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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Policy entrepreneurs and problem definition: the case of European student mobility

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Abstract

In the literature on the role of agency in the policy process, relatively little attention has been devoted to how agents define policy problems. This article helps to address this gap by asking when and how policy entrepreneurs are successful in defining problems. The article rests on a framework that shows how policy entrepreneurs holding specific ideas and given a propitious socioeconomic context are able to define problems, translate those problems into new frames, and draw on those frames, while using their personal skills and political and institutional resources, to help build supportive coalitions in favor of policy change. Illustrated by a puzzling case in the field of European mobility policy, the article offers a new perspective on the role of ideas at the problem definition stage of the policy process, while providing a richer understanding of the policy entrepreneur as a driver of policy change.

Keywords: European education policy; ideas; policy entrepreneur; problem definition; problem frame; student mobility

Introduction

The role of policy entrepreneurs as strategic and transformative agents of policy change has been widely recognized and discussed (Mintrom and Norman 2009; Ackrill and Kay 2011; Béland and Howlett 2016; Cairney and Jones 2016; Bakir and Jarvis 2017; Mintrom and Luetjens 2017). Policy entrepreneurs can trigger policy change by virtue of the skills they possess and the resources to which they have access (Kingdon 1984). They are also carriers of ideas (Swinkels 2020). Policy entrepreneurs can advance their goals through actions such as interpretation, communication, assembling new evidence, networking, and leading by example (Mintrom and Luetjens 2017; Mintrom 2019). They "reveal themselves through their attempts to transform policy ideas into policy innovations" (Petridou and Mintrom 2021, 39), while using a range of actions and strategies to produce supportive political coalitions (Zahariadis 2013).

The policy entrepreneurship literature has recognized the significance of agency in the agenda-setting stage of the policy process; as such, we also know that policy entrepreneurs are involved in problem definition (Petridou and Mintrom 2021) where they carefully reinterpret situations to advance their goals by assembling new evidence and making novel arguments (Dewulf and Bouwen 2012). Yet little attention has been devoted to how policy entrepreneurs define problems. The literature on agenda setting and problem definition (Weiss 1989; Schön and Rein 1994; Stone 2002) has stressed the importance of defining an issue early in the policy process, recognizing its implications for the political landscape. In these perspectives, a problem definition "creates meaning in the policy process" by drawing attention to certain solutions and by inviting the participation of certain political actors, implying that alternative solutions and actors are marginalized and devalued (Weiss 1989, 98). Given that the definition of the alternatives is the "supreme instrument of power [. . .] because the definition of the alternatives is the choice of conflicts, and the choice of conflicts allocates power" (Schattschneider 1960, 66), it follows that problem definition is a crucial component of the policy process deserving further analysis.

In this article we ask when and how policy entrepreneurs are successful in defining policy problems. Although the literature has discussed the agency of policy entrepreneurs with reference to their strategies and attributes, less is known about how ideas influence policy entrepreneurship. We maintain that ideas play a greater role in policy entrepreneurship than is evident in the mainstream literature. In analyses of policy entrepreneurship, problem definition tends to be conflated with the strategies that policy entrepreneurs put in place. This tendency risks missing the full extent of problem definition by policy entrepreneurs. If "policy problems and the whole policy process strongly depend on the meaning attached to them by the actors involved" (Jones and Radaelli 2015, 341), it follows that the definition of a problem as it enters the policy arena needs to be better understood.

To test our theoretical argument empirically, we take a puzzling case of policy making, that of European student mobility. In the early years of the European integration process, student mobility was seen as central to the cultivation of a sense of European identity. However, Member State reluctance to pursue cooperation in the strictly intergovernmental policy field of education meant that proposed programs failed to make much impact. In 1985, however, a radical change took place. Within the space of six months, a new set of proposals on student mobility was able to gain Member State support, and, for the first time in the history of European education policy, the role of the European Commission expanded. This new mobility program for student exchanges, named the Comett programme, then paved the way for the implementation of further mobility programs that now represent the cornerstone of EU policies in this field of activity.

The shift from Member State resistance to supranational cooperation raises an intriguing theoretical and empirical puzzle: after a decade in which equivalent proposals attracted limited support and given that the interests of key policy actors remained much the same, what changed in 1985? In this contribution, we argue that the answer lies in the interplay of the ideas and policy entrepreneurship of the then European Commissioner for Education, Peter Sutherland, who saw mobility as a solution to the challenges of the Single Market Programme (SMP), a solution that

would help to address concerns about European competitiveness. This new problem frame fit well with the Europhile climate of the mid-1980s.

Our case study shows that policy entrepreneurs are successful in defining problems when they hold specific ideas and when there is a fit between the definition of the problem and the socioeconomic context of the time. In presenting this argument, we are engaging with a recently revitalized debate on the role of ideas within the policy process, and more specifically on the relationship between ideas and policy change (see Kamkhaji and Radaelli 2022). In the context of this article, we are particularly interested in ideas as causal beliefs that inform problem definitions. Thus, we are alert to the ideational agency of policy entrepreneurs, that is, the way in which ideas are used instrumentally by agents (Stone 2002). This leads us to understand better when and how policy actors define problems by framing policy issues in the way that they do, how they make sense of ideas by embedding them with meaning in the policy process, and how policy entrepreneurs more generally impact the policy process. This article adds to our understanding of policy entrepreneurship by providing a more nuanced understanding of how policy entrepreneurs define successful policy problems, by framing issues to create consensus, and when and how they are successful in achieving desired policy outcomes.

The article begins by contextualizing and elaborating the theoretical framework, which is informed by the works of literature on policy entrepreneurship and the role of ideas. We then present our case study. First, we focus on the framing of student mobility in the 1970s and 1980s, after which we examine how mobility was framed differently in the mid-1980s. This section emphasizes Peter Sutherland's role as a policy entrepreneur in the setting up of the Comett programme. The final section sums up the argument and spells out our theoretical contribution, suggesting future research avenues, such as the need for more attention to be given to the relationship between policy entrepreneurs as ideational agents of change and their role in problem definition at the agenda-setting stage of the policy process.

Policy entrepreneurs and problem definition

The Multiple Streams Framework (MSF), which was originally developed by John Kingdon in the 1970s, has proven a useful framework for the analysis of decision-making. At its most basic, the model rests on the confluence of three streams: "problems," "policy," and "politics" which can be "coupled" together where a "policy window" opens. In the early version of the model, problems, defined as such by government officials, are brought to light via focusing events like crises; policy proposals are floated, though only some survive to be given serious consideration where they can be presented as policy solutions; and the political arena affects agendas though shifts in national mood or legislative turnover (Kingdon 2003, 19–20). These developments may be exploited by actors known as policy entrepreneurs.

Over time, key concepts from the MSF have entered the wider academic conversation on the policy process. These concepts are often divorced from the specifics of the framework that was originally proposed by Kingdon. In this vein policy, entrepreneurship has been both substantively and theoretically analyzed (see

Petridou and Mintrom (2021) for an extensive review of the current state of research on policy entrepreneurship). In this literature, policy entrepreneurs are taken to be actors who use their knowledge of the policy process to further their own policy ends. They "lie in wait in and around government with their solutions at hand, waiting for problems to float by to which they can attach their solutions, waiting for a development in the political stream they can use to their advantage" (Kingdon 1984, 65–66). At the same time, policy entrepreneurs exploit windows of opportunity to promote the solutions they favor, while drawing on resources such as access and credibility (Dahl 1961; Kingdon 1984). They may be politicians, civil servants, experts, or business leaders as long as they share a common interest in a policy and recognize an opportunity to intervene (Zahariadis 2008, 518).

There are certain characteristics and personal skills that policy entrepreneurs tend to exhibit. For example, they are likely to possess a "perceptiveness in understanding others and engaging in policy conversations" (Mintrom and Norman 2009, 652). This is consistent with Kingdon's conceptualization of policy entrepreneurs as being able to understand others' concerns and ideas and to recognize opportunities before introducing policy innovations. Moreover, they are likely to exhibit strengths in leadership, communication, team-building and networking, and an "ability to work effectively with others" (Mintrom and Norman 2009, 653). Policy entrepreneurs are also able to lead by example, which "involves engaging with others to [. . .] demonstrate the workability of a policy proposal" (Mintrom and Norman 2009, 654). By analyzing 229 articles on policy entrepreneurs' characteristics and strategies, Aviram, Cohen, and Beeri (2019, 17) found that policy entrepreneurs exhibit three key attributes, namely the power of persuasion, the ability to build trust, and social acuity.

Policy entrepreneurs may also have access to political and institutional resources, which help their policy ambitions. These resources are often connected to the formal role they perform, which might give them a clearly defined part to play in the policy process, access to specific venues, which open channels of influence, the support of an effective, well-qualified team, and in some cases, financial support. Informal, personal networks might also be an important resource for policy entrepreneurs, especially where networks derive from experiences gained from previous roles. The credibility that derives from having held such roles in the past might also be an important resource.

The role of policy entrepreneurs has been also explored with reference to how they might define a policy problem (Mintrom and Luetjens 2017; see also Béland and Cox 2016). As noted by Winkel and Leipold, policy entrepreneurs may act as discursive agents "by connecting a specific problematization to a specific problem solution drawing on an available policy discourse" (Winkel and Leipold 2016, 123). Thus, problems are not waiting to be discovered and solved; they pass through a process of discursive construction to become problems in the first place. It is through this process – which is inherently ideational – that problems become apprehensible and amenable to a solution. We are interested in how this process works in practice.

However, in the current policy entrepreneurship literature, policy entrepreneurs are more likely to "pay close attention to problem definitions" (Mintrom and Norman 2009, 652) than to engage actively in a process of problem definition.

Knaggård (2015) is one of the few authors to address in some detail the issue of this ideational aspect of policy entrepreneurship (or what she terms as "problem brokerage"). She argues that it is important to examine the process by which actors first frame "conditions" as "public problems," drawing on knowledge, values, and emotions, and then work to make policymakers accept those frames. However, for Knaggård, it is especially important to separate analytically the framing of problems (problem brokerage) from the making of policy suggestions (policy entrepreneurship) (Knaggård 2015, 451).

We argue, by contrast, that bringing an ideational perspective to the analysis of policy entrepreneurship in a more integrated way has the potential to shed new light on the role of agency in the policy process. In other words, we argue that policy entrepreneurs do not only "pay close attention to problem definitions" (Mintrom and Norman 2009, 652) but they actively define problems. This can be done by means of rhetorical strategies, such as storytelling or narratives, by suggesting for instance that a crisis is imminent (Stone 2002) or by emphasizing the failure of current policies and seeking support from other actors through the building of coalitions (Schattschneider 1960; Baumgartner and Jones 1993).

Framing is a key strategy used to promote a particular problem definition. It is generally considered "a way of selecting, organizing, interpreting, and making sense of a complex reality to provide guideposts for knowing, analyzing, persuading, and acting" (Rein and Schön 1996, 146). Dewulf and Bouwen (2012), in emphasizing the "interactional" nature of framing, claim that it "works through arranging and rearranging the elements of an issue such that its meaning is altered, a process that involves selecting certain issue elements as part of the frame while leaving out others" (p. 170). This understanding of framing casts policy actors as active conversationalists who construct the meaning of situations through discussion with others. These conversations are facilitated by means of personal skills and political and institutional resources.

Despite some limited recognition of the importance of policy entrepreneurs in the definition of policy problems (Boushy, 2010), it is still not clear when or how these actors engage with framing, nor the conditions under which they are successful. This is why it is important to bring ideas into consideration and to acknowledge what policy entrepreneurs do to include ideational agency. In essence, the framing of a problem is a social construction process, which implies an acknowledgment that problems are not real or exogenous to the policy process (Saurugger 2013, 896–989).

Drawing from public policy analysis (Kingdon 1984) and from the literature on the role of ideas in the policy process, we derive theoretical expectations in which to embed our research (see also Schmidt 2002; Kamkhaji and Radaelli 2022). First, and central to our theoretical argument, we expect ideas to matter as templates used by key actors to inform their decision-making. This conceptualization assumes that ideas can have causal effects, which help actors to decide on a "correct" course of action. Policy entrepreneurs may express a commitment to certain ideas that provide both a diagnosis of a condition and a prognosis, the latter comprising a view of what would happen should change not occur, and the reforms or policy proposals that would mitigate against or resolve the problem. Policy entrepreneurs may not

only be attached to these ideas in the abstract but may also assert them in a proactive manner. This allows them to translate ideas into workable policy solutions.

Thus, policy entrepreneurs are attached to and associated with a particular idea or set of ideas. There is likely to be evidence that the policy actor has held beliefs consistent with these ideas in previous roles, or that in some way the ideas prefigured the start of the policy process. These ideas are causal in the sense that they might, explicitly or implicitly, provide a template for ensuing policy, though without necessarily framing the problem at this point. These ideas are likely to be new or different from those held in the past. They would be identified by means of an analysis of speeches and other statements made by the policy actor, as well as in policy documents. Policy entrepreneurs put these ideas into practice by defining a policy problem and using one or more problem frames to advocate for a specific policy solution that will, subsequently, if successful, achieve a change in policy. Although there may be different frames for different audiences, we expect the underlying idea(s) to remain consistent.

A second step requires the problem frames to be put to good use in the policy process. As is also true of policy entrepreneurs in the mainstream literature, policy entrepreneurs also use their personal skills and political and institutional resources to turn their ideationally informed frames into decisions. Personal skills might include determination and persistence, leadership, good communication, team-building abilities, intelligence, and commitment. We would expect to see evidence of these skills in the policy actor's ability to mobilize support for their ideas and build a supportive consensus around them. Political and institutional resources, by contrast, might include the authority that actors bring to the task, drawing on their past experience and/or expertise and the credibility that derives from the institutional roles they hold or have held in the past. We would expect to see evidence of these resources by examining the policy entrepreneur's career and present role and the wider institutional and situational context in which they work.

Yet even where a policy entrepreneur fulfills these criteria, holding ideas that they can use as templates, building a new problem definition, and advocating for change by using their skills and resources, this is not enough to guarantee policy change. We also need to take into consideration the wider structural context, which will either facilitate or deter successful agency. Thus, we also consider essential the existence of a policy window at the early stages of the policy process. Within our framework, this policy window is a necessary scope condition. Policy windows may arise out of changes in material conditions or shifts in the political climate. For example, a change in the *zeitgeist* may allow actors to turn a "condition" into a "problem" and trigger some action (Kingdon 1984; Mintrom and Norman 2009). Economic crises (Hall 1993) and other focusing events (Birkland 1997) have high visibility and can be expected to gain public attention, provoking a response from policymakers (Zahariadis 2008). Policy windows may also be thrown open as a result of cognate policy initiatives and reforms (Aydin 2014). We maintain, therefore, that structural factors are crucial for enabling actors to bring to the fore specific ideas about how a problem should be understood and framed, as well as what solutions are possible. As such we also need to consider the existence or absence of policy windows when examining the conditions under which problem entrepreneurship occurs.

To apply these theoretical expectations to our case, we use a process tracing methodology that allows us to trace key decisions in this policy area from the 1970s to the mid-1980s. Process tracing links a condition with an outcome, providing a clear theorization of the causal mechanisms that connect them. Applying process tracing to the study of ideas poses a number of challenges, however; not least that it is difficult to distinguish the influence of ideas from "the material parameters of the choice situation" (Campbell 2008, 163). In other words, process tracing needs to show that ideas have an influence of their own, even if this influence is not completely detached from the influence of other conditions (Jacobs 2015).

To do this, we draw on Jacobs' (2015) three empirical strategies: (1) analyzing private communication; (2) expanding the temporal scope of the analysis; and (3) tracing ideational diffusions and the role of ideas carriers. First, we looked at the ideas underpinning student mobility, drawing from official European documents, the private papers of key protagonists, and confidential sources found in the Historical Archives of the European University Institute in Florence, Italy. Second, we used an analysis of these texts to reconstruct the narrative on EU mobility programs, stretching that narrative beyond our specific focus on the events of 1985. Third, we identified key actors and reconstructed the process through which mobility was closely tied to European competitiveness and used that data to make the empirical case for problem entrepreneurship. To detect a mechanism of influence between actors and ideas (Jacobs 2015), we again checked the archival sources seeking evidence that decision-makers possessed particular ideas, and that those ideas shaped their choices. We identified their ideational commitment by establishing that the relevant ideas were applied to the choice we sought to explain (Jacobs 2015).

To test our theoretical argument, we applied this methodology to the case of European student mobility. The next section provides some background to the case and sets the scene for our subsequent discussion and analysis of problem entrepreneurship and problem definition.

European mobility in the 1970s and 1980s

It was not until 1973 that education was officially recognized as an area of European cooperation. Considered a prerogative of national governments, education was framed as an exercise in cultural and social integration (Cino Pagliarello 2022). After the European Commission set up an education directorate in 1973, there were some attempts to get a European-level education policy off the ground. These efforts led to the publication of the Janne Report, which included proposals for student exchanges as well as other initiatives to harmonize education across the European Community (EC) (Janne 1973, 35). However, as education was a domestic competence, national governments rejected the proposals (Interview 1).

In 1974 Hywel Ceri Jones, a senior official working within the Commission, picked up some of the report's recommendations in a Commission Communication, *Education in the European Community* (CEC, 1974). This document, which was to inform Commission policy for the rest of the 1970s, provided the basis for the *European Community's Action Program on Education*

(see Ministers of Education, 1976; see also Pépin, 2006). This in turn led to plans for more Europe-wide cooperation on higher education. Specifically, it sought to put in place a framework for short study visits for teaching, administrative staff, and researchers in the higher education sector. However, it excluded any reference to harmonization as this was still opposed by certain Member States, including the UK and Denmark (Interview 1). It culminated in a modest initiative on Joint Study Programmes, which comprised a system of grants enabling students and teaching staff to fund short visits. The aim of these visits was to encourage the comparative study of European higher education systems (Corbett, 2005, 97) and to facilitate the transfer of European funds to higher education institutions, which would allow them to plan and organize mobility exchanges (Corradi 2015, 62).

The Joint Study Programmes were of limited ambition and had very narrow participation. Between 1976 and 1985 only 586 grants were cofinanced by the European Commission (Neave 1984; Corradi 2015). Moreover, the scheme had no formal budget and no legal basis (Pépin 2006). The European Commission had no ownership of the programs and no capacity to develop any strategy around them. Even where the Commission might have had a role to play, Member States were reluctant to allow it to take control. For example, meetings of an Educational Committee representing the ten Member States and the Commission, which should have coordinated and overseen the implementation of policy, were canceled in both 1978 and 1979. These decisions came at the request of France and Denmark, who were strongly opposed to what they considered to be supranational interference in matters of education (Beukel 1994; Corbett 2005, 97–106).

The European Commissioner for Education at the time, Ralf Dahrendorf, did not push the issue but rather acknowledged that while education had "to promote the process of EU integration, for instance by [...] promoting initiatives for cooperation between institutions from different member countries," it was clear that "the Community can make only a very limited contribution partly because the Community is not necessarily the appropriate political framework" (Dahrendorf 1973, see also Corbett 2005, 81 on this point). Ivor Richard, Commissioner for Education between 1981 and the end of 1984, reflected a similar sentiment when he declared that: "[w]e have to work rather gradually, bearing in mind that we do not have a strong base for community educational activity in the Treaty" (Richard 1981, 7). Thus, although the Joint Study Programmes were an attempt at cooperation in European education, they also revealed the difficulty of undertaking initiatives in this sensitive policy area.

All this would change in the mid-1980s. Over the course of the early 1980s, emphasis on the social contribution of education was gradually replaced by a discourse highlighting the economic benefits that a European-level education policy might bring (Fogg and Jones 1985; Brown and Lauder 2001). This reflected the growing influence of neoliberal ideas in Europe, particularly prevalent in the UK, but also taking hold in Ireland and elsewhere in the EC. National politicians and officials working in the EC were effective carriers of those ideas. Although its President, Jacques Delors, preferred to talk of a "Social Europe" rather than of neoliberalism, it was in this context that he proposed and saw accepted the Single Market agenda in 1985–1986 (Schmidt 2008; Schmidt and Thatcher 2013).

In the previous decade, political and economic indices showed the EC to be lagging behind the USA and East Asia (Brown and Lauder 2001, 120–1). A preoccupation with the competitive threat posed by Europe's global competitors made Member States more receptive to educational agendas that sought to achieve economic competitiveness via investment in human capital, skills, and lifelong learning (Leclerq and Rault 1990, 12). With unemployment rates continuing to rise, the argument frequently heard in the elite discourse was that technological change required training for workers to take a different, more flexible form (Fogg and Jones 1985; Brown and Lauder 2001). For European businesses to compete, workers would need to be able to access employment opportunities across the European continent. This would only be possible if workers' educational credentials were recognized across the EC; if they had experience of living abroad; and had a knowledge of foreign languages. Numerous reports at the time pointed to the importance of nonphysical investment – human capital – on the assumption that investment in knowledge was the main driver of a country's growth (Leclerq and Rault 1990, 12). Thus, as an important element in what eventually formed the EC's free movement agenda, education came to be seen as a vital instrument for economic development (Jones 1987, 3).

Within this context, the promotion of student mobility was part of the Single Market project. Advocating freedom of movement became one of the most important educational objectives for the Community, concluding with several recommendations for intensifying the EC's approach (Council of the European Communities 1983; European Parliament 1984). It was not until 1985, however, that these ideas produced policy effects. The Comett programme was based on a communication produced in April 1985, which aimed to strengthen cooperation between universities and industry across the EC, launching in the process a seven-year mobility program (European Commission 1985). In strengthening cooperation between the higher education sector and industry, Comett was designed to allow Europe to be better able to respond to the challenges posed by technological and social change. It included a focus on the initial training of undergraduate and graduate students and, as one of several initiatives, proposed the introduction of student mobility programs. The Comett programme was approved by the Council of Ministers on 5 December 1985. In the space of less than a year, the Commission had managed to establish a student mobility program that had its own budget, a legal basis in the Treaty, and, in contrast to the earlier Joint Study Programmes, the opportunity for the European Commission to issue its own guidelines, and thereby develop a strategic purpose for the program (Corbett 2005, 97). What accounts for this change? Why were student mobility programs that had been rejected in the 1970s accepted in 1985 over the course of few months? We answer this question by examining the role played in the policy process by the Commissioner for Education, Peter Sutherland.

Peter Sutherland as policy entrepreneur

Peter Sutherland was an Irish businessman and lawyer (barrister) who had previously held the senior position of attorney-general. He was affiliated to Fine

Gael, the Irish liberal-conservative party, and was a fervent pro-European who, in the early 1970s, had taken an active part in the campaign to promote Ireland's membership of the EC (Sutherland 2011, 4). On 6 January 1985, he was appointed by Commission President, Jacques Delors, to the post of Commissioner for Competition. To cover a gap until the Spanish accession took place the following year, Sutherland also agreed to take temporary charge of the Directorate-General (DG) responsible for Social Affairs, Employment, Education, Training and Youth (Sutherland 2011, 4).

From the outset, Sutherland's thinking on student mobility was embedded in new ideas on education and competitiveness. These ideas were nested within a broader set of neoliberal ideas that predated his arrival in the European Commission, but which were very quickly applied to education policy. They were thus in line with his liberal political stance in embracing a "market dynamics theory of economic development" and his belief in "the gradual increase in the powers of the European Union" (Sutherland 2011, 7). As he stated: "I was convinced at an early stage that there was a legal basis in the Treaty of Rome for action in the field of education although a number of Member States were opposed to any commission initiatives" (Sutherland 2011). Indeed, in his first appearance as Commissioner for Education, Sutherland stated that "we must transform – together – our whole approach to education" (Sutherland 1985a). This was not only a reference to the economic rationale for education policy but was also an argument for a more Europeanized approach. Thus, in contrast to the skepticism and cautious attitudes of former Education Commissioners, Sutherland approached education policy differently, arguing that there was room for the Commission to become more involved (Sutherland 1985a). Although aware of the difficulty in undertaking initiatives in the sensitive policy area of education, Sutherland was from the outset determined to push for further European cooperation in this area.

As early as January 1985, Sutherland told a meeting with social partners that: "We are all of us in this room fully committed to the reemergence of Europe as a major first-class industrial power" (Sutherland 1985b). In line with his vision of the economic purpose of education, he saw student mobility as "an Italian student training in France and becoming familiar with French products and technical standards, establishing strong friendly ties with French engineers or researchers and developing the habit of thinking European first and not American or Japanese before making economic decisions" (Sutherland 1985c). As he put it: "Education, for me, is about the development of basic human resources, which we all know is the Community's most valuable natural asset, and upon which depend all other Community policies" (Sutherland 1985d). Within his vision, the lack of university-industry cooperation and the lack of student mobility were considered the main weaknesses of European education systems (Sutherland 1985e). In other words, the promotion of a European dimension in education was strongly linked to the development of human resources required by European companies.

Sutherland was able to transform these ideas about higher education and student mobility and their relationship to the economy into policy practice by virtue of the personal skills and the political and institutional resources he had at his disposal as Commissioner for Education (and Competition). He knew that his oversight of education policy was likely to be short-lived, and that he had limited time to make

his mark. In recalling the events that led to the program's approval, one of the members of his personal office (cabinet), Hywel Ceri Jones, defined Sutherland as "a man who had the fire in his belly" (Interview 1), while another cabinet member, André Kirchberger, remembers him as "creative, ingenious, and courageous" (Interview 2). He applied his personal skills to getting a deal done quickly.

Sutherland's dual role as Commissioner for Education and Competition gave him privileged access to multiple political venues as well as credibility when talking about the importance of education for Europe's competitiveness (Sutherland 1985f). Sutherland was aware of this, and frequently underlined his dual mandate; for instance, he would often start with education and then later switch the discourse toward economic concerns by saying: "let me now put on my competition hat" (Sutherland 1985d, 5), implying a connection between and consistency across these two ostensibly very different policy areas.

In translating his ideas into policy practice, Sutherland also sought to build a strong and like-minded team around him. He relied on a small but capable group of experts. Two of his cabinet members, Hywel Ceri Jones and André Kirchberger, were instrumental in drafting the background proposals for the Comett programme during the early phase of work between January and March 1985. Michel Richonnier, Sutherland's chief of cabinet, was also an extremely important actor, particularly during the negotiation phase. He was especially instrumental in pushing for an expanded budget for the initiative (Interviews 1 and 2). As well as working in the same DG for the same ends, the cabinet members also had shared interests, namely being enthusiastic rugby players and supporters (Interviews 1 and 2). The Sutherland cabinet was, therefore, characterized by capable individuals "who [got] along well [. . .] and by being well connected [. . .] [were] [. . .] more likely to achieve their policy goals" (Mintrom 2019, 312).

In contrast to previous Education Commissioners, Sutherland also went out of his way to attend meetings with the social partners (Sutherland 1985b), with the aim of building consensus around his proposals. He worked extremely hard to mobilize support for this new agenda in April and May 1985 by initiating consultations with advisory bodies, groups of experts, and interest groups, such as the European Round Table of Industrialists, Ministers of the Member States, the social partners, the Advisory Committee for Vocational Training, universities, the European Parliament, Chambers of Commerce of several Member States, and the European Students' Association (Interview 1; Sutherland 1985e; Sutherland 1985f). The recourse to a narrative presenting Comett as a way of strengthening cooperation within the Community, enabling Europe to keep pace with Japan and the USA in the area of industrial innovation, and the framing of student mobility as a tool to foster European integration, was instrumental in rallying wide support for the Comett proposal. For instance, in his speech to the European Students' Association in April 1985, Sutherland claimed that the Comett programme would "promote a strong European identity among students who are the decision makers of tomorrow in their economic and social fields" (Sutherland 1985c, 1); whereas in his address to the Advisory Committee on vocational training in May 1985, Comett was framed as an initiative to help workers to update their skills (Sutherland 1985g, 2). To the Liaison Committee of Rectors, representing university leaders, the program was presented in terms of the benefits arising from the setting up of joint

training packages across Member States (Sutherland 1985g). In other words, Sutherland was able to frame the issue of students' mobility and cooperation with industry differently depending on the audiences he was addressing by binding together different objectives and instruments related to mobility.

Putting his ideas into practice would take both personal skills and political and institutional resources. These skills and resources were especially important in the latter stages of the legislative process when Sutherland was trying to get his version of the Comett initiative accepted by the Council. While the proposal had had a relatively smooth passage through the first Council meeting in July (Sutherland 1985h), it came under greater scrutiny at the October Council and in the weeks that followed. At this point there was intense debate and strong resistance to the legal basis for the legislation, the role of the advisory committee that would issue guidelines on the program, and the scale of the program's budget (Interviews 1 and 2).

Regarding the legal basis, Sutherland had argued that the Comett programme should be approved under Article 128 of the EEC Treaty, which required only a qualified majority vote. However, several Member States were opposed to this suggestion. In an internal Commission note, Michel Richonnier noted that Denmark, Belgium, the UK, and West Germany all wanted to see the program decided under Article 235, which required unanimity on the part of the Member States. While the Council ultimately rejected the Commission's insistence on the use of Article 128 at a meeting on 3 December 1985 (Sutherland 1985g; Sutherland 1985i), the impact of this decision was diminished as the Council, having won this important argument, then agreed that the Commission could provide guidelines on the priority themes for the program. In the words of Sutherland: "For the first time, as far as I know, the Council agreed to yield some of its political power concerning the selection of guidelines to a committee in which the Commission has fantastic power, since it can be opposed only with qualified majority" (Sutherland 1985g, para 2). This meant that the European Commission was now empowered to manage the program, with much greater discretion than in the past. Finally, while the principle of having a European budget had been accepted by the Council, some Member States challenged its scale. After some to-ing and fro-ing, Sutherland was able to negotiate a compromise, which meant that while the budget was subsequently reduced, it remained substantial. One of the witnesses to the budget negotiation, André Kirchberger, stated that it was "the voluntarism, if not the audacity" of Peter Sutherland that resulted in the Commission agreeing to an "estimated amount of 85 million ECU, almost 15 times the annual budget for all the activities of DGV" (Kirchberger, quoted in Pépin et al. 2006, 133; Interview 2). This was a remarkable achievement.

While there is ample evidence of Sutherland's commitment to a package of ideas, and use of personal skills and political and institutional resources to see those ideas translated into policy, Sutherland himself acknowledged that the approval of the Comett programme would not have been possible without the SMP, which was launched in 1985 by Commission President, Jacques Delors. The SMP sought to create an integrated European market based on the four freedoms (of goods, services, capital, and labor) by the end of 1992. The buzz around this initiative meant that Sutherland's educational plans were proposed in an "atmosphere of

optimism and creativity supported by the Delors project" (Interview 1), as well as in a more "general atmosphere of moving ahead" (Interview 2). As Sutherland had declared to the European Parliament in April 1985: "I am convinced that the moment is now ripe since we have a rather fortunate juxtaposition of circumstances" (Sutherland 1985d, 2). He went on to say that:

> "[E]ducation should, and I think will be, one of the principal targets of the beneficiaries, of the new political interest in a people's Europe [. . .]. [D]uring the course of this year I believe we can make substantial progress in the area of education, profiting from what I see to be a new political climate [. . .]. [T]he aim will be to respond to the perceived lack of human resources required by European industry, to improve its technological base, strengthen cooperation with the community, and enable Europe to keep pace with Japan and the USA" (Sutherland 1985d, 3).

Sutherland's ideas about education are, therefore, situated within a broader set of ideas and policies on the Single Market. While this section demonstrates how Peter Sutherland was instrumental in drawing on his personal skills and political and institutional resources to push through a policy based on a novel set of ideas, it is also important to recognize that this was unlikely to have happened without the emergence of a policy window that allowed for those ideas to take hold.

To sum up, we can convincingly describe Peter Sutherland as not only a policy entrepreneur, in the classical sense, drawing on his skills and resources to promote a specific policy solution, used to solve a problem, externally generated, but as a policy entrepreneur who was able to use his ideas to redefine the problem to which mobility was a solution, and to mobilize support and build consensus in favor of policy change. The Single European Market policy window was a necessary condition for the success of Peter Sutherland's efforts at problem definition; without the Single Market initiative, he would not have been successful. That said, however, it was through the agency of Sutherland himself, via a form of policy leadership that was very much grounded in an underpinning set of ideas, that the Comett programme came into being at the end of 1985.

Conclusion

This article began by calling for researchers to pay more attention to agency at the problem definition stage of the policy process. More specifically, we sought to examine when and how policy entrepreneurs are successful in defining a problem. In answering this question, we developed a framework comprising two steps: the first based on the ideas held by a policy entrepreneur, the redefinition of a problem and its translation into one or more new frames; and the second on the use of these new frames alongside those more conventional strategies and tools of policy entrepreneurship, that is, personal skills and political and institutional resources, to build a supportive coalition in favor of policy change.

Our framework does not rely on agency alone, however. It also acknowledges the significance of the structural context. We note that this context might take various

forms: it could comprise a crisis situation, for example, a broader ideological or cultural change, perhaps even a paradigm shift of some kind. We present this contextual factor as a scope condition, which may ultimately be the key determinant of a successful policy outcome.

To illustrate how this process might work in practice, we drew on a case study involving student mobility in European education policy. This allowed us to focus on the role of Commissioner Peter Sutherland in the successful introduction of that policy in 1985. We presented this case as an empirical puzzle: how was Sutherland able to oversee a successful policy outcome in the space of less than a year after many years of failed policy attempts in the 1970s? Addressing this puzzle, we showed how Sutherland, in a very short space of time, was able to establish the first EU students' mobility program by defining the issue of "mobility" – formerly connected to more cultural aims – as linked to EU competitiveness and employment policy objectives, and by using his personal skills and political and institutional resources to build a supportive coalition in favor of this initiative. The context was crucial in that Sutherland's policy ambitions were facilitated by the wider Single European Market agenda, which created a propitious policy window for the proactive policy entrepreneur to use as the foundation for his agency.

On that basis, this article makes two distinct contributions to the ideational and policy entrepreneurship literature. First, it highlights how ideas and frames matter in the process of problem definition by policy entrepreneurs. It serves as a reminder that the definition of problems should not be taken for granted within the policy process. At the very least this means we need to add an ideational question to our empirical inquiries when investigating cases of policy change.

Second, our contribution moves the policy entrepreneurship literature forward by taking more clearly into account the interplay of ideas and agents. Our contribution shows that problem definition deserves more attention than it currently receives. In other words, policy entrepreneurs should be understood as ideational agents; as policy actors whose agendas are informed or shaped by ideas, and who are actively involved in a process of social construction of problems. Holding specific ideas and having these ideas aligned with the *zeitgeist* is also a factor that provides additional perspectives on why policy entrepreneurs are successful.

Drawn from these contributions, we also add three caveats or clarifications to our argument. First, we want to be clear that in developing a theoretical approach that focuses on the dynamic nature of ideas, we in no way reject the importance of actors in ideational policy processes. On the contrary, as shown above, there exists no theoretical contradiction in arguing that ideas are framed by their relation to other ideas, or in assigning an important role to actors. Instead of taking sides in a meaningless discussion of whether ideas control actors or actors control ideas, the article argues that both actors and ideas are important. Thus, actors can use ideas, but due to their contested nature, actors are not always able to control their meaning.

Second, we do not claim that policy entrepreneurs will always define problems in the way we argue Sutherland did in this article; only that they may do so. As such, this article invites researchers to be attentive to the way in which ideas are (re)framed at the start of, as well as during the policy process. This adjustment to

common practice might seem modest, but it matters immensely if our empirical analyses of policy change are to be convincing and comprehensive.

Finally, the obvious limitation of our study is that our framework and argument have been illustrated in only one case. More empirical work is needed to explore further how problem entrepreneurs contribute to the definition of policy problems, how they interact with the wider political and economic context, and to explore how ideas matter in public policymaking. In this way, the construction of problem definitions may be better integrated into analyses of policy entrepreneurship. In sum, we hope that the operationalization of the kind of "policy entrepreneurship" we have developed in this article might also be used in a wide range of contemporary cases, such as those that focus on the resilience of policy-makers in the context of post-COVID-19 recovery plans, or on the ideas underpinning Russian leader Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukraine in February 2022.

Data availability statement. This study does not employ statistical methods and no replication materials are available.

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Interviews. Interview 1 – Hywel Ceri Jones – EU official from 1972–1998, member of Sutherland's cabinet in 1985, head of the Education division within DG Research, Science, and Education and successively from 1981 till 1993 as Director for Education, Training and Youth Policy, and Director of the Commission's Task Force for Human Resources, Education, Training, and Youth. From 1993 to 1998, he acted as Director General of Employment, Social Policy, and Industrial Relations; Interviewed several times between 2016 and 2017.

Interview 2 – André Kirchberger– EU Official from 1981–1998, member of Sutherland's cabinet in 1985, former Head of the Vocational Training Policy Unit in the Directorate General for Education, Training, and Youth and involved in education and training at Community level from 1982 to 1999; Interviewed in April 2017.

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