases. In this case, while references to ‘cooperation’ and ‘networks’ increase (respectively from 24 to 30 and from 12 to 16), references to ‘volunteering schemes’ decrease (from five to two). The significant change in ‘cooperation and active citizenship’ occurs with a notable increase within the ‘values’ standpoint. In this case, few references to ‘active citizenship’, ‘free moving’, and ‘social cohesion’ (6 overall) were identified in 2014. However, in 2022, 42 references to the same concepts were registered. In this case, ‘active citizenship’ is at the top of the list, being stated 35 times, followed by a minor increase in references to ‘social cohesion’, while ‘free moving’ remained the same. Two emerging concepts were identified in 2022 from the ‘values’ standpoint: ‘peace’ and ‘shared values’ (with one reference each).

Some notable changes were identified in the category ‘EU citizenship and social inclusion’. The ‘actors’ standpoint shifted from a generalist tendency, based on expressions such as ‘people with disadvantaged backgrounds’ or ‘the disadvantaged’ in 2014, to a higher specification tendency in 2022, moving from 30 to 85 references. In this latter case, the list of concepts is far too extensive for an exhaustive description. Still, some examples may be given: ‘people with fewer opportunities’, ‘economically disadvantaged’, ‘sign language users’, ‘orphans’, ‘homeless’, ‘learners of all ages’, ‘(former) offenders’, ‘people suffering from discrimination’, and ‘people facing discrimination based on sexual orientation’, among many others. This higher level of specification suggests an intention to convey each possible category motivating discrimination. While risking leaving someone behind, this strategy denotes increased sensitisation and awareness to previously hidden forms of discrimination, namely, ageism, gender-based discrimination, and intersectional discrimination, increasing social and political visibility. The strategy impacts and strengthens the emancipatory perspective by facilitating the empowering conditions of previously hidden, omitted, forgotten, or even avoided groups.

Concerning the ‘devices’ standpoint within ‘EU citizenship and social inclusion’, the quantitative shift changes from 21 to 41 references. The reason behind this change is mainly conveyed by a notable increase in the use of ‘democracy’, moving from one to 18 references. In parallel, a slight increase is registered in the use of concepts related to ‘EU awareness/EU sense of belonging’, ‘equal opportunities’, and ‘intercultural-based’ ‘devices’. In qualitative terms, in 2022, more comprehensive dimensions emerge with the reinforcement of references to ‘equal opportunities for all’ and the emergence of references such as ‘fighting social marginalisation’, ‘development of skills for all’, ‘non-discrimination of people’ or the ‘rule of law’. Differently to the previous case of the ‘actors’ (and the following case of ‘values’), registering a higher specification, in the case of those ‘devices’, the higher generalisation may also suggest a higher possibility for social inclusion since they point to a transversal *responsibility of all* – which includes ‘individuals’ but also ‘institutions’.

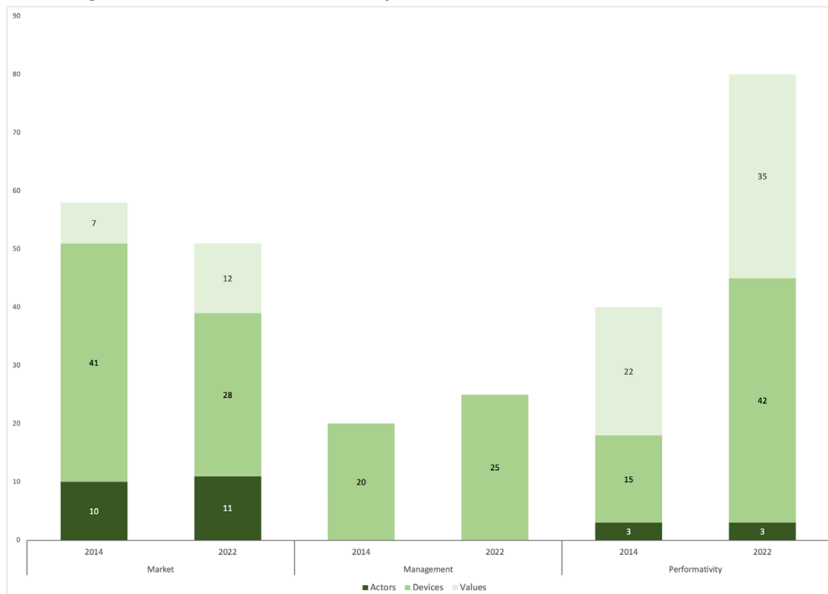
The ‘values’ standpoint in ‘EU citizenship and social inclusion’ registered the second most significant change in the emancipatory perspective, moving from 21 references in 2014 to 90 in 2022. Such a change is exclusively given by the concept of ‘inclusion’ and affiliated enunciations such as ‘social inclusion’, ‘cultural inclusion’, or ‘inclusiveness’. It also denotes a qualitative change, with ‘diversity’ now added. Overall, the construct of ‘inclusion and diversity’ was represented 85 times in 2022, against the less frequent use of these terms as separate concepts in 2014 (‘inclusion’ was used 10 times and ‘diversity’ was used 6 times). The expression ‘inclusion and diversity’ emerged in 2021 as one

out of four priorities of E+ for the period 2021–2027, alongside ‘digital transformation’, ‘environment and fight against climate change’, and ‘participation in democratic life’. Naturally, this contextual change in the programme’s priorities impacted the difference in references in the two time-based guides. Since the four priorities convey scenarios aligned with the emancipatory perspective, the new weight of references found within it increases value. As mentioned above, this brings additional emerging references, such as ‘social cohesion’, ‘peace’, and ‘shared values’, or an emphasis on ‘networking’. Within this scenario, we found it curious to observe an attenuation of the ‘volunteering’ dimension, worth additional effort and studies to explain.

In sum, in the emancipatory perspective, ‘devices’ are mainly impacted over time through additional references to ‘cooperation’, ‘partnership’, and ‘democracy’ and by an emerging but quantitatively noteworthy reference to ‘digital tools’. In its turn, the ‘values’ standpoint is mainly impacted by four reasons: (i) additional references to ‘inclusion’ combined with ‘diversity’; (ii) reinforcement to ‘active citizenship’ references; (iii) a notable emerging reference to ‘digital skills’; and, finally, (iv) a growing set of discriminated ‘soft skills’. The significant differences in ‘actors’ align with this tendency to diversify their enunciation, covering additional possibilities not previously foreseen and reinforcing their quantitative presence.

Regarding the instrumental perspective, a general increase in the number of references over time was identified, as shown in Figure 2, although not as notable as the one found in the emancipatory drivers. This tendency is provided through concepts feeding the categories ‘management’ and, most notably, ‘performativity’ since references to ‘market’ show a slight decrease. Concerning the standing points of these *policy technologies*, the increasing number occurs most notably in ‘devices’ and ‘values’, while references to ‘actors’ remain almost the same.

Figure 2: Instrumental Perspective Drivers in 2014 and 2022.



Concerning the analysis of the 'market', the primary references feeding it are related to 'enterprises', 'companies', and 'employers' as subjects or actors. In contrast, the primary devices of application are the 'labour market', 'employment', 'jobs' and 'entrepreneurship'. Although decreasing slightly over time, references to the 'labour market' are the quantitatively most significant in both years. This concept is widely entrenched in an instrumental approach to education, as suggested above. It is imbued with the symbolic charge of the policy technology 'market', in the neoliberal sense pointed out by Ball (2008), of a self-regulated market in which the value of labour turns into a commodity. In this sense, 'labour' is subject to the laws of the 'market' rather than to the possibilities of an empowered, active, and emancipatory citizenship, to which the concept of the 'world of work', as we argue, would better express. Following such an argument, this latter concept, as other referred to in this analysis, can fluctuate between the emancipatory and the instrumental education perspectives at a certain point. Such fluctuating concepts act as a *bypass*, creating permeability zones between both perspectives.

Concerning the 'values' of the 'market', we can observe that in 2014, references to 'economy' were focused on 'economic growth' and 'competitiveness', while in 2022, they were preceded by the adjective 'sustainable'. This suggests a different approach to 'values', moving from a purely economic drive towards a sustainable one. In this sense, it somehow detaches, although not entirely, from the instrumental and becomes closer to the emancipatory perspective. For this reason, 'sustainable growth' and 'sustainable economy' represent additional *bypass concepts* identified within the 'market' *policy technology*.

Concerning the 'management' *policy technology*, references have been found only from the 'devices' standpoint in both years. The main quantitative result is provided by the 'career guidance', 'career prospects', or 'career development' – references showing an increased frequency over time. A change was identified concerning the expression 'human capital', used in 2014 but not in 2022. Combined with the analysis of the emancipatory references, this suggests a move away from the influence of the 'theory of the human capital' (Becker, 1975) and a shift in the approach to education, seen, as Klees (2016) points out, 'as an end in itself rather than merely a means for achieving other ends' (p. 660). Klees reflected on alternative thinking to the human capital theory, bridging its 'neoliberal market fundamentalist regime' with human rights, human capabilities, and human agency – dimensions aligned with our proposal of the emancipatory perspective.

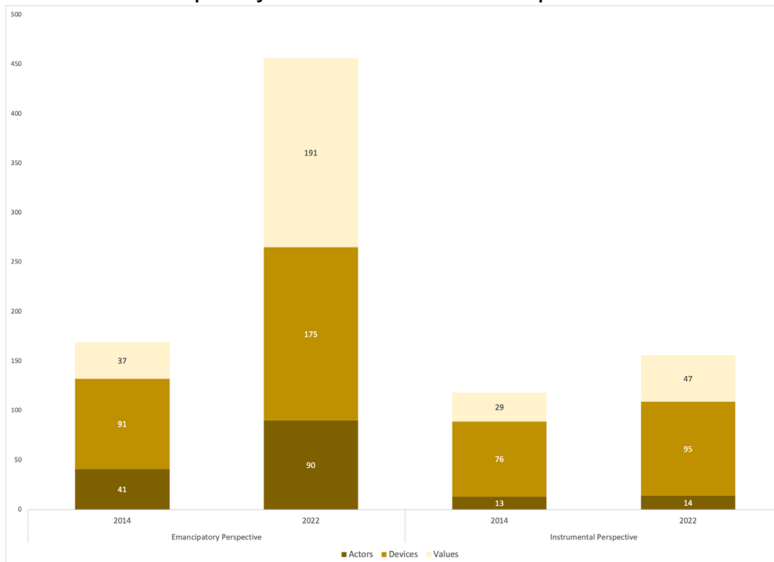
Within the 'devices' standpoint of the 'management' category, 'flexible learning' was equally presented in 2014 and 2022 as a *bypass concept*. We argue that 'flexibility', beyond the instrumental dimensions previously pointed out in the analysis, also relates to socioemotional dimensions, for instance, when enabling associations with soft skills (inside but also outside the world of work), namely with 'interculturality' or 'creativity'.

References feeding 'performativity' registered the highest increase of the three *policy technologies*, suggesting that this is currently the most potent *policy technology* shaping the instrumental perspective within the E+ Programme guidelines. Those are references to 'best' or 'excellent students' from the 'actors' standpoint; to 'innovative policies', 'quality standards', 'recognition awards', 'prizes', 'labels', and 'visibility', in the 'devices' standpoint; and to 'modernisation', 'innovation', 'high-quality' or 'excellence', in the 'values' standpoint. The highest increase is due to references to 'innovation' and 'excellence', while new concepts emerge in 2022, such as 'key performance indicators' or 'merit'. In the case of 'performativity', the *bypass concepts* found, bridging both perspectives under analysis, are 'flexible performance' (2014) and 'innovative cooperation' (2022). Comparing both

perspectives under analysis, the references related to emancipation were more frequent, as shown in Figure 3.

Beyond the simple addition in the number of references found in 2022, a significant factor reflecting this shift is the *nature* of such references, moving from a *generic* to a *diversified* tendency. Using a disaggregated approach, the new forms of enouncing are mainly reflected in the ‘actors’, where different people and groups are named, and in the ‘values’, where specific mindsets related to soft skills and digital literacy are named. This results in a growing presence of soft skills and digital literacy. Placed within the emancipatory perspective, as we propose, such an expansion reinforces the argument, supported by Graphic 3, that the instrumental perspective loses ground, seeming comparatively more contaminated by the emancipatory than the other way around. However, such an enunciation requires caution. ‘Devices’ and ‘values’ of the instrumental system, while constraining the actor and shaping ‘enactment’, are quite powerful, as Ball (2008) demonstrated. On the contrary, while operating at a questioning level, the emancipatory drivers are more permeable, able to raise doubts and even lead to possible unanswered demands or even to institutional inaction (Mikelatou & Arvanitis, 2018). In such a case, the increased quantitative strength of variables may not operate proportionally in qualitative terms.

Figure 3: The Emancipatory and Instrumental Perspectives in 2014 and 2022.



Therefore, the entrapment of emancipatory concepts, including *bypass concepts*, from the instrumental perspective seems to be a potential, quite substantial risk. Returning to ‘flexibility’, it might be helpful to convey this idea better. ‘Flexibility’ refers to a *disposition* to mitigate attrition in response to emerging situations or needs. In this sense, it tends to be considered a relevant soft skill that enables adaptation and positive change, also applicable to employers’ requirements for employees’ soft skills (Matteson et al., 2016; Robles, 2012). However, as Sennett (1998) highlights, since ‘flexibility’ operates in the short term, being shaped by frequent changes, it facilitates the erosion of the subject’s character. The author sustains that ‘character’ is based on the relationship with others,

relying on notions such as trust and confidence and, in this sense, anchored in the long term and on stability, both required for solid relationships. As we argue, this example is hybrid, a *bypass concept* allowing both perspectives to function. It relies on the emancipatory, socioemotional domain of soft skills; however, it is fully operational within the instrumental perspective, for example, when setting up the conditions and adjustments required to feed the labour market's needs. Possibly more than other concepts capable of such hybridism ('motivation', 'leadership', 'creativity', 'problem-solving', and others), it seems clear how 'flexibility' plays on both sides of this board. The concept of 'flexible capitalism', addressed by Sennett, fairly expresses how 'flexibility', regardless of its socioemotional potential, permeates the instrumental perspective.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis of the concepts driving an emancipatory or an instrumental approach to E+ VET mobility used in the E+ guides of 2014 and 2022 identified a quantitative increase in references in both perspectives, reflecting broader and progressive EU efforts to integrate VET within a common European education and labour market agendas (Zaunstöck et al., 2021). However, the concepts linked to an emancipatory perspective registered the highest growth by far. Concerning the nature of the concepts, it is also within the emancipatory perspective that the most significant changes occurred, while the instrumental one maintains similar references and approaches over time.

The most relevant changes are related to the emerging character of digital literacy, sustainability, and the strengthening of concerns with democracy, three dimensions relying on the new priorities of the E+ Programme for 2021–2027. Results showed that the 'sustainable' character of 'economic concerns' is growing in importance, facilitating the emancipatory possibility of 'economic opportunity'. Following Zajda's (2020) theory, this is also one condition for inclusion and democracy. 'Democracy' is reinforced over time in the Programme Guide, not only through an increasing quantitative emphasis on the concept, but also through affiliated concepts contributing to it, such as 'equal opportunities' and 'intercultural understanding', among others. The importance of this dimension is emphasised by the increasing risks faced by democracy, of which the VET sector, while combining the emancipatory and the instrumental dimensions, as we argued, should be particularly aware: 'While demands for more democratic, inclusive and tolerant are voiced, which should be reflected in TVET and corporate governance, the world is also witnessing trends in the opposite direction.' (UNESCO, 2021, p. 5). In line with such concerns, the E+ Programme reveals a strengthening of 'inclusion and diversity' over time, also reflected in the enlarged and detailed approach in listing the 'actors' who risk becoming targets of discrimination. This situation is aligned with the theoretical framework relating democracy to equality and human rights as equiprimordial dimensions, as argued by Habermas (2012). The level to which the concepts addressing 'inclusion and diversity' unfold is evidence of a change from a generalist approach in 2014 to a detailed and specific approach in 2022. These changes suggest an attempt to address more and new targets, leaving no one behind. Such a concern is associated with broader international priorities in VET (UNESCO et al., 2016), as is the case of one of the UN strategic priorities for the sector in 2022–2029: 'Skills for inclusive and resilient societies' (UNESCO, 2021). It is also related to the SDGs, particularly goal number 4, addressing an inclusive education perspective (United Nations, 2015). In E+, the 'inclusion'

dimension is further enhanced in 2022, reflecting a change introduced in 2019 in the Programme Guide, since including an assessment criterion to be considered by the project's promoters and by the evaluators of E+ applications: 'the project proposal is relevant for (...) supporting participants with fewer opportunities' (European Commission, 2022, p. 91). Therefore, the programme's political 'enactment' is expected to adjust accordingly, in this case in favour of the emancipatory perspective.

Caution is nevertheless advised in such a conclusion for two main reasons. On the one hand, the potential power of policy technologies as (re)configurators of action and identities, alongside the verified exponential growth of 'performativity' within the instrumental perspective, demands particular attention (e.g. Veiga, (2021) calls attention to the instrumental concepts' power on reshaping 'cooperation'). This is especially relevant given how market-driven VET models may lead to employer-driven curricula prioritising 'just-in-time skills' over broad-based and citizenship-based competencies (Gekara & Snell, 2018). 'Performativity' grew mainly based on its 'devices' – framed on notions such as 'innovation', 'modernisation', or 'excellence', but also on 'quality standards' and 'visibility' which, as Ball (2008) recalls, are dimensions that very strongly shape the subject's 'enactment'. On the other hand, the existence of bypass concepts, acting as bridges that facilitate fluidity between both perspectives and encourage hybridism, softens the prevailing perspective. Enactment risks entrapment by the stronger of the two within a given standpoint. In sum, this idea of a *bypass concept*, a simple analogy to a clinical bypass, refers to a device interconnecting the emancipatory and instrumental perspectives of education, generating hybridism. Its effects may support or dilute each perspective, or both, potentially leaning towards the one mostly determined by *enactment*. Following the example given, *flexibility* can mean both a dimension of openness to others, diversity and tolerance (Wolgast et al., 2024) as a dimension of the employee's behaviour (Al-Sa'di et al., 2023; Kumar et al., 2022) conforming to the labour market's demands. This poses additional challenges, namely uncovering the practical dimensions and formats of the E+ Programme's enactment within VET institutions, as particular targets of hybridism since concomitantly addressing education and labour concerns.

In conclusion, the comparison between the two versions of the E+ guide, 2014 and 2022, shows an attenuation of an instrumental perspective over time in VET mobility, originating not from a drop-off process of such an approach, which keeps increasing, but mainly from an emphasis on an emancipatory dimension. While concerns with the 'labour market' and 'quality and excellence' are maintained, additional dimensions of a humanistic nature are emphatically growing or are being introduced. This evidence suggests that, compared to 2014, in 2022, the 'enactment' of the E+ Programme is more likely to convey humanistic dimensions. The 'enactors' of this 'policy' may easily follow empowering pathways, supported by appropriate devices and embedded by accordant values, while we should stress, still maintaining instrumental aims. In this sense, this comparison procedure seems to show a somewhat hybrid system, where the 'purpose' of education is still defined as instrumental to the labour market but progressively demanding inputs (such as the new priorities of E+) and potentiating outcomes of a humanistic nature, in this sense more compliant with an emancipatory perspective of education. In conclusion, an emancipatory approach is progressively gaining ground in E+ VET mobility. However, given the references to an instrumental approach still in place, their potential strength and the ambiguity of some bypass concepts generate a somewhat hybrid context driving policy 'enactment'.

While bringing relevant knowledge about the E+ Programme mobility in VET and providing clues for understanding it further, this study does not unveil how the programme's

actors understand and enact it. Additionally, further studies extended to the Erasmus+ Programme Key Actions 2 and 3 (respectively, cooperation between institutions and support for policy development) should provide insights on 'policy enactment' and on 'enactors' possibilities to feed back the Programme, in line with the policy cycle, namely concerning the *contexts of practice, of influence, and of policy text production* (Ball, 1994; Bowe, Ball & Gold, 1992). Such limitations lay the ground for further research through empirical studies with VET institutions and actors involved in the E+ Programme, aiming to uncover how both perspectives and found hybridism shape their 'enactments' and how those feed back into the Programme's evolution over time.

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