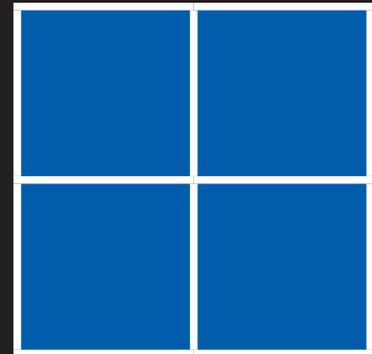


The Evolution of European Union Policies on Vocational Education and Training

John West

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Introduction

Much has been written about VET policy in the various countries of the EU, including comparative studies of many aspects. However there has been relatively little analysis of the policies of the EU itself: why these take the form they do; whether, like a number of other sectors of EU activity they have ‘deepened’ over time; and still less about the impact – if any – that they have had on the policies and practices of Member States.*

The aim of this paper, therefore, is to describe what EU policies there are in the field of VET, and how they have evolved since the EU began. We start with a brief discussion of the theoretical frameworks that have been developed to explain the process of ‘EU integration’ (or lack of it) then turn to a description of the main phases of policy development in the field of VET, discuss in a little more detail the main elements of current EU policy, and finally discuss what this might say about the policy process at EU level, and in particular which of the theories of EU development outlined earlier might most realistically be said to apply.

Theories of EU Integration

It is reasonable to see VET policies in the light of a more general view of how EU policies and institutions develop. A number of different interpretations have been put forward over the years to explain the process of policy development at the EU level. There is a good deal of overlap between them, but we might illustrate four in order to contrast the differing points of view:

- **neo-functionalism**: this interpretation was prevalent amongst academic commentators in the early days of the Community (Lindberg, 1963) and revived in the 1990s (Stone Sweet and Sandholtz, 1998). It is based on the ideas of rational actors seeking to advance their preferences, the importance of interest groups and elites (pluralism) and the reinforcing effects of supranational institutions (cf. the European Commission (EC)) once these have been established. The concept of ‘spillover’ accounts for a trend towards increasing integration. ‘Spillover’ holds that integration in one field (eg. the mobility of labour)

*For example Green, Wolf and Leney’s substantial study (1999) assessing whether or not the education and training systems of EU countries had converged in recent years contained no discussion of the effects, if any, of EU policies themselves on bringing about similarities in the development of education structures in different countries, despite having being sponsored by the Commission.

inevitably leads to pressure for integration in others (eg. common immigration and asylum policies, moves towards European citizenship). Neo-functionalism predicts gradualist, technocratic, path-dependent and perhaps accidental pathways to integration. The founding father of the EU, Jean Monnet, was arguably in this camp, as he believed in progressive integration area by area, building up a functional case for an ever closer union:

‘The new method of action developed in Europe replaces the efforts at domination of nation states by a constant process of collective adaptation to new conditions, a chain reaction, a ferment where one change induces another.’ (Monnet, 2003)

- ‘liberal inter-governmentalism’ (Moravcsik, 1998) takes states (rather than EU-based officials, elites or interest groups) as its main units of action. States form their preferences through their own internal political processes, bargain with each other to reach the optimal policy solution, and – where it is in their interests to have a durable inter-governmental arrangement – erect supranational institutions to administer and enforce the mutually agreed solution. The nature of the solution depends principally on the strength of preferences for a particular outcome between the various states and their comparative bargaining power. Thus the EU is no different in principle to other supranational organizations erected through international agreement – the degree, direction and speed of integration is explicable by the sum of the preferences of its constituents (factored by their relative power) and it acts to optimise these.*
- a rather stronger version of liberal inter-governmentalism is presented by Milward (1992) who considers that European integration and the formation of supranational institutions were:

‘... not the supersession of the nation-state by another form of governance as the nation state became incapable, but was the creation of European nation-states themselves for their own purposes, an act of national will.’ (p. 18)

Drawing particularly on the history of the early years of the Community, Milward argues that the institutions and collective policies of the member states can be explained purely by fact that the EU served the interests of the nations, with different countries drawing different benefits at various times. It was sometimes even convenient for a national government to blame the EU ‘for unpopular policies which were also those of the government itself, and, when it suited the mood, caricatured as a technocratic dictatorship trampling the rights of

*This theory is labelled ‘liberal’ in contrast to ‘realist’ because it asserts that countries’ preferences are set through their internal political processes (democratic/pluralist) rather than purely by their geo-political status.

[national citizens] underfoot' (p.116). Contra the neo-functionalists or federalists, there is nothing at all inevitable about 'ever closer union'; the future course of the EU depends entirely on its members and on the relative power between them.

- the 'social constructivist' point of view in contrast asserts that there is an 'idea of Europe', formed through the interaction of actors with the central institutions, which results from joint learning and socialization, the construction of behavioural and belief norms and assisted by vigorous entrepreneurs, which has a discernible impact on political actions and which reinforces and itself leads to increased integration:

'European institutions can construct, through a process of interaction, the identities and interests of member states and groups within them.' (Checkel, 2003, p. 355)

A stronger version of this is the federalist idea, that there is an inevitability of an 'ever closer union', whether through historical forces, an underlying common identity or the ideas of great men, which will lead – in Winston Churchill's phrase – to some kind of "united states of Europe" (Churchill, 1974).

- alternatively, an emphasis on 'political economy' asserts the essentially economic nature of the EU, and views it as an arrangement which promotes economic growth and/or industrial/commercial interests. While there are many strands within this grouping (eg. Marxism, interplay between 'varieties of capitalism' such as Anglo-American and 'Westphalian' models of the organization and funding of enterprises), one particular variant posits the idea of the 'regulation theory' whereby compensatory arrangements are made in society to counter or balance the otherwise unacceptable effects of economic growth, thus leading to some kind of settlement – which may change over time. In this interpretation various facets of European integration (and varying degrees of it) are explicable as functions of the quest for economic expansion or consequential arrangements for changing 'regulation' in society. Thus, according to Cafruny and Ryner (2009):

'Supranational institutions and ideas have not been, in themselves, the most important factors driving European integration. Rather they have played a decisive role only to the extent that they have successfully articulated the interests and strategies of the dominant national, regional and transatlantic social forces.' (p. 237).

It is, of course, possible to combine elements of these theories of integration, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. A recent example is Perry Anderson's *The New Old World* (Anderson, 2009). In a wide ranging commentary on Europe's post-war development, Anderson – rather like a shopper in a clothing store – tries on the various theories of EU integration, and

while finding favour in some elements of most, does not find the ‘perfect fit’. Anderson’s own ‘mix and match’ preference is not brought into very sharp focus, but seems to consist of:

- the EU as a project favoured by elites (both nationally and within the EU institutions), who take care not to expose it to any popular mandate wherever possible, but who do not have any very clear end-view beyond the shared view that integration is desirable. One can see the commonality with neo-functionalism here;
- the EU as a geo-political device conceived both as a way to prevent further war in Europe (and particularly to contain a potentially resurgent Germany), and to counter the Soviet bloc during the cold war; in these aims the EU is inextricably linked to (and supported by) the USA. Here we see an inter-governmentalist interpretation, ‘realist’ perhaps rather than ‘liberal’;
- the EU as a vehicle for promoting free-trade economic relations, with the contestability of this economic stance being put beyond the democratic sphere of individual nation states. This aspect has increased over time; originally the EU was conceived by Monnet as being “capable, not simply of freeing factors of production across unified markets, but [also] of macro-economic intervention and social redistribution” (p. 540), but now Anderson considers that these latter roles have atrophied leaving the EU primarily as a free-trade zone wedded to the freedom of capital within it. Here Anderson clearly views the EU as a particular type of political economy.

One can agree or not with Anderson’s interpretations, but the ideas that the EU owes its nature to a number of different drivers, and that the balance between them shifts rather unpredictably over time, seem precepts well worth bearing in mind.

The Main Milestones in EU Education and Training Policy

It makes sense to divide the EU’s evolution of VET policy into a number of phases:

- i) the early years of the Community;
- ii) attempts at intervention;
- iii) lifelong learning and economic development;
- iv) creation of a VET ‘space’.

Though these phases overlap to a degree, and certain strands weave through a number of them, they are reasonably sequential and contain their own narratives.

Early Years

The 1957 Treaty of Rome (European Economic Community, 1957) made no provision for education; it did, however, make an apparently strong provision for vocational training:

‘The Council shall, acting on a proposal from the Commission and after consulting the Economic and Social Committee [of the social partners] lay down general principles for implementing a common vocational training policy capable of contributing to the harmonious development both of the national economies and of the common market.’ (Article 128, p. 104)

Also relevant were the general provisions for ‘freedom of movement for workers’ (Article 48), the progressive abolition of all ‘qualifying periods and other restrictions ... imposed on workers of other Member States conditions regarding the free choice of employment other than those imposed on workers of the State concerned’ (Article 49), and – very specifically – provision in Article 57 for the Council of Ministers (the supreme legislative body of the Community) to ‘issue directives for the mutual recognition of diplomas, certificates and other evidence of formal qualifications’.

Several years were to pass, however, before anything approaching a ‘common vocational training policy’ was to emerge and this was in the form of ten ‘common principles’ (Council of the European Communities, 1963). These were broadly conceived, for example ‘to bring about conditions that will guarantee adequate vocational training for all’, and ‘to promote basic and advanced vocational training and, where appropriate, retraining, suitable for the various stages of working life’ (Objectives under Principle Two). Worthy though these sentiments were, there was nothing very actionable at Community level since:

‘A common vocational training policy means a coherent and progressive common action which entails that each Member State shall draw up programmes and shall ensure that these are put into effect in accordance with the general principles contained in this Decision ...’ (Article One)

The Commission had the duty to carry out relevant research, to ‘collect distribute and exchange any useful information’, to ‘draw up a list of training facilities’, and to ‘encourage direct exchanges of experience’. The one point of direct intervention was ambitious, though. This was for the Commission to:

‘... draw up in respect of the various occupations which call for specific training a standardised description of the basic qualifications required at various levels of training...[in order that] harmonisation of the standards required for success in final examinations should be sought ...’ (8th Principle).

Continuing efforts were made on this last point, but attempts by the Commission in the 1960s to draw up, fund and operate a transnational training programme (in this instance for unemployed

Italian workers seeking work in other countries), ran into severe opposition and attempts at Community-level action appear to have lapsed (CEDEFOP, 2004).

Thus while the original treaty appeared to envisage some kind of common training policy, enhancing mobility of workers (and probably particularly geared to the restructuring of heavy industries which had underpinned the European Coal and Steel Community from which the EEC had developed), the execution of such policies had been slow and halting. The ‘common principles’ are clear that training is largely left to member states, and the Commission’s role is primarily one of facilitation and technical fixes to allow comparability of vocational qualifications.

Attempts at intervention

The 1970s saw the first forays of the Community into the field of education (as opposed to vocational training). Partly this seems to have been as a result of the expansion of the Community, and a realization that little was being achieved through the Council of Europe (which had originally been seen as the vehicle for educational cooperation). Partly too, it was a result of a common desire to stress the social, rather than merely the economic, functions of the Community and a desire in the Commission to widen the basis of EEC policies generally so as to avoid “restrictions on the natural development of the dynamism of the European Community” (European Commission, 2006b, p. 64). Given the lack of legal authority for any action by the EEC in the field of education proper, the mode selected was that of ‘co-operation’, and the first meetings of education ministers were styled, awkwardly, as ‘the Council and the ministers of education meeting within the Council’. Thinking was done, both by the Commission and by education ministers, as to what – if any – the role of the Community in education might be, and the first central mechanisms for co-operation took shape – for example *Eurydice*, a descriptive database of education systems started in 1980; *Arion*, a programme of study visits for education administrators (1978); and *NARIC*, national centres advising on equivalences of diplomas and study periods within higher education (1984). *Eurostat* started to compile education statistics on an EEC-wide basis in 1978.

There was, however, little action in vocational training, except for the establishment of a parallel small programme (PETRA) in the late 1970s which had the object of establishing pilot projects and networks of vocational training providers. In addition the European Centre for the

Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) was established in 1975 as an agency for research and co-operation, but more specifically:

‘to encourage and support any initiative likely to facilitate a concerted approach to vocational training problems. The centre's activity in this respect shall deal in particular with the problem of the approximation of standards of vocational training with a view to the mutual recognition of certificates and other documents attesting completion of vocational training.’ (Council of the European Communities, 1975, Article 2.2)

The early 1980s saw an attempt to widen the vision of the Community to embrace the so called ‘People’s Europe’ launched at the Fontainebleau Summit of 1984 (Council of the European Communities, 1984) which considered it:

‘essential that the Community should respond to the expectations of the people of Europe by adopting measures to strengthen and promote its identity and its image both for its citizens and for the rest of the world.’ (p. 11)

This stance encouraged the Commission to seek to establish its new programmes in the field of education and training more securely and on a substantially larger scale – these, after all, would affect the people of Europe directly rather than relying on the intermediation of Member States. Not surprisingly there was opposition amongst the more Eurosceptic Member States (particularly Denmark), which focused on the legal basis for centrally run programmes in the field of education, given that the Treaty of Rome made no mention of education. The Commission, however, was relieved by the 1985 *Gravier* judgement of the European Court of Justice which held that vocational training (which was plainly included in the Treaty) included:

‘any form of education which prepares for a qualification for a particular profession, trade or employment or which provides the necessary skills for such a profession, trade or employment ...’ (European Commission, 2006b, p. 102)

As a result of this ruling, much of higher education, at least, was in scope to the Commission. Various programmes were launched, including *Erasmus* in higher education and *Leonardo da Vinci* in the vocational education area. These schemes continue, though differently grouped and slightly amended, to this day.

The 1980s also saw developments in requirements for the mutual recognition of Diplomas and Certificates, a field which was also plainly in scope to the Community, and indeed one which was central to one of its main tenets – the freedom of movement of workers. Two Directives were issued one concerning Higher Education Diplomas (Council of the European Communities, 1989), followed 3 years later by a complementary version for lower and shorter duration training requirements (Council of the European Communities, 1992).

In the late 1980s there was a doubling of size of the so-called ‘structural’ funds of the EU – principally the European Regional Development Fund, focusing on infrastructure and industrial restructuring, and the European Social Fund (ESF) providing help for individuals at a disadvantage, in depressed regions or affected by industrial change. These funds were increasingly seen as important corollaries of the ‘single market’ (also in development at that time) as the free movement of goods and services was expected to increase the regional disparities within the EU which these funds would help to mitigate (Dinan, 2005). The smaller ESF is very largely spent on training – in the latter half of the 1990s, training amounted to nearly 75 per cent of its expenditure (European Commission, 1997, p. 115). The fund aims to stimulate training by requiring that expenditures from it should involve ‘additionality’. It aims to direct this additional expenditure to regions and people who are disadvantaged or who are particularly prone to the effects of economic change. However the nature and quality of the training interventions made are entirely the prerogative of the member states, and indeed it is likely that the shares of the ESF that accrue to each member state are largely determined by political considerations rather than objective criteria (Allen, 2005). Though at €30bn* the ESF is a sizeable fund, in 2005 it accounted for a little less than a third of all the structural funds, and around 10 per cent of all EU expenditure (European Commission, 2009a).

The contested legal basis for Community action in education was tidied up in the 1992 *Treaty of Maastricht*. This introduced an Article (126) which clearly permitted joint action in the field of education ‘while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems and cultural and linguistic diversity’ (European Union, 1992). A parallel article – replacing Article 128 of the Treaty of Rome – was introduced in respect of vocational training. This required that:

‘The Community shall implement a vocational training policy which shall support and supplement the action of the Member States, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content and organisation of vocational training.’ (Article 127)

It can be seen that this approach was rather more narrowly based than the equivalent in the Treaty of Rome, including now the principle of ‘subsidiarity’ (whereby the Community only did things which could not be done at a lower level). The Article also gives the aims of any Community action: to ‘facilitate adaptation to industrial changes’, to ‘improve initial and continuing training’, to ‘facilitate access ... and encourage mobility of instructors and trainees’,

*2005 figures. EU accounts after 2006 do not easily allow the separate identification of the ESF.

to ‘stimulate cooperation ... between educational or training establishments and firms’, and to ‘develop exchanges of information and experience on issues common to the training systems of the Member States.’ Importantly, both articles specified that action taken at Community level must exclude ‘any harmonisation of the laws and regulations of the Member States.’ These provisions would appear to limit the aspiration of the Treaty of Rome for a ‘common vocational training policy’.

This formative period for policy was thus essentially one of experimentation, with the Commission attempting to widen the scope of its activities into education proper, testing the limits of central actions which were acceptable to member states, establishing some democratic credentials for its activities in education and training through reaching directly to a number of the stakeholders within member states, while getting on with the two spheres for which the EU had undoubted legitimacy – the mutual recognition of qualifications and the Social Fund. The education and training provisions of the Maastricht treaty can be seen as a form of ‘settlement’ between the Commission and member states, allowing it a role in education (as the Treaty of Rome did not), but limiting its role in VET to a rather more realistic level than that which might have been implied in the original Treaty.

Lifelong learning and economic development

By the beginning of the 1990s problems of economic growth were beginning to pre-occupy the Commission and the Council, and connections between overall growth, international competitiveness and education and training were beginning to be made, whereas before training was largely seen as helping individuals cope with industrial restructuring or disadvantage. The Commission’s *White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment* (European Commission, 1993b) – the ‘Delors’ White Paper – for the first time in terms of Community policy, invoked the importance of education and training in securing growth and in particular introduced the notion of lifelong learning (though this had been in currency in earlier OECD and UNESCO publications):

‘All measures must ... be based on the *concept of developing, generalizing and systematizing lifelong learning and continuing training*. This means that education and training systems must be reworked in order to take account of the need ... for the *permanent recomposition and redevelopment of knowledge and know-how*.’
(p. 120, italics as in original)

The White Paper called for much action by Member States. At Community level it proposed that there should be action:

‘to improve the quality of training and to foster innovation in education by increasing exchanges of experience and information on good practices and developing joint projects; to establish a genuine European area of - and market in - skills and training by increasing the transparency, and improving the mutual recognition, of qualifications and skills; to promote European-level mobility among teachers, students and other people undergoing training, that is to say physical mobility and the 'virtual' mobility made possible by the new technologies of communication; to develop common databases and knowledge on skills needs; to conduct comparative research on methodologies used and policies implemented; to improve the interoperability of systems of distance learning and to increase the level of standardization of the new decentralized multi-media training tools, etc.’ (p. 122)

Though lengthy, this was a fairly ‘technical’ list, confined in the main to things that the Community had done before and to items which could be represented as things which Member States could not readily undertake on their own. However the Commission also proposed that:

‘... the Community should *set firmly and clearly the essential requirements and the long-term objectives for measures and policies in this area* in order to make it easier to develop a new model for growth, competitiveness and employment in which education and training play a key role ...’ (p. 122, italics as in original)

The idea of having a collective forward agenda across of all of education and training, and tied to objectives, was clearly now mooted.

The notion of moving beyond co-operation and selective community-wide programmes had been raised earlier the same year in a Commission working paper on education and training:

‘... Community action is developing and should continue to develop at 3 levels:

- the encouragement of well-structured cooperation between the education and training systems;
- the promotion of quality through innovation by exchanges of information and experience; and
- the launching of specific direct actions on a community-wide basis, where there is a clear advantage over action only at a national level.

... Community action should seek to give a strong multiplier effect to the promotion of innovations which aim to improve the quality of education and training and set higher standards or new targets. These efforts should focus on problems of common concern identified in collaboration with Member States ...’ (European Commission, 1993a, pp. 9-10)

The new element here was the idea of ‘higher standards or new targets’. The next decade was to see this approach considerably developed. In the field of economic development in general, and vocational education and training in particular, the EU was to develop a mode of operation which was entirely different from the previous methods of funding discrete initiatives, arranging

co-operation or issuing legally binding directives in the closely defined fields where it had competence.

The first manifestation of this new approach came in the field of employment. The European Employment Strategy was launched in 1997; as well as the usual fine words the strategy contained a mode of working involving the setting of overall targets, the production of action plans by each member state, review of these by countries jointly (based on assessments by the Commission) and statistical monitoring of results. Publication of material accompanied each stage (European Commission, 2006a).

This Employment Strategy has persisted to this day, with slight emendations to its procedures. The Eastern European countries were encouraged to participate in it before their accession in 2004-7. VET is clearly relevant to the strategy, but until the Lisbon summit of 2000 the training elements were largely confined to training for unemployed people as part of ‘active labour market policies’.

The *Lisbon Summit* of 2000 not only revived the agenda of enhancing economic growth and productivity in an EU context that had been earlier set out in the 1993 White Paper, but it followed it too, in placing education (and, perhaps more naturally, training) in the service of these economic imperatives. It set:

‘a new strategic goal for the next decade: *to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion.*’ (Lisbon European Council, 2000, p. 2 italics as in original)

According to the communiqué:

‘Europe’s education and training systems need to adapt both to the demands of the knowledge society and to the need for an improved level and quality of employment. They will have to offer learning and training opportunities tailored to target groups at different stages of their lives: young people, unemployed adults and those in employment who are at risk of seeing their skills overtaken by rapid change.’ (p. 8)

This might seem familiar rhetoric, but then (p. 9) we have more specific targets, not all of which are jobs to be done at the Community level, including ‘a substantial increase in per capita investment in human resources’, a halving, by 2010, of the number of 18-24 year olds with only lower secondary education who are not in further education and training and ‘schools and training centres, all linked to the Internet, [to be] developed into multipurpose local learning centres accessible to all ...’ Reflections on further ‘concrete future objectives of education systems’ were remitted to the Council of Education Ministers.

The Lisbon summit effectively combined the economically driven education agenda of the ‘Delors’ White Paper with the working method that had been developed for the Employment Strategy, which was enshrined as the preferred working method. This was the so-called ‘open method of coordination’ as the means of spreading best practice and achieving greater convergence towards the main EU goals” which involved (p.12):

- ‘fixing guidelines for the Union combined with specific timetables for achieving the goals which they set in the short, medium and long terms’;
- ‘establishing, where appropriate, quantitative and qualitative indicators and benchmarks against the best in the world and tailored to the needs of different Member States and sectors as a means of comparing best practice’;
- ‘translating these European guidelines into national and regional policies by setting specific targets and adopting measures, taking into account national and regional differences’;
- ‘periodic monitoring, evaluation and peer review organised as mutual learning processes.’

The ‘open method of co-ordination’ allowed the EU as a whole to influence the activities and performance of member states in a way in which could be represented as no more than voluntary inter-governmental co-operation, aided by the services of the Commission. There was no community law involved nor any attempt to establish common institutions for the operation of VET, education more generally or indeed the wider economic agenda. On the face of it all that mattered was progress, and activities were entirely a matter for member states. In reality of course the establishment of ‘transparent’ numerical targets and the discipline of open reporting, combined with the ability of the Commission to validate and comment upon the progress and actions of each member state was designed to act as a distinct spur to influence the domestic activities of each country, not least by providing ammunition to the domestic public, press and oppositions in the case of any backsliding.

The Education Ministers duly reported back on the ‘concrete objectives’, which were endorsed in February 2002 (Council of the European Communities, 2002). There were now 13 objectives for education and training, which appear to have subsumed the six laid down in Lisbon. In many cases indicators of success (‘benchmarks’ in the jargon) were yet to be developed.

In parallel the Commission organized a consultation on the concept of lifelong learning in its *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* (European Commission, 2000), reporting back a year later, in November 2001 (European Commission, 2001). This highlighted six priorities: mutual recognition of qualifications; information, guidance and counselling; access to education and training; more investment in lifelong learning; development of basic skills; and the development

of new training methods. It, too, suggested that the ‘open method of coordination’ be applied in these areas (p. 25).

Surprisingly soon after these two sets of proposals the Commission undertook a stock-take of the education and training situation, not only in Member States, but also in the various countries which at the time were candidates for accession. As a result it concluded that:

‘efforts are being made in all the European countries to adapt the education and training systems to the knowledge-driven society and economy, but the reforms undertaken are not up to the challenges and their current pace will not enable the Union to attain the objectives set.’ (European Commission, 2003, p. 3)

The Commission noted that ‘the date of 2010 is getting closer and closer’ [p. 4] and called for national strategies and ‘coherent action plans’. Rather sinisterly, it declared:

‘the urgent nature of the challenges to be faced means we have to use the open method of coordination to the full – while fully complying with the principle of subsidiarity.’ (p. 4)

The threat of using the open method ‘to the full’ was manifested in a requirement for annual reports on progress from each country (later amended to be biennial).

A broader follow-up to Lisbon was made by a ‘High Level Group of Experts’ headed by Wim Kok, which reported in November 2004. It also considered that progress was too slow, and asked for annual guidelines and reports on economic growth and jobs, which of course included relevant education measures.

This approach to co-ordinating growth strategies, including broad education measures continues, though with some amendments both to substance and to method. Following the financial crisis of 2007-8 (and the realization that the original benchmark year of 2010 had arrived), the Commission published a revised *Europe 2020* strategy and set of targets (European Commission, 2010). This iteration of the ‘open method of co-ordination’ combined the established reporting against the Euro-related ‘stability and growth pact’ with that emanating from Lisbon. The central education targets at the highest EU level have been confined to reducing early school leaving to under 10 per cent and achieving a minimum of 40 per cent participation in tertiary education (measured by those aged 30-34 who have completed it). Individual countries were invited to nominate their own targets on each of these measures, and to report progress on each aspect each year in ‘National Reform Programmes’. As before, these self-assessments are commented on publicly by the Commission and are subject to recommendations made collectively by the European Council.

The first assessment by the Commission of the prospects for the achievement of the 2020 targets came in its *Annual Growth Survey* (European Commission, 2011a). This concluded, on the basis of the targets set by individual member states*, that neither of the EU-wide education benchmarks was likely to be met, though ‘the gaps are not so large that they cannot be closed by determined action in the coming years’ (p. 12). The Commission clearly also had some doubts as to whether member states were earnest in their efforts to achieving the education targets they had set for themselves, or whether they were merely reiterating pre-existing national policies and programmes:

‘The analysis of the draft NRPs [National Reform Programs submitted by individual countries] reveals that on average greater attention is paid to the analysis of current challenges and possible answers than to defining concrete reform plans and measures. In most draft NRPs it is unclear whether measures described are launched in response or at least adjusted to the priorities of Europe 2020.’ (p. 8)

though it noted that ‘an exception to this trend was the programmes presented by Member States receiving financial assistance, which presented more detailed measures’ (p. 11).

This high level reporting, though, is only the tip of a considerable iceberg. Similar patterns of the ‘open method of co-ordination’, involving national reports and EU-level assessments, exist both for the community’s employment strategy (which, as we have seen, started the process) and more specifically for education and training. In principle these reports and analyses feed into the Growth Survey, though they contain much more material and support their own networks.

The 2011 Employment Report (European Commission, 2011b) declared that ‘insufficient quality of training and education is hindering transitions on the labour market’ (p. 7), citing the lack of ‘responsiveness’ of training systems. Participation of adults is:

‘often too low ... due to lack of incentives for companies to train workers, insufficient support to workers to engage in training and inadequate offer responding to the needs of particular groups. Moreover complex structure of financing and a vast array of providers make it difficult to implement coherent strategies ... Multiple spheres of responsibility, overlapping funding and the absence of a genuine lead weaken the governance of the system.’ (p. 8)

With respect to another key concern – early school leaving – while many countries attempt to tackle it through innovative learning and teaching methods, and more targeted support for pupils at risk:

* the UK did not nominate a target for either of the education measures, and the Netherlands did not for the target concerned with higher education.

‘... the impact of such measures often remains low ... Holistic approaches closely coordinated with other relevant policy sectors are often lacking to address all multi-related factors. (p. 8)

Finally, moving down this rather complex food-chain, there have been biennial analyses of progress towards the ‘Education and Training 2010 work programme’. The 2010 report was supported by a Commission staff working document (European Commission, 2009b) running to 135 pages excluding the assessments on individual countries. These reports focus on rather different items from cycle to cycle, for example the 2010 report contained much on ‘key competences’, of which there is – perhaps inevitably – an approved European list.*

On lifelong learning the 2010 conspectus concludes that:

‘Many countries have an agreed and published strategy. However, these can be considered comprehensive and coherent only in a relatively small number of cases.’

and that:

‘A challenge remains the effective implementation of lifelong learning strategies and policies. There is little evidence in the national reports that LLL [Lifelong Learning] strategies are broadly supported by targeted funding mechanisms ... Implementation plans should be guided by concrete targets and a clear division of responsibilities between actors whereas strong monitoring mechanisms to assess progress and impact of new policies need to be more often established.’ (p. 111)

On VET specifically, the report observes that countries are using modularization, pathways to higher education and improvements in quality to make VET more attractive, though ‘the validation of non-formal and informal learning may remain a challenge in most countries.’ Involvement of the ‘social partners’ is ‘now also becoming more frequent in the countries without that tradition’ and ‘Apprenticeships and work-based training schemes are ... increasingly being established in the countries with no work-based training tradition’ (p. 123).

Creation of a VET ‘space’

Overlapping with the efforts to act on education and training as a vehicle for promoting economic development, and often using rhetoric derived from *Lisbon*, the EU devoted attention to a range of more specific measures designed to enhance the compatibility of different education and, particularly, VET systems. As we have seen, this strand was present in the 1993

* Communication in the mother tongue; Communication in foreign languages; Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology; Digital competence; Learning to learn; Social and civic competences; Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship; Cultural awareness and expression. (Official Journal of the European Union, 2006).

Delors White Paper which as well as the “long-term objectives” for education and training which were to materialize in the Lisbon initiatives, proposed measures to enhance “the mutual recognition, of qualifications and skills” and to promote “mobility among teachers, students and other people undergoing training” (p. 122).

Of course the vision of compatibility had had a long history within the EU, starting with ideas of harmonization through common principles, and later reflected in the task of ‘approximation of standards’ given to CEDEFOP. But apart from arrangements for the mutual recognition of a limited number of qualifications which acted as ‘licences to practice’ in member states, little had resulted from this vision – and indeed, as we have seen, the Maastricht Treaty expressly banned harmonization in the field of VET.

Following the 1993 White Paper some more specific ideas were proposed in a further *White Paper on Teaching and Learning* (European Commission, 1995). Here we find proposals such as a European accreditation system for skills – including key skills and a template for personal skills cards (p. 35) embodying ‘more flexible ways of acknowledging skills’ (p. 34). A European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), already in embryo form in higher education institutions would be rolled out and paralleled in VET (p. 35). Mobility of apprentices between countries would be promoted, supported by a European apprentice/trainee charter (p. 41). A European Voluntary Service Scheme would be set up on an enduring basis, support for a network of ‘second chance’ schools given (p. 44), and ‘quality guarantee systems’ including a ‘European Quality Label’ would be made available for the teaching of European languages (p. 48).

There was, though, little impetus behind these rather technical proposals and progress appears to have been limited during the 1990s. But in 1998, quite outside the ambit of the Community and a surprise according to Commission officials of the time (European Commission, 2006b, p. 197), the *Sorbonne Declaration* was made by higher education Ministers of France, Germany, the UK and Italy. These countries proposed ‘progressive harmonisation of the overall framework of [higher education] degrees and cycles’. We may note that this went beyond the powers of the Community in the Maastricht Treaty, so when the declaration was reformulated into European Union terms in 1999 in Bologna the word ‘harmonisation’ was not included (p. 197). Though technically outside the Community ambit (30 countries associated themselves with Bologna) the development was significant in showing what could be achieved:

‘Bologna changed the paradigm: it was no longer simply a question of mobility and cooperation, but rather of convergence between systems.’ (European Commission, 2006b, p. 29)

Bologna (and Sorbonne before it) held out the prospect of a ‘European area of higher education ... to promote citizens’ mobility and employability and the Continent’s overall development’ (European Ministers of Education, 1999, pp. 1-2). The idea of an ‘area’ or ‘space’ has to do with ease of movement not only of students but also of staff and knowledge; it necessitates a degree of underlying common architecture so that different structures and traditions can be readily understood and navigated. In the case of higher education these elements included ‘easily readable and comparable degrees’, a common system of two main cycles of higher education, a system of credits and ‘co-operation in quality assurance’ (p. 2).

In 2002 there was a clear attempt to replicate the *Bologna* initiative in the field of vocational education and training, with the aim, not so much of increasing its volume and universality (which was the thrust of the *Lisbon* process), but rather to create a ‘space’ or ‘common area’ for VET in the same manner as was being undertaken for higher education. Thus the *Copenhagen Declaration* (European Ministers of Vocational Education and Training and European Commission, 2002) referred to a ‘European education and training area’ (p. 2) and aspired to promote ‘action similar to the Bologna-process, but adapted to the field of vocational education and training’ (p. 2). It called for more mobility and cooperation, the creation of a single framework for the various documents which aided mobility in the labour market and between education systems as well as pushing forward ideas for increasing ‘transparency’ of qualifications including the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, and ‘common criteria and principles for quality in vocational education and training’ (p. 3).

Like *Bologna*, the Copenhagen Process gave rise to a work programme interspersed with regular summits.* Again like *Bologna* the ‘process’ included European countries which were not in the EU (by 2010 Croatia, the FYR of Macedonia, Iceland, Turkey, Liechtenstein, and Norway). This work programme has resulted in a series of joint ‘instruments’ which are intended to aid mobility and commonality in vocational education, including: a revised *Europass* (a standard way of setting out vocational achievements) in 2005; a *European Qualifications Framework* in 2008; a template for a *European Credit System for VET* (ECVET) in 2008; and the *European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET* in 2009.

* a veritable tour of European cities – Maastricht, 2004, Helsinki, 2006, Bordeaux, 2008, and Bruges 2010.

Current Strands in EU VET Policy

Where does this evolution of VET policy leave the EU today? We can examine this in terms of the conceptualization of VET and in terms of the current areas of EU intervention.

Conceptualization of VET

The overall conceptualization and positioning of VET has moved from being fairly specific training or re-training for particular jobs to a very wide concept, overlapping with general education and spanning, in theory at least, secondary education, adult training both generally and in connection with active labour market measures, much of higher education and lifelong learning as a whole (including quite explicitly non-formal and informal learning).

This change in conceptualization in the scope of VET in part mirrors similar changes in member states and international organizations, particularly the introduction of concepts of lifelong learning in the 1990s. But it also reflects the desire of the Commission, before the Maastricht Treaty, to widen the remit undoubtedly given to the Community in the Treaty of Rome for ‘vocational training’ (the term used in the Treaty) to a wider sphere – a widening given legal justification in the *Gravier* judgement. After Maastricht a wide interpretation of both education and training allowed the Community to gain some jurisdiction through its employment and economic strategies while avoiding specific measures which might be interpreted as efforts to bring about harmonization between national systems, or to prejudice ‘subsidiarity’.

As well as a change in conceptualization of the *scope* of VET, we can detect in the history, a change in the conceptualization in the *rationale* for VET. Prior to the Delors White Paper of 1993 VET appears to have been seen primarily as a ‘compensatory’ measure. VET policy, at least at the Community level, was framed within the ambit of social policy with the task of ameliorating industrial change and disadvantage – whether personal or regional; the major expansion of the Social Fund is a clear example of this way of thinking. After the White Paper VET (and education more generally) was seen much more as a driver of economic development through its impact on human capital and on future productivity. It is true that social cohesion was avowed, throughout, as a parallel aim; but commentators from both Eastern and Western Europe seem clear that it was subordinate (Kuhn and Sultana, 2006; Strietska-Ilina, 2007).*

*Some deny the dichotomy and follow ‘third way’ thinking that social cohesion is necessary for sustainable economic growth, and growth is necessary for a stable society (Dale and Robertson, 2006).

The positioning of the rationale for VET as an economic rather than a social measure has arguably pushed it up the political agenda within the EU. As well as featuring prominently in the high-level political processes that followed the *Lisbon* summit it meant that VET was a prominent item in the efforts to promote the economic development of Eastern Europe prior to accession – marked by the creation of the European Training Foundation in 1994 as a specific agency to promote VET as part of the EU’s aid efforts.

While the broader scope of VET and its economic rationale may have increased the prominence of VET policy within the EU, arguably they have also diffused it. The EU has, perhaps understandably, studiously avoided pronouncing on the merits or demerits of particular institutional approaches to initial VET (cf. apprenticeship or school-based) or on the mechanisms (exhortation, levies, regulation, *etc.*) which might prompt employers to train; pronouncements have customarily been at the most general level of the importance of lifelong learning. Similarly the economic rationale for VET has meant that other economic determinants (employment policy, the single market, financial crises *etc.*) have tended to swamp the VET agenda; education seems a rather smaller component of the *Europe 2020* agenda than it did at Lisbon a decade earlier.

Areas of Intervention

The history of EU VET policy has in many ways been a story of the Community (and specifically the Commission) attempting to find legitimate and acceptable means of intervening. At every point at least some member states have been reluctant to countenance expansion of either the powers or the budgets which would allow EU intervention to take concrete effect. It would appear, though, that since around 2000 there has been a fairly stable ‘settlement’ between countries and between the Council of Ministers and the Commission as to what types of intervention are appropriate.

The most long-standing area is that of *mutual recognition of diplomas*, which has been dealt with rather separately from policy on vocational education and training. This policy area concerns the recognition of Diplomas for purposes of professional mobility, rather than (as is the case with the measures stemming from *Copenhagen*) recognition for purposes of continuing study, or mobility between education and training institutions in different countries.

Unlike other areas of education and training, this is one where ‘hard’ Law may apply at the Community level – as we have seen, the Treaty of Rome provided expressly for directives about

mutual recognition. These powers apply in cases where a Diploma or Certificate is required in a certain country for the practice of a particular occupation or profession. In such cases, in order to allow mobility of labour, some mechanism is needed whereby someone who has trained to an equivalent level in another country may satisfy, or partially satisfy, the requirements applying in the country to which they are moving. Originally this was pursued on a profession by profession basis, with agreements across Member States about equivalent qualifications. This, however, was a tortuous business and naturally became slower as the number of Member States progressively expanded. The *General Directives* adopted in 1989 and 1992 resolved this problem by placing a duty on Member States to adopt procedures in respect of each of their ‘regulated professions’ whereby either they recognized equivalent qualifications gained in other Member States or laid down supplementary training in the form of an ‘adaptation period’ or ‘aptitude test’ (Council of the European Communities, 1992, Article 7).

Outside the regulated professions the original hope was that there might be ‘harmonization’ of training – ie. that training standards would converge. It was plain at an early stage that this was unrealistic, so the search instead was for ‘equivalences’. As we have seen, this was one of the tasks for which CEDEFOP was set up. A large exercise was started in the 1980s to ‘undertake work ... on the comparability of vocational training qualifications between the various Member States, in respect of specific occupations or groups of occupations’ (Council of the European Communities, 1985, Article 2). This work included, *inter alia*, ‘drawing up mutually agreed Community job descriptions’ and ‘matching the vocational training qualifications recognized in the various Member States with the job descriptions’ in order to identify, for each occupation, a table showing the relevant vocational qualification in each Member State (Article 3). This proved a Sisyphean task in which:

‘Under [CEDEFOP’s] aegis, dozens of tripartite groups of experts met to try to draw up correspondence tables for skilled workers in the various occupations. While questions did arise once the work had been completed as to the practical value of the tables so produced, CEDEFOP’s work contributed greatly to promoting a European approach in training.’ (European Commission, 2006b, pp. 233-4)

Nothing seems to remain of this task – the scale of which, with 27 Members, constant updating of vocational qualifications, and flexibility of job descriptions, would surely now boggle the mind. But the scarring experience on those involved no doubt encouraged the move away from the idea of ‘equivalences’ into that of ‘transparency’, which is the flag under which the European Qualifications Framework flies: the idea is that employers and individuals should more readily be able to estimate the nature and level of training for themselves rather than to

rely on officially produced tables, still less on common ‘harmonized’ training syllabuses or standards.

Next in chronology, the programmes still survive and have not changed dramatically either in scale or nature over the past 10-20 years. The vocational programme *Leonardo da Vinci** operates principally through three modes: supporting individual exchanges of students and teachers/trainers; supporting ‘innovative’ projects of a transnational nature (ie. involving project partners in a number of different countries); and the establishment of networks to exchange information and practice.

These programmes, taken as a whole, are small in EU terms. In 2005 they only accounted for 7.3 per cent of the ESF or 0.7 per cent of total EU expenditure (European Commission, 2009a). Member states have resisted their expansion and they remain marginal, giving a small overlay of transnational collaboration and experience to the training and developmental efforts of member states.

Though small, one should not dismiss these programmes as incidental. There have been two important side effects – one personal and the other political. At the personal level, a considerable number of people have been involved; 77,000 ‘partners’ were involved in *Leonardo* transnational projects in the period 1995-9, and 127,000 students and 11,000 trainers took part in exchanges or work placements in other countries (European Commission, 2006b, p. 180). According to Stein and Kurtz-Newell (1995, p. 148), by 1992 some 6-7% of all EU students could expect to participate in exchanges arranged through the various programmes at some point in their education careers. Though most of these were in higher education, and perhaps therefore targeted future elites rather than ‘ordinary’ citizens (Field and Murphy, 2006), the influence of this very personal experience of the ‘European Dimension’ should not be underestimated. This exposure was particularly welcome in the case of Eastern European countries, which were – through an enlightened decision – granted access to these programmes in 1997, well before their accession to the Community (European Commission, 1997, p. 56).

At the political level the programmes have been a way of allowing the Commission to interact directly with professionals, rather than just policy-makers, in the various Member States, as enthusiastically recorded by the relevant policymakers in the Commission:

*The other programmes are ‘Comenius’ for school education, ‘Erasmus’ for higher education, and ‘Grundtvig’ for adult education – one is somehow reminded of an IKEA catalogue!

‘[The programmes’] strength lay in the fact that they were implemented at the closest possible level to the education and training players on the ground and were effective catalysts and multipliers of the European dimension in education and training. Since they were hotbeds of transnational innovation and experimentation in Europe they were increasingly cited as an example of what the Community could best do for its citizens in response to their expectations of a Europe closer to their needs.’ (European Commission, 2006b, p. 26)

This effect on the ‘players’ is confirmed by Rasmussen (2006):

‘In general Danish attitudes towards EU involvement in matters of education and culture are becoming more positive. This is partly because ... many institutions and organisations have over the years been awarded grants from EU programmes or participated in EU-funded networks.’ (p. 63)

In short, the programmes seem to have delivered a lot of ‘bang for their bucks’ in gaining the Commission allies amongst professional educationalists and those in the training world, allowing them to put ‘bottom-up’ pressure on the policy-makers of Member States in addition to the top-down pressures of the ‘open method of coordination’. However, it is hard to see them as a cornerstone of EU VET policy in the longer term, except perhaps to the degree that they have encouraged transnational research and development in the field of VET, bringing countries’ technocrats and researchers together.

We have already said much about the co-operation between countries in the field of VET. Before *Lisbon* co-operation in the field of VET had consisted, at the technical level of loose networks of VET specialists brought together by EU level organizations such as CEDEFOP and at the political level of sporadic initiatives introduced by particular countries or the Commission. It was difficult to prevent distractions appearing on the agenda as happened so frequently with the rolling system of six monthly chairmanship of the Council of Ministers, where:

‘over the years, successive Presidencies ... influenced the political agenda by adding their national priorities, which did not always make for continuity in the Community’s work.’ (European Commission, 2006b, p. 192)

and it was even more difficult to hold the various Member States to acting on the commitments they had made, as the cooperation process:

‘... depend[ed] largely on the willingness and commitment of the Member States to take account, at national level, of the common objectives that they had fixed for themselves at European level.’ (p. 32)

The answer, as we have seen, was the ‘open method of coordination’ first used in National Action Plans for Employment in the late 1990s, and enshrined as the preferred method for collective action at Lisbon. This method was not new to many countries. It was perhaps a transatlantic import, derived from older ‘Management by Objectives’ traditions and applied

more widely to government in the influential *Reinventing Government* (Osborne and Gaebler, 1993) which was popular with the ‘Third Way’ thinkers in the Clinton and Blair administrations. The idea of ‘steering by goals’ subsequently affected educational policymaking in many European countries (Green, 2006). This approach seemed to accommodate the hitherto conflicting desires of achieving collective progress while respecting a regime of ‘subsidiarity’; to achieve ‘convergence’ without the banned ‘harmonization’; to allow and promote ‘decentralization’ while achieving aims for the bloc as whole. Above all it allowed a firm hand for political direction when critical countries acted together and gave the Commission a valuable role as initiator and monitor of ostensibly voluntary involvement.

Thus the *Lisbon* process has introduced a much more directive, target driven and higher-level form of co-operation. Whether it has had an effect on country policies in the field of VET or in any other field is, however, questionable:

‘In the now extensive literature and commentary on OMC we find hugely varying assessments of its effectiveness. These range between considerable scepticism as to the value of so ‘soft’ a form of joint policy-making ... and great enthusiasm for its success - and further potential - as a mechanism for extending EU influences into parts of the domestic policy processes of the member states where there remain deep obstacles to formal transfers of policy competences to the EU.’ (Wallace, 2005, p. 86)

Some see it as providing a “shared normative basis for common action, to set up, or approximate, a particular form of epistemic community” (Dale and Robertson, 2006, p. 24) or a means for national policy-making elites to become “socialized into the trans-national culture of EU policy-making” (Rasmussen, 2006, p. 63). Keep (2006), on the other hand, views the process as being much more confrontational, in terms of a battle between an intrusive Commission wanting to get ‘a foot in the nation state’s policy door’ and ‘individual states [which] have their own goals, targets and visions of what lifelong learning policies might deliver, and tend to prioritise these over the goals of the Commission’ (p. 151). He concludes that the open method is only a ‘weak form of co-ordination in the area of education, training and lifelong learning’ (pp. 162-3).

The truth probably is that the open method is taken more seriously in some countries than others, depending on their innate enthusiasm for the matter in question, on their attitude toward the European project, and on their relative power within the constellation of member states. A comparison between the 2011 contributions of, for example, the UK and Romania to *Europe 2020* (the latest version of the *Lisbon* process) shows the former providing 3 pages of description of pre-existing education policies with no figures about participation or completion

(HM Government, 2011), while the former contains three times that amount replete with tables and charts showing performance against targets in terms of participation (Government of Romania, 2011).

Whatever the merits of the ‘open method’, it would seem to have become extremely complex. As we have seen there are at least three levels at which education and training feature (the global *Annual Growth Surveys*, the Employment Reports and those on Education and Training – the latter in fact involving countries other than existing or prospective EU member states). Although we are assured that each level feeds into the higher one, it is not wholly clear that this is the case. And each level involves reporting by countries, assessments by the Commission, and pronouncements by the Council. Moreover each cycle has to take account of the latest policy initiatives at Community level and periodic changes in reporting format.

Finally there is the area of intervention of the common instruments applying to VET in the EU educational ‘space’. It now seems to be an accepted role for the Community to establish certain mechanisms which facilitate the transfer of elements of VET across borders. Some are relatively uncontentious such as *Europass* – the longest standing of the instruments – which does little more than contain a common suggested format for the setting out of qualifications and experience gained. Others have potentially more impact. If they were at all tangible and monitored the principles for quality assurance contained in the *European Quality Assurance Reference Framework* might be a significant influence on VET practice in member states; unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately from the point of view of some member states) they are neither. Similarly the credit transfer rubric *ECVET* is rather less than its name might imply, being no more than a suggested mechanism whereby two or more educational institutions in different countries might calculate the amount of curriculum time that an individual’s learning in another country might amount to; it being entirely open to them to use any other method, or none.

Perhaps the most significant of these instruments so far is the *European Qualifications Framework*. Although voluntary this does seem to be prompting action in the majority of member states who do not have a national qualifications framework – a national framework is a pre-requisite for using the EQF (CEDEFOP, 2010). It is true that by August 2011, a year after the recommended completion date, only Ireland, Malta, the UK and France of the 27 EU countries had referenced their national qualifications to the EQF. But the EQF marks quite a shift in philosophy for many countries, with an explicit emphasis on ‘learning outcomes’ rather than curriculum (teaching) content, and a definition of a ‘qualification’ as ‘the formal outcome

of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent body determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards' (European Parliament and Council, 2008, p. 4) rather than the concept of a package of skills and knowledge necessary for a particular occupation or position in society, which is often the dominant idea behind the term 'qualification' when used in continental Europe. These instruments also explicitly envisage education and training taking place, and being formally recognized, outside the ambit of the formal and state-sponsored institutions which in many European countries have been traditionally seen as the repositories and conferrers of knowledge and occupational status (Magalhaes and Stoer, 2006). These ideas of qualification, learning outcome and qualification framework and recognition of knowledge however acquired exhibit an Anglo-Saxon influence on EU policy; indeed the English Qualifications and Curriculum Authority was contracted to do influential work in the development of the EQF (Coles and Oates, 2005).

Even if the EQF and ECVET become widely used as a 'translation device' (European Parliament and Council, 2008, p. 2) they will, together, only be able to 'translate' level and volume of education and training. In VET the more important dimension is surely domain – the occupational categories for which particular knowledge and skills are relevant. Since the abortive work by CEDEFOP in the 1980s, there has been no organized EU effort to assign curriculum or learning outcomes to a recognized pan-European schedule of occupations or to offer any kind of 'translation device' for so doing. It may be that this kind of work will emerge organically, through international links at sectoral level, but there is so far little sign of this occurring.

It is far too early to determine whether these common instruments will have any significant effect on European VET. The test will be whether they are actually used – as is their intention – by teachers, students, parents and employers to facilitate mobility within European VET and material recognition of achievements in other countries beyond what would obtain in any case.

Nevertheless the instruments emanating from *Copenhagen* have served to bring together the technical staff concerned with qualifications and curriculum design within VET in a more material and collaborative manner than the previous regular 'talking shops' organized by CEDEFOP were able to do. There are signs of a growing consensus amongst such people, more perhaps in terms of precepts and terminology than in terms of concrete ways forward. This growing consensus probably does not extend to the higher echelons of senior policymakers and politicians in the majority of countries, though there is more enthusiasm for 'European standards and qualification structures' in the new member states (Sellin, 2007, p. 255). It may be that, in

time, what Dale calls ‘European Education Policy’, will have some effect in ‘promo[ting] and thicken[ing] the idea of Europe as a distinct ‘society’, different from individual Member States and from the sum of its parts’ (2009, p. 123).

The nature of the integration process in the case of VET

What can be said about the degree and nature of European ‘integration’ in VET, and which of the models for achieving integration seem most readily to explain the process?

The first observation is that – over the 50 years of EU activity in this sphere – progress towards integration has been distinctly limited. Arguably only over the past decade have any sustained efforts been made which would appear to offer a concerted approach to VET and then only in the most general terms. The collective target-driven co-operation of the *Lisbon* process and the generation of a collective set of pan-European instruments arising from *Copenhagen* have each been sustained for more than ten years, though with respect to *Lisbon* somewhat watered down in its VET emphasis and in the case of *Copenhagen* unproven in practical usage. The EU programmes and the mutual recognition protocols both seem to have reached a point of stability, useful in themselves no doubt, but affecting only a minority of citizens.

In VET, as no doubt in other areas of policy, the history has been one of a series of initiatives, often but not always taken by the Commission, which have run into the ground either through the inherent impracticality of the task (cf. the CEDEFOP exercise in ‘equivalences’) or the lack of interest (and sometimes opposition) of member states in taking concerted action (cf. unwillingness to expand the EU’s education programmes, lackadaisical efforts in pushing forward VET in the *Lisbon* context).

Nevertheless we have seen some growing consensus about the role of the Community – as opposed to member states – in providing a forum for discussing targets and reaching a collective view about progress towards them, and in devising a limited number of common instruments to enhance mobility and articulation between different systems. Both of these roles may be having more impact on the newer member states than in the older members, both because there has been anxiety amongst the newly acceded countries to conform to the ‘European idea’ which helped to motivate their transition from communism and the Soviet sphere (Anweiler, 1992) and because they exhibited a preparedness to engage in substantial reforms to VET systems which were seen as unfitted to their new circumstances (Voicu, 2007).

The role of the Community in bringing together and sponsoring the collaboration of VET specialists in different countries, bringing about some coming together of concepts and preferred approaches, may prove to be the most significant long-term development in integration of VET, but at present would not seem powerful enough to prevent national governments from taking divergent actions, and may be less influential than the activities of other international organizations such as the OECD.

Returning to the theories of EU development outlined in the first section of this paper, it is plain that the economic rationale for broader and deeper EU integration has been a significant one in setting the context for VET. At the most obvious level the EU started explicitly as an *Economic Community* and its further deepening as a ‘Single Market’ has been driven by a clear economic rationale. However despite the express inclusion of vocational training in the original treaty and its obvious relevance to issues of labour mobility, concerted action on VET was at best sporadic in the first three decades of the Community’s existence. The re-emphasis on economic co-ordination in the ‘Delors’ White Paper of the early 1990s and given more concrete expression in the ‘Employment Strategy’ and the *Lisbon* process gave a new impetus to Community actions on VET, but at a very general level, focussed more on overall levels of the broadest interpretation of VET as ‘lifelong learning’ than on any development of a distinctive ‘European’ model of VET. The inclusion of the Eastern European candidate countries in these mechanisms before their formal accession, in order to accelerate their transition to market economies, probably resulted in a greater emphasis on VET reform in these new member states than in the established members of the Community.

The ‘regulation’ variant of the theory of economic integration, with its postulation of a ‘settlement’ providing compensatory mechanisms to offset the otherwise politically unacceptable side-effects of widened capital markets, sheds rather more light on EU VET policy in the early years; the European Social Fund, largely spent on training, was increasingly and explicitly seen as a means to ameliorate the regional and industrial effects of the single market. But again this did not give rise to any very distinctive European form of VET or have more than a marginal effect on the priority given to VET by member states.

For those, like Anderson, who would emphasize the growing pre-eminence of capital over labour in the evolution of the single market, there must be a challenge to explain the complete absence of pressure from European multi-national employers towards the achievement of common standards (and levels of financing) of training, which must surely have been very much

in their interests, but which – as we have seen – came to nothing despite some well meaning efforts to harmonize standards or to provide ‘read-across’ between country VET systems.

So, while undeniably forming the context of many EU VET actions, it seems somewhat unrealistic to claim that the Community’s VET policy was driven principally by economic imperatives. Indeed it would surely be fanciful to conceive that it has been ‘the interests and strategies of the dominant national, regional and transatlantic social forces’ which have resulted in the EQF or EUROPASS; such forces, if they exist, would, one imagines, have rather more important business with which to be getting on.

The intergovernmental interpretation, holding that EU development is primarily a function of the interplay between the perceived interests of its independent member states which can both prompt and prevent integration, is evidently a powerful explanation of certain critical milestones in the Community’s VET policy. It has been both a negative and a positive force; negatively in capping the growth of the Community’s education programmes in the 1980s, in limiting EU competence in the field of VET in the Maastricht Treaty and perhaps also in explaining the hesitant progress towards the fulfilment of ambitions for a collective approach to lifelong learning in the years after *Lisbon*. Certain positive impetuses have also resulted from intergovernmental initiatives, most notably the Sorbonne Declaration of 1998, which gave rise to the *Bologna* process for higher education and – as has been argued – the *Copenhagen* process of common instruments for VET. The *Lisbon* summit seems also to have required a particular configuration of powerful governmental interests in order to give real effect to the Delors White Paper of seven years before, though in this case also carefully orchestrated by the Commission. Indeed, these examples would support Milward’s interpretation of governments using supranational institutions and programmes to pursue favoured domestic goals which might be politically difficult to promote on a purely national basis: Sorbonne was used by the original participating governments to ‘kick-start domestic reform agendas’ in higher education (Knodel and Walkenhorst, 2010, p. 138), and it seems likely that the *Lisbon* process of the ‘open method’ of co-ordination is helpful to some governments in achieving labour market reform which they might balk at on a purely domestic basis.

However while it might be useful in explaining the more dramatic developments, intergovernmentalism would not seem to be a powerful explanation of many of the incremental developments – the slow elaboration of the different education programmes (albeit capped in terms of total expenditure), the evolution of the common instruments, or the decision to substitute general protocols for mutual recognition of diplomas for the more specific ones. True,

and more or less by definition, governments had no very powerful objections to these evolutionary developments and did not stand in their way, but they do not seem to have played a significant part in proposing them.

At the working level one can see distinct evidence for the constructivist interpretation, particularly in recent years. The Commission's programmes gave material benefits, not only financial but also in terms of widening interests and career opportunities, to education and training providers and to relevant researchers, as well as to the students who participated in them. This approach had the effect of stimulating an interest in European policies and in the possibilities of acting on a transnational stage amongst specialists. It may have begun to synthesize concepts and methodologies in a distinctively European way amongst technical circles. The emergence of a professional consensus has become more marked – though far from universal – in the collaborative work undertaken to develop the common instruments under the *Copenhagen* process.

However the identification of national policymakers with a pan-European VET technical community is a fragile and recent development and does not seem to have stretched to the political class. Anderson's interpretation of colluding national elites, appear, in the field of VET at least to be more to do with consensus amongst working level experts than the higher echelons of policymakers. There are signs, though, that this working level co-operations may be resulting in some distinctive 'European' features of VET systems, particularly in the field of qualifications and curriculum development.

Finally there is the neo-functionalist explanation. Between the occasional inter-governmental *démarches* there would appear to have been a constant pressure from the Commission to find ways of pushing forward a distinctive agenda in VET. While it is obviously far from the Commission's highest priority we have noted a series of initiatives over the years. These initiatives have varied considerably – ideas for transnational training schemes in the 1960s, programmes of financial grants for particular activities in the 1980s, the discovery of the discourse of lifelong learning in the 1990s and the attention to qualifications architecture from 2002. What is notable is that when one avenue is baulked, the Commission has been diligent in trying to open up another.

The neo-functionalist concept of 'spillover' is helpful as well. We have seen that, through the *Gravier* judgement the competence of vocational training was held, in the 1980s, to extend to higher education. Focusing on jobs and productivity in the 1997 European Employment

Strategy's open method of co-ordination had 'spilled over' to VET and lifelong learning by the time of *Lisbon*. Similarly the approach towards higher education qualifications developed through *Bologna* was transferred to VET in the form of the EQF and ECVET. Even within the *Copenhagen* instruments we can see how the idea of a common vocabulary for qualifications, exemplified in the EQF, prompted the idea that – to be effective – countries should sign up to common principles for quality assurance. For the future it is quite conceivable that dissatisfaction with the impact of the common instruments will lead to calls for them to be reinforced and further elaborated.

Perhaps therefore we should conclude, with Perry Anderson, that the drivers of EU integration are multi-faceted and shift in their emphasis over time. A rather more structured interpretation, though, would be that the various interpretations are appropriate to different *levels* of Community action: the economic context as a significant backdrop to all activity; inter-governmental interplay to be critical at significant points when bottlenecks at community level need to be unblocked or when domestic agendas build up so as to demand action at the community level; the pragmatic functionalist logic to determine the day-to-day evolution of policy, though not always in a linear fashion; and the constructivist interpretation being helpful in identifying and analyzing the gradual formation of an EU-wide VET technical and research cadre whose members have much to do with each other and share concepts and methodology if not policy prescriptions.

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