

Higher Education and Europe's Recovery in times of crisis: an analysis of National Recovery and Resilience Plans in Southern Europe

Sofia Viseu¹, Carla Menitra² & Mariana Gaio Alves³

Universidade de Lisboa

Abstract

This article focuses on the social imaginaries about higher education (HE) and its connection to recovery efforts during times of crisis, with a particular emphasis on the European Union NextGeneration (NGEU) initiative. It addresses the gap in research on National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs), exploring recovery as a platform for advancing education reform, namely creating new roles, expected outcomes and governance principles for HE. The study focuses on NRRPs from four Southern European countries - Greece, Portugal, Italy and Spain - conceiving these documents as policy texts. Overall, the paper discusses HE imaginaries and changes in governance to address global social and economic needs in times of crisis. The study reveals not a transformative agenda for HE but rather a consolidation of existing paradigms, namely, reinforcing a transnational narrative about HE as an economic asset.

Keywords

Higher Education; Education Governance; Europe Recovery and Resilience; Southern Europe; Social Imaginaries.

¹ UIDEF, Instituto de Educação, sviseu@ie.ulisboa.pt <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0059-9717>.

² Instituto de Educação, cmenitra@ie.ulisboa.pt <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-0448-6086>.

³ UIDEF, Instituto de Educação, mga@ie.ulisboa.pt <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8895-0796>.

Introduction

This article focuses on the social imaginaries about higher education (HE) and its connection to recovery efforts during times of crisis, with a particular emphasis on the European Union NextGeneration (NGEU) initiative. Our focus stems from two main considerations: first, the centrality and uniqueness of the NGEU in the European Union's crisis response; and second, a research gap regarding how this initiative was developed at the national level, particularly in what concerns HE, bearing in mind its double mission, i.e., educating/training people and producing scientific knowledge.

Launched in 2020 by the European Commission in response to the socio-economic disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the NGEU has a budget of approximately €800 billion and was designed to foster recovery, strengthen the European Union's long-term resilience and competitiveness, promoting the green and digital transitions (NextGenerationEU, 2025). To access this funding, European Union (EU) member states were required to submit National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs), setting out proposed reforms, investments, milestones, and targets to be achieved by 2026. This option consolidates conditionality-based lending, through which reforms are linked to the disbursement of financial aid (Angelou, 2025). However, compared to prior EU funding and fiscal instruments, the NGEU is unique. For the first time, the EU was empowered to borrow collectively on international capital markets to finance direct grants and loans to member states, marking a significant departure from its previous inability to run deficits or issue debt for redistributive purposes. As Miró (2022) explains, this unprecedented step under the NextGenerationEU plan gave the EU a new fiscal capacity to respond to crisis. Unlike the European Central Bank, which conducts monetary policy and does not finance fiscal transfers, the EU itself became a fiscal actor, borrowing in its own name and distributing funds to support economic recovery.

Significant scholarly attention has been paid to the institutional, political and financial dimensions of the NGEU. Previous studies have analysed the design, negotiation, and implementation of the NRRPs, highlighting the complexity of these processes, namely on the discursive and participatory mechanisms employed at the national level to legitimise them (De la Porte & Jensen, 2021; Vanhercke & Verdun, 2022; Kaniok, 2024; Munta et al., 2023). However, tracing HE within the European context, drawing on the NRRPs' analysis, is a topic that remains underexplored. Nevertheless, the work of Molla and Cuthbert (2023) must be mentioned: reporting on

the Australian context, the authors showed how the reform of HE conducted during a context of crisis – the pandemic – contributed to the way “government reactivated old neoliberal visions of society and the economy” (idem, p. 45).

Taken together, this context and findings highlight the complexity of the political dynamics inherent to EU policy making (Featherstone & Radaelli, 2003) and provide a crucial backdrop for our study. We aim to explore how the political discourse of crisis and recovery in the European socio-political context is reframing problems and defining solutions for HE. Thus, our approach examines recovery as a platform for advancing education reform, creating opportunities for new actors, roles, expectations, and governance modes for HE, that is, to construct new or repurpose pre-existing social imaginaries about HE in Europe. Being so, this study examines how the crisis may (or may not) have catalysed reimagining the function of HE.

By analysing four NRRPs from Southern European countries - Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain - the study intends to contribute to uncover regional and national specificities that persist in the framework of a hegemonic transnational narrative about HE as an economic asset (Alves & Tomlinson, 2021). The relevance of this approach arises from the recognition that “the research terrain itself has tended to reflect the hierarchical ordering of global higher education, since higher education studies are disproportionately located in the global centres of higher education” (Warren et al., 2017, p. 617) resulting in a relative absence of empirical studies focusing the non-core regions of Europe.

These four countries, located in a non-core region of Europe, were selected for three reasons. First, they were part of the so-called “solidarity coalition”, a political alliance that strongly supported the establishment of the NGEU, reflecting a shared commitment to deeper EU integration and coordinated recovery (Fabbrini, 2023). Second, within this coalition, Greece and Portugal have historically underperformed in research and innovation (R&I) (European Commission, 2024), making them particularly relevant for analysing how recovery funds address long-standing structural weaknesses. Third, all four countries share the status of Mediterranean welfare states characterised by strong inter-generational family ties, the intrusion of the Catholic Church into politics, bitter political opposition between Right and Left, as well as similar challenges in HE, such as reducing student dropout rates and providing an adequate response to the demands of enterprises, regional and territorial institutions (Cocozza, 2014).

This article is structured into four main sections. The first section, titled “Crisis, recovery, and educational imaginaries”, outlines the theoretical framework. The second section details the research design. Section three offers a comparative analysis of the NRRPs and of HE in the NRRPs. The concluding section discusses the main findings and their implications.

1. Crisis, recovery, and higher education social imaginaries

The notion of crisis has long permeated educational discourse, particularly across Europe and the United States. Far from being a novel development, crisis narratives have shaped educational systems for over a century and a half (see Arendt, 1958, for a historical and political perspective). The overuse of the term crisis in the field of HE is also remarked by Tigh (2024). In contemporary contexts, these narratives have become increasingly linked to the emergence of complex social and educational challenges - from generative artificial intelligence and disinformation, to enduring patterns of social, ethnic, and racial segregation, as well as persistent inequalities in access to and success within education.

While such phenomena are undeniably real, it is equally important to recognise that crisis has often catalysed policy change (Angelou, 2025), and more recently, is presented as a framework for promoting recovery. Over the past decade, international organisations - particularly those focused on disaster response - have actively advanced recovery as a central tenet of the building back better paradigm (see United Nations, 2020). This approach reframes crisis as an opportunity to reconstruct institutions in ways that enhance resilience and reduce systemic vulnerabilities (Cheek & Chmutina, 2022). Since the Covid-19 pandemic, this recovery-oriented discourse has gained significant traction within European policymaking. The concept underpinned the design and implementation of the NRRPs and was employed to justify policy reforms, including in education (Morris et al., 2022). Two key consequences emerge from this evolving crisis-recovery nexus.

First, the crisis-recovery nexus reinforces what Rhinard (2019) terms the *crisisification* of European governance, that is, the increasing tendency to frame policy challenges as urgent, exceptional events requiring immediate response. Although this dynamic was sharply intensified during the Covid-19 crisis, it has earlier precedents in the Eurozone linked to migration crises, as well as to debt and financial crises. Moreover, *crisisification* not only alters the temporal dynamics of decision-making by invoking the

need for swift, often top-down interventions, but also reshapes the institutional landscape, narrowing the range of actors involved and limiting deliberative processes. The invocation of crisis lends political decisions a sense of inevitability and technical necessity, thereby justifying the marginalisation of dissenting voices and bypassing conventional mechanisms of democratic participation, both at the EU and national levels (Rhinard, 2019).

Second, the crisis-recovery nexus underscores the potential for the creation of new social imaginaries, and more specifically, educational imaginaries. These refer to collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly articulated visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of attainable forms of social life and social order, supported by advances in education, science, and technology (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015; Rahm & Rahm-Skågeby, 2023). Such imaginaries shape how societies envision the future of education and define the role of public policy in addressing complex societal challenges. Rather than merely responding to crises, these imaginaries may reconfigure the objectives, instruments, and actors of governance in ways that persist well beyond the immediate context of crisis (Molla & Cuthbert, 2023).

Thus, we aim to discuss if the crisisified framing of recovery planning has not only contributed to the concentration of decision-making power among a limited set of institutional actors, but may have also catalysed reimagining HE, namely fostering the reproduction of established discourses or the emergence of new ones. This approach intends to add to the multidisciplinary field of research into HE in which the Covid-19 crisis resulted firstly in the development of studies focusing on the changes linked to the challenges of emergency remote teaching and online teaching and learning, as well as the investigation of students' mental health (Tigh, 2024).

The NRPPs emerge in a context in which a closer link between HE and the labour market has been advocated by policy discourses, having globalisation as a backdrop and framing graduates' employability, and their suitability to labour market needs, as a crucial endeavour. In fact, "an obsession with developing the countries' Human Resources, an euphemism for the term Human Capital (...) is often unabashedly used in HE policy discourse" (Mayo, 2009, p. 88) and is visible in the European political actors' discourses. This aligns with the prevalent understanding of the student as a consumer, reducing his/her experience of learning in HE to its outcomes in the labour market and devaluing HE contributions to students' disciplinary apprenticeship and production of knowledge, as well as to the development of effective citizenship practices. The extension of market

principles is also evident in the widespread pursuit of knowledge for profitable economic activities, which has led to a narrowing of the themes and disciplines explored by researchers due to funding priorities that prioritise the economic and technical impact of scientific knowledge.

In fact, research has been underscoring that HE systems are caught between a political discourse that emphasises, on the one hand, its economic value pushing towards research and educational activities that can be commercialised, as well as to the preparedness of graduates to work, and on the other hand a praise of its status as a public good that does not necessarily privilege market readiness (Warren et al, 2021). Similarly, Mayo (2009) signals that an economist and neoliberal tenor within the discourses about HE tends to prevail in the EU policy texts and contrasts with a less clear focus on social cohesion linked, for example, to the objective of diminishing barriers and inequalities of access to the educational system and to science and technology. This scenario demands reframing research as a public good for the collective interest (Borrelli et al., 2019), arguing for its responsiveness to social needs driven by the public good rather than profit.

Acknowledging these tensions between conflicting discourses about HE - one focusing on marketisation and the other centred on public good - is important to explore if and how the European strategies designed to foster recovery and resilience from the most recent global crisis are reinforcing or reframing the envisaged function of HE. If the crisis-recovery nexus contains the potential for the creation of new social imaginaries and desirable futures remains to be discussed. Thus, we aim to explore ways in which the most recent crisis and the European strategies pointing at recovery and resilience might change and/or reinforce the social imaginaries about HE, particularly in the South of Europe.

2. Methods: Documentary corpus and analytical procedures

Our empirical study is centred on the NRRPs from Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain, which we approach as policy texts. This option stems from the understanding of education policy as composed of multiple and sometimes competing rationalities and logics embedded within specific historical and spatial contexts (Ball, 1990). It is, therefore, a site of meaning and action. Thus, we understand policy not as merely a set of technical solutions to predefined problems but as a discursive and textual intervention into practice. As Ball (1993) argues, “policies pose problems to their subjects” that “must be solved in

context,” shaping not only what is done but how issues are framed and understood (idem, p. 12). In this sense, we conceive policy as discursively constructed through texts, speeches, and institutional practices, using discourse intentionally to promote particular agendas, shape political possibilities, and define what can be thought or enacted in response to specific policy problems (Arnott & Ozga, 2010).

This conceptualisation led us to be inspired by discourse analysis of education policy (Anderson & Holloway, 2020). Discourse analysis allows us to interrogate how dominant knowledge systems become normalised over time and how certain conceptualisations, such as the social imaginaries about HE, are reinforced or challenged within policy narratives. We treat NRRP documents as participants in the construction of multiple, sometimes conflicting, discourses on HE (e.g., market-oriented versus social justice framings; see Hoskins, 2008). They also mobilise different policy statements regarding the function of HE within society (Mayo, 2009).

The study draws on prior research that used comparative and document analysis to examine the content of NRRPs, notably Kaniok (2025) and Theodoropoulou et al. (2025). We began our empirical work by describing the social and political contexts surrounding the NRRP formulation and approval. This initial step aimed to situate the measures targeting higher education within the broader framework of education and training policies and the structural pillars of each plan, including an assessment of their relative significance in terms of projected funding allocations.

In the subsequent phase, we proceeded to the identification of references to HE in each NPPR. The analysis started with a textual analysis of keywords, clusters and phrases about/with mentions to HE, crisis, university, research, science, academia, and pandemic. Table 1 provides a general sense of the keywords identified and the corresponding excerpts selected from the document corpus. We included variations of relevant terms (e.g., both “science” and “sciences”).

Table 1: *Keywords identified in the four NRRPs*

National plan	Greece	Italy	Portugal	Spain
NRRP number of pages	749	164	346	348
Higher education and Higher educational	20	4	52	2
Crisis	114	22	87	105
Crisis and Higher Education	2	0	0	0
University and Universities	40	64	10	16
Research and Researchers	230	228	75	140
Science and Sciences	14	8	29	263
Academia	5	4	12	0

Pandemic and pandemics	78	27	67	99
Sources: Hellenic Republic, 2021; Governo Italiano, 2021; República Portuguesa, 2021; Gobierno de España, 2021.				

The analysis was qualitative; therefore, the focus was not on the absolute or relative frequency of the excerpts, but rather on their content and contextual relevance. Nevertheless, it is noticeable that “research”, “researchers”, “science” and “sciences” are words quite present in all four NRPPs and also that the word “crisis” appears often as a sort of scenario for the designed interventions but is not directly associated with HE. This suggests that HE, namely throughout the production of scientific knowledge, is part of the solution to overcome the current crisis but it does not seem to be depicted as being in a state of crisis.

Then, we defined a grid for analysing the NRPP that stresses the importance of the tension between two logics - marketisation and public good - to better understand national cases within a common transnational framework that has been underlining the pivotal role of HE in fostering the knowledge economy in the 21st century (Alves and Tomlinson, 2020). Specifically, within Europe, HE has also been depicted as an important contribution to ensure this region's competitiveness, as the target of turning Europe into the most powerful and competitive knowledge economy in the world was the ambitious goal set by the EU at the beginning of this century (EC, 2000). Nevertheless, at the same time, concerns with the regeneration of democracy and the public sphere have also been present to re-conceive HE function as not simply meant to boost the economy (Mayo, 2009).

Acknowledging these conflicting discourses about HE, the grid for analysing the NRPPs includes three categories: the role of HE, HE expected outcomes, and governance principles for HE, and assumes that there is a tension between two logics – marketization and public good – for each of these categories. The key ideas associated with each of these two logics in each category are shown in the following table, providing an analytical framework for considering how marketisation and public good might be combined in different ways in specific national cases.

Table 2: Grid for Analysis

		Logics of HE	
		Marketisation	Public good
Role of HE		Maximising human capital, entrepreneurial capacity	Generating public good, improving collective outcomes, and social justice
Expected outcomes		Graduates' employability, measurable private benefits	Individual and collective benefits, social and scientific literacy, and effective citizenship
Governance principles		New Public Management, competitive accountability	Informed professionalism, professional accountability, collegiality

Source: adapted from an analytical framework proposed by Alves and Tomlinson (2020)

By exploring convergences and divergences across these four NRRPs, we aim to map the roles assigned to HE, considering education, research, innovation, economic and technological development, social change, and workforce preparation.

3. Brief comparative overview of NRRPs

The characterization presented in Table 3 is based on academic and EU sources to provide a comparative overview of the NRRPs under analysis and refers specifically to the moment of their adhesion to the NGEU. All four NRRPs focus on addressing the economic and social consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. Structurally, the plans prioritise investments in green and digital transitions, social cohesion, competitiveness and long-term growth, aligning closely with EU policy objectives (see Table 3). By the end of 2023, each country had integrated the REPowerEU chapter in subsequent revisions, reflecting a coordinated European response to the energy crisis triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Table 3: Comparative overview of NRRPs

	Greece (a)	Italy (a)	Portugal (a)	Spain (a)
Political context/government at the time of adhesion to the NGEU	Centre-right to right-wing government elected in July 2019	Fragmented and unstable multiparty collisions; shift from a centre-left to a centrist technocratic government	Centre-left government; broadly aligned with EU priorities; stable political setting during submission.	Centre-left coalition; stable political setting during submission.

Social context at the time of adhesion to the NGEU	Greece has entered the pandemic with vulnerabilities from previous economic adjustment programmes.	First EU country hit by Covid-19; strong public pressure for coordinated EU support; structural weaknesses and high budget deficit; strong North-South differences.	Post-austerity recovery from the sovereign debt crisis; strong societal demand for resilience and social investment.	Interrupted growth due to Covid-19; public support framed around equality and cohesion.
NRRP name	Greece 2.0	Italia Domani (Italy Tomorrow)	Recuperar Portugal (Recover Portugal)	Plan de Recuperación, Transformación y Resiliencia (Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan)
Submission	June 17, 2021	May 5, 2021	April 22, 2021	April 30, 2021
Council Approval	July 13, 2021	July 13, 2021	June 13, 2021	July 13, 2021
Total Amount (b)	€36.6 billion	€194.4 billion	€22.2 billion	€163 billion
RRF allocation as a share of GDP (b)	15.96%	9.12%	8.29%	10.88%
Engagement	Fifth largest plan overall; highest GDP share across EU; significant socio-economic transformation agenda.	Largest NRRP in absolute terms; 26.1% of total RRF; central to EU's post-Covid strategy.	First EU member to submit its national plan	Second largest NRRP in absolute terms; 13.1% of national GDP
Plan structure	Five pillars: green transition; digital transformation; private investments and economic transformation; employment, skills, and social cohesion	Six missions: digitalisation, green transition, mobility, education/research, cohesion, and health	Six pillars: green transition, social and territorial cohesion, digital transition, health and resilience, policy and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)	Four pillars: green transition, digital transformation, cohesion, and gender equality.

Sources: (a) European Commission (2025a); Theodoropoulou, 2022; Matsaganis & Manalis, 2022; (b) European Commission, 2025b; Corti, et al, 2022; Missos et al, 2024; Theodoropoulou, 2022; Bonfanti, 2024.

Despite these similarities, the NRRPs reflect diverse national contexts. Greece and Portugal were still grappling with the long-term effects of previous financial crises, while Italy and Spain experienced particularly severe public health and economic shocks at the

onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Politically, the plans were developed under distinct governmental configurations: from Italy's technocratic leadership to Spain's progressive coalition. Nevertheless, all four governments displayed a strong commitment to the European Union's NextGeneration EU agenda, engaging meaningfully in the design and submission of their national plans. This shared alignment is visible in the scale and scope of their proposals: Italy's NRRP stands out as the largest in absolute terms, while Greece's plan reflects the highest allocation relative to national GDP.

4. Comparative overview of HE in the NRRPs

The comparative overview across the four NRRPs under analysis is presented in the next three subsections, each devoted to a category of the grid for analysis, i.e., the role of HE, HE expected outcomes, and governance principles for HE. Overall, we aim at mapping social imaginaries about HE underlying the NRRPs, considering education, research, innovation, economic and technological development, social change, and workforce preparation.

4.1 Role of Higher Education

Data analysis revealed a prevailing utilitarian framing of HE in the four NRRPs, aligning universities with economic modernization, technological advancement and innovation-driven competitiveness, enhanced employability and labour market integration.

The Greek plan offers a pronounced example of a market-driven orientation, as most references to HE focus on strengthening links to the labour market, research commercialization, and university-industry collaboration. As one can read in the general description of the plan's education component, as regards HE, "interventions to foster cooperation between Greek universities and universities abroad, boost research activity in Greek universities and strengthen the link between higher education and the labour market" (Hellenic Republic, 2021, p. 43). It is important to note that references to social justice, inclusivity and collective benefits are present. For example, reforms and investments in social care and solidarity mechanisms are framed as ensuring "equal access of all citizens, including the most vulnerable, to quality social services" (idem, p. 72). However, these objectives appear to be relatively secondary to the dominant focus on employability and economic performance, as illustrated by the following excerpt: "reforms and investments enhancing the autonomy of Greek universities, their research

performance, and the quality of university education, including its relevance to the labour market" (idem, p. 651).

Italy's NRRP articulates a dual orientation of the HE. On one side, it adopts a social justice and equity logic, promoting access to HE through scholarships, the upgrading of student housing, and support for early-career researchers. For instance, the plan explicitly targets "upgrading of skills and right to study" and includes investments to "enhance housing services for out-of-town students" aimed at mitigating "income-related barriers" (Governo Italiano, 2021, p. 117). Moreover, the plan supports "free access to university" and "financing young researchers" (idem, p. 117), suggesting a redistributive intent and concern for academic capacity-building. However, this commitment to equity and knowledge development coexists with incentives aimed at strengthening collaboration between the business sector and higher education institutions and research centres. An example is the creation of 20 "territorial champions of R&D" and "the establishment of dedicated PhD programmes, with the contribution and involvement of enterprises, including by encouraging research spin-offs" (idem, p. 128).

The Portuguese NRRP predominantly frames HE through a utilitarian lens, prioritizing its role in addressing labour market challenges and promoting economic recovery. The plan envisions HE institutions primarily as instruments for upskilling and reskilling the workforce, with significant emphasis on aligning educational offerings with the digital and green transitions. This is exemplified by initiatives such as *Impulso Jovens STEAM* and *Impulso Adultos*, which promote the creation of HE programmes in collaboration with employers and public administration, particularly in STEAM fields and in digital competencies. These programmes are explicitly designed to "develop skills for innovation and industrial renewal, adjusting the offer to the transformation of labour markets and new employability requirements" (Governo Português, 2021, p.119). Nevertheless, the NRRP includes some redistributive measures, such as support for student accommodation and a target of 10,000 beneficiaries in HE degrees.

In a similar way, Spain's NRRP conceptualizes HE as a tool to foster innovation in the economy, by both reinforcing human capital and transferring knowledge. On the one hand, it is envisaged that "human capital will be strengthened through reforms of education, universities, vocational training, and active employment policies" (Gobierno de España, 2021, p. 35), and this is presented as one of the eleven key areas to support the country's economic and social structure. Namely, promoting access to HE and graduates' professional opportunities are fundamental objectives of the reform of the

university system that has been initiated. Another key area of reform corresponds to the “commitment to science, modernizing and strengthening the research system, deploying major key projects, and driving innovation across the economy as a whole” (idem, p. 35). Accordingly, HE and science are depicted as part of a value chain that comprises private enterprises and the public administration. So, the role of HE seems to be mainly to maximise human capital and the entrepreneurial capacity. Research seems to be highly valued for scaffolding reforms and modernization in various sectors such as health, fishing, public administration, small and large companies, to enhance the digital and ecological transition. More precisely, the plan aims at increasing “the teaching, research, and knowledge transfer capacity of the system over the next decade” (idem, p. 164) as part of its “requalification and internationalization plan for teaching and research staff” (see Component 21). Overall, this conveys an utilitarian approach, setting knowledge produced within research as a basis to foster the intended changes in the country.

4.2 Expected outcomes

Data analysis reveals a predominant policy orientation that positions HE as a strategic instrument for enhancing graduates’ employability and addressing labour market needs. Across the four national plans the expected outcomes of HE are primarily framed in terms of private benefits, particularly employment and skills alignment, while references to broader collective goals - such as social cohesion, scientific literacy, and effective citizenship - are less frequent and tend to be either narrowly framed (e.g., a strong focus on gender equity in Spain) or relegated to a secondary role (as in Greece, Italy and Portugal).

In the Greek NRRP, the expected outcomes of HE are explicitly articulated through the lens of labour market responsiveness and economic adjustment. The plan emphasizes the role of universities in addressing skill mismatches and high levels of overqualification among graduates. As the document states, “a significant number of university graduates are reported to hold jobs for which they are overqualified,” and higher education reform is expected to contribute to “reducing unemployment” and “improving graduates’ employability and relevance to the job market and digital skills” (Hellenic Republic, 2023, pp. 256–259). These goals are embedded within a broader narrative of supporting Greece’s green and digital transitions by equipping citizens with the competences needed for newly emerging sectors. The envisaged reforms and investments will improve educational outcomes, increase the extroversion of Greek

universities and the employability prospects of their graduates" (Hellenic Republic, 2023, p. 43). While the Greek plan includes limited references to collective benefits, such as the need for responsiveness to "the needs of students, of the society and of the economy" (idem, p. 654), these remain peripheral to the dominant framing.

Italy's NRRP adopts a dual structure in its articulation of HE outcomes. On the one hand, the plan is oriented toward reducing territorial and socioeconomic disparities in access to tertiary education, with concrete measures such as scholarships, housing support, and pedagogical modernization. These are framed as efforts to "improve educational outcomes and employability of Italian students" and to increase the proportion of young adults with tertiary qualifications, which remains below the OECD average (Governo Italiano, 2021, p. 112). On the other hand, the Italian plan foregrounds the economic and industrial utility of HE, particularly through university-industry collaboration. Universities are expected to engage in applied research and technology transfer, develop specialized programmes in priority areas, and contribute to the establishment of innovation ecosystems. The plan anticipates "participation of enlarged partnerships – extended to universities, research centres, companies" aiming to support "the development of R&D projects" and "the increase in the number of researchers" "in line with the European Union's Research and Innovation Framework Programme" (Idem, p. 126).

Portugal's NRRP sets out to tackle longstanding structural weaknesses in its labour market by using HE to lever economic modernization. The expected outcomes of HE are strongly tied to private returns, particularly "increased employability and productivity gains" (Governo Português, 2021, p. 273). Investments are concentrated in strategic fields such as digital technologies and STEAM, and are designed to stimulate direct pathways from education to employment. This is evident in the stated goals of reducing skill shortages and increasing the number of HE graduates in targeted fields by "adjusting supply to the transformation of labour markets and new employability requirements" and the "new production models associated with digitalization" (idem, p. 120-121).

The Spanish NRRP presents a comparable emphasis on individual benefits, particularly in terms of enhancing digital competences and increasing access to professional opportunities. Digitalization is framed as both a pedagogical tool and a labour market strategy, expected to facilitate "human capital development" and mitigate dropout risks (Gobierno de España, 2021, p. 35). Here too, employability is the primary

outcome envisioned for HE, closely tied to Spain's broader economic modernization and innovation agenda. However, Spain's plan also reveals a partial concern with collective benefits, particularly through its commitment to gender equality in scientific careers. As noted, "more measures are needed to close the gender gaps that persist in R&D, especially about the presence of women in senior positions in research organizations and universities" (idem, p. 324). Nonetheless, these dimensions are presented as complementary to, rather than constitutive of, the system's primary economic objectives.

4.3 Governance Principles

The four NRRP reveal emphasis on competitive accountability, performance-based funding and enhanced public-private coordination regarding HE governance. While nuances exist across the national contexts, particularly in terms of the extent of emphasis on inclusion (for example tackling gender inequalities in Spain) and regional equity (notably in Italy but also in Portugal), the dominant policy paradigm privileges managerial efficiency, measurable outputs, and alignment with labour market and innovation system demands over traditional collegial governance or informed professionalism.

The Greek NRRP emphasizes performance-based evaluation, international competitiveness and market-oriented efficiency, steering universities towards productivity metrics. The strengthening of higher education is pursued through measures aimed at "increasing efficiency, accessibility, and financial sustainability" (Hellenic Government, 2023, p. 72), including a "results-driven and ROI-oriented approach, alongside improved governance schemes" (idem, p. 86). These reforms seek to strengthen the link between science and business and, in addition to public funding, aim to foster greater private investment in research and development, to encourage business research, development and innovation and knowledge transfer (idem, p. 373 and following). The plan also places significant emphasis on enhancing the competitiveness, internationalization, and extroversion of HE to align research with private sector needs, promote start-ups, and attract investment (idem, see for instance, p. 259 and p. 547).

Italy's NRRP combines competitive mechanisms with normative commitments to inclusion and regional rebalancing. Performance-based funding and competitive calls for research, particularly in strategic areas, are central tools for resource allocation, with specific schemes designed to emulate European Research Council (ERC) models (see Italy NRRP, Component 1). Scholarships and research funding are awarded not only

based on socio-economic need, but also academic merit, reinforcing a dual logic of equity and excellence. However, Italy's governance narrative has an emphasis on equity and territorial cohesion. For example, "the Fund for Construction and Research Infrastructures will finance interventions in research facilities and infrastructures with particular attention to the South," highlighting an explicit effort to mitigate regional disparities (Governo Italiano, 2021, p. 126). Moreover, governance is framed through partnership and co-creation logics: "hubs for innovation, and research and development" (idem, p. 123), involving universities, industry and civil society, are encouraged to co-develop innovation agendas, suggesting a broader conception of stakeholder engagement beyond managerial control.

The governance model promoted by the Portuguese NRRP reflects key elements of NPM, notably through the use of competitive funding mechanisms, performance indicators, and strategic alignment with labour market needs. The plan supports the development of "programs, "schools", and/or "alliances" of initial and postgraduate higher education, in the form of consortia between higher education institutions and employers" (Governo Português, p.120), intended to co-design and implement targeted educational programmes. These structures suggest a shift away from traditional collegial governance towards more networked and performance-oriented forms of management, where institutional legitimacy is increasingly tied to relevance, responsiveness, and return on investment.

Moreover, HE governance in the Portuguese plan is marked by an emphasis on coordination across public and private sectors, particularly through co-financed initiatives in adult education and digital skill development. The use of competitive calls, the prioritization of strategic areas, and the integration of employers in programme design, all point to a governance approach rooted in instrumental rationality and managerial efficiency.

Spain's NRRP also follows a logic of aligning research with private sector needs within the overall intention of creating a "new scientific career. The goal is to support talent and connect it with the private sector" (Gobierno de España, 2021, p. 160). This is associated with the Reform of the National Science Law and the enhancement of public-private collaboration to ensure the quality and good governance of university institutions, namely "strengthen public-private collaboration and promote knowledge transfer" (idem, p. 261). Within this context, facilitating the mobility of research, technology and innovation personnel, are key measures. Thus, the establishment of a network

“encompassing all stakeholders operating in that value chain, from the smallest start-ups to the largest companies, from academia to research staff, and from service providers to suppliers” (idem, p. 155) is foreseen and is expected to foster mobility across the public and private sectors. This main governance guiding principle might be understood as associated with the prevalence of a logic of NPM.

To sum up, the analysis of the Greek, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish NRRPs reveals that despite some differences in policy framing and implementation, all four plans share a common emphasis on maximizing human capital and entrepreneurial capacity as the primary role of HE. The expected outcomes are predominantly focused narrowly on graduates’ employability and measurable private benefits, rather than broader civic, scientific, or collective goals. Similarly, governance principles align with NPM canon, privileging competitive accountability, performance-based funding, and increased coordination with market actors over traditional forms of collegiality or informed professionalism. Our analysis also highlights the presence of references to the crisis (see Table 1). However, except for the Greek case (and even there, only in two excerpts), mentions of the crisis are not directly linked to references to HE. This absence is analytically significant and will be further discussed in the concluding section.

5. Discussion and final remarks

Our findings resonate with Molla and Cuthbert (2023) study, who contend that in the aftermath of the pandemic, national recovery agendas have largely failed to articulate new social imaginaries for HE. Instead, national recovery agendas have reactivated longstanding neoliberal visions of society and the economy. As these authors concluded analysing the Australian context, the reform agendas imprinted in the four Southern European countries present a reductionist account of the value of university education and a weak mention of social justice issues.

Nevertheless, two points should be highlighted. Firstly, considering the continuum marketisation-public good, the four countries tend to position themselves nearer the marketisation logic, even if traces of public good are identifiable (such as a concern with gender equity particularly in Spain or a focus on fostering social and territorial cohesion also in Greece, Italy and Portugal). Secondly, it must be remarked that this set of non-core European countries is usually depicted as continuously facing major challenges concerning the development and consolidation of HE and scientific research. Thus, rather

than acting as a moment for reimagining, the crisis seems to have been seized by these four countries as an opportunity to deepen utilitarian and market-driven logics already embedded within European HE policy.

When focusing on the NRRPs as policy texts, the study supports Rhinard's (2019) analysis of the EU's governance-by-crisis dynamic. The pandemic offered a potent context to further institutionalize European interventions as rapid responses to shared crises - responses that often skip deeper democratic negotiation. In fact, from the Eurozone crisis to migration and Brexit, crises have been mobilized to legitimize a logic of urgency that reinforces top-down policy solutions. The Covid-19 recovery followed the same script. Whether the recovery from the pandemic truly required a European solution may be open to debate, but what is clear is that it provided a unique opportunity to deepen EU integration through shared funding instruments and streamlined policy frameworks. As Rhinard (2019) notes, *crisisification* does not supplant traditional forms of policymaking in the EU, but now operates alongside them, reshaping both time and trajectory.

Ultimately, this study reveals not a transformative agenda for HE, but rather a consolidation of existing paradigms, namely suggesting the reinforcement of a transnational narrative about HE as an economic asset in the South of Europe. Faced with Covid-19 crisis, HE was not predominantly framed as a site for fostering democratic renewal or inclusive social development, but as a vehicle for producing market-ready individuals and scientific knowledge. As Auld and Elfert (2024) suggest, the crisis did not open a path toward imagining a better future through education. Instead, it solidified existing logics, more of the same, wrapped in the urgency of recovery. It is within this framework that we interpret a particularly significant finding: although the term crisis features prominently and consistently across the four NRRPs, it is rarely, if ever, associated with HE. This suggests that the proposed reforms to HE would likely have been the same regardless of whether they were being implemented in a time of crisis or not.

A final note. We acknowledge that NRRPs do not reflect the full political, social, or historical realities of the four countries. Rather, they represent one of the sites in which imaginaries about HE are discursively constructed; these imaginaries do not exist in a vacuum. In fact, one of the well-documented limitations of policy text analysis is the risk of decontextualised textual interpretations (Ball, 1993). Nevertheless, our data allowed us to identify both convergent and divergent national features, and to show how, despite

these differences, the social imaginaries about HE embedded in the NRRPs contribute to the consolidation of a transnational narrative of HE as an economic asset in Southern Europe. Thus, in light of our findings, future research should delve more deeply into HE and the NRRPs. As Kölling and Hernández-Moreno (2023) have noted, while the RRF may contribute to fostering political cohesion within the EU, national governments retain significant autonomy in shaping and implementing their plans, resulting, at times, in divergence from the EU's strategic objectives. This underscores the importance of analysing the specific trajectories followed in each national context, especially concerning HE. Additionally, the recent audit by the European Court of Auditors (2025) highlights persistent concerns regarding the transparency and accountability of the RRF, including the lack of clarity about who benefits from the funded measures and how outcomes are assessed. In this context, tracing the effects of RRF investments in HE will be critical to understanding how these resources have catalysed.

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