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## **Ch. 1 Lifelong Learning: National Policies in the European Perspective**

John Holford with Agata Mleczo<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

Two decades ago, an influential article lauded the European Union as ‘the most successful example of institutionalised international policy co-ordination in the modern world’ (Moravcsik 1993, p. 473). A few years earlier, in 1988, Jacques Delors – then President of the European Commission – had claimed that about 80 per cent of the socio-economic legislation in EU member states stemmed from the EU’s treaties, policies and legislation (Wallace, Wallace & Pollack 2005, p. 3). Since then, the EU has grown – from 12 member states and 350 million people to 27 member states comprising over 500 millions. The hubris which accompanied this growth was of a piece with the so-called ‘end of history’: the collapse of the Communist governments of central and eastern Europe and the apparently inexorable onward march of globalised markets. By the time the European Council met at Lisbon<sup>2</sup> in early 2000, the EU’s optimism embraced not only continued expansion, but a new currency (plans for the Euro were far advanced), a new constitution, and ‘a new strategic goal ... 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’ by 2010 (CEC 2000).

In Greek tragedy, nemesis succeeds hubris; for Europe, the decade after Lisbon brought neither dynamism nor competitiveness:

The ink had scarcely dried on the agreement before the worldwide stock market bubble imploded, the epicentre of which was the collapse of the overvalued prices of American dot.com and telecom shares amid evidence of financial and corporate malpractice. Scepticism mounted about the potential of the knowledge economy. The US suffered two years of economic slowdown and recession and the European economy followed suit. (High Level Group 2004, p. 9).

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<sup>2</sup> Confusingly, Portugal’s enchanting capital was the backdrop for – and thus lends its name to – several of the policy developments described in this chapter. We shall therefore encounter the Lisbon Council (the meeting of the European Council held at Lisbon in March 2000), and ‘Lisbon goals’, ‘Lisbon objectives’ and the ‘Lisbon strategy’ and ‘Lisbon process’ (policy goals, a process for setting them and a strategy for achieving them set for the EU at that meeting). In addition, but wholly distinct, we shall also encounter the Lisbon Treaty (the Treaty amending the EU’s foundational treaties signed at Lisbon in December 2007).

And this was only the beginning. In 2005 the voters of France and The Netherlands – two of the EU’s original six founding states, signatories to the Treaty of Rome – rejected the Constitutional Treaty. In 2008, US and European banks brought the global financial system to the edge of oblivion; the price of their rescue by governments and central banks proved in due course to be the western economic crisis of the 2010 and 2011. This, of course, had particularly serious implications for a number of EU member states, led by Greece, and for the ‘Eurozone’ as a whole.

From the early 1990s, the EU became a strong advocate of lifelong learning – among international organisations, perhaps the strongest. (It remains to be seen whether, having waxed with Europe’s hubris, lifelong learning will now share in its economic nemesis – early signs are not encouraging.) As we shall see in this chapter, lifelong learning became a much-vaunted weapon in the armoury of European economic and social development, and there is now a considerable literature on the EU’s lifelong learning policies (e.g., Dale and Robertson 2009, Holford et al. 2008, Holford & Mohorčič Špolar 2012, Pépin et al. 2006). These have tended to emphasise the evolution and purpose of policy. To simplify greatly, their focus has been on the evolution of the key themes of EU policy: that lifelong learning should contribute to economic competitiveness on the one hand, and to social cohesion, inclusion and citizenship on the other. This emphasis is probably natural. In EU terms, lifelong learning is not just a child of hubris: more prosaically, it is a product of the European Commission’s development of an educational bureaucracy in the late 1980s and early 1990s – formally speaking, a directorate-general for education came into being only in 1995, though in practice this was the culmination of growth over the previous decade or so (Holford & Mohorčič Špolar 2012, Pépin et al. 2006).

The purpose of this chapter, and indeed of this entire book, however, is to explore how lifelong learning has developed and taken root across the various countries which comprise Europe. In part, this is an examination of the impact of EU policy. The relationship between the EU and its member states is a complex one. From one perspective, its main function is to shape the activities of member states. There are many variations on this theme. To the political right in Britain, it is a ‘superstate’ (Campbell 2010). Manuel Barroso (quoted Charter 2007) famously compared the EU ‘to the organisation of empires’: ‘We have the dimension of empire’, he said (though in contrast to empires which were made ‘with force’ and ‘a centre imposing diktat’, EU members had ‘fully decided to work together and to pool their sovereignty’). Dale and Robertson (2009) see the EU as an institution educating and disciplining its member states in the interests of capitalist globalisation: to understand the role of Europe in education, Dale argues, we must dispense with ‘methodologically nationalist and statist assumptions’ (Dale 2009, p. 32).

These perspectives are in line with Jacques Delors’ assertion that 80 per cent of member states’ social legislation stemmed from the EU. Conversely, however, Wallace, Pollack and Young suggest that some 80 per cent of the concerns of national policy-makers’ daily lives are probably ‘framed by domestic concerns’ (2010, p. 9). As a ‘policy arena’, they suggest, the EU

rests on a kind of amalgam of ... two levels of governance. Country-defined policy demands and policy capabilities are set in a shared European framework to generate collective regimes, most of which are then implemented back in the countries concerned. ... [However,] how those European regimes operate varies a good deal between one EU

member state and another. In other words, the EU policy process ... has differentiated outcomes, with significance variations between countries. (Wallace, Pollack and Young 2010, p. 9)

To understand EU policy processes, they continue, it is 'just as important' to understand national institutional settings as EU-level institutions (pp. 9-10). This chapter emphasises the EU level; the aim of the book is to explore the intersections between this and the national.

### **Europe and its Nations**

Based on an investigation of lifelong learning policies, one of the earliest 'outputs' of the LLL2010 project (Holford et al. 2008) drew attention to the importance of national context. This early research strongly suggested that Europe's diversity was deeply important, and 'a single model of lifelong learning' across the EU was unlikely to be achieved. European policy was important, it argued, and had an impact at national level. But countries would very likely 'pick and choose' between different EU priorities – influenced by their national institutional, political, social, and ideological contexts (Holford et al. 2008). The present book develops this theme by taking the analysis beyond the level of policy. The project has examined lifelong learning in thirteen countries: most, though not all, of which are EU member states. Although the LLL2010 project did not take an historical approach, an earlier publication drew attention to some of the countries' characteristics, and did so with an eye to history. Drawn from Northern, Eastern and Central Europe, their histories include periods of convergence and divergence – especially during the twentieth century:

To take but three examples: in 1914 Ireland, Scotland and England formed parts of the United Kingdom; Hungary, Slovenia, and Austria formed part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire; while Estonia and Lithuania formed part of the Russian Empire. Today all are independent countries.<sup>3</sup> During the twentieth century, however, their histories have varied: Estonia and Lithuania enjoyed a brief period of independence between the two world wars, but were absorbed into the USSR in 1939; Hungary became independent from 1918, though it fell under German rule during the Second World War and into the Soviet 'sphere of influence' after 1945; Slovenia became an integral part of Yugoslavia; Austria remained independent after 1918, apart from a period of absorption into 'greater Germany'. Although educational policy and practice are not simply a product of history, we cannot make sense of the diversity of how lifelong learning has been understood and operationalised without an awareness of the diversity – but also the commonalities – of these national histories. (Holford et al. 2008, p. 000)

As we have seen, the EU's enthusiasm for lifelong learning coincided with its rapid expansion. Many of the new member states of the 1990s and 2000s lay to the east of the former 'iron curtain', or to the south, around the Mediterranean. Their incorporation into the EU was widely seen as a consolidation of 'Western values': democracy and human rights; free markets and good governance.

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<sup>3</sup> Apart from England and Scotland, which form parts of the United Kingdom: Scotland has a substantial element of devolved decision-making, with its own Parliament and government; England is governed by the UK parliament.

The EU would play this consolidating role, of course, precisely to the extent that it was successful in shaping or reshaping the practices and institutions of these countries. This did not imply that it would intervene in detail, or in an oppressive way, in the activities of member states: but it clearly meant establishing parameters for acceptable policy, legislation and political behaviour. A favoured EU term for this is 'policy learning' – a concept central to the Open Method of Co-ordination and to the 'Lisbon process' – although these methods do not apply solely to new member states.

The LLL2010 project provided an opportunity to explore the intersection between EU policies in lifelong learning and the activities of new member states in particular. The countries represented in the research team, and investigated by it, included a significant number from those newer EU member states which had, until around 1990, been governed for several decades by Communist Party-led regimes.

## **EU policies on Lifelong Learning**

### *Origins and Development*

The European Union is the direct descendant of the European Common Market and the European Economic Community. While it has grown and changed in many ways, in important respects its character today reflects its origins. The principal focus of both the Common Market and the EEC was economic: the strengthening of economic ties, internal free trade, and free market. Education was nowhere on the agenda; indeed Blitz has suggested that education was a 'taboo' topic in European-level discussions until the 1970s (2003, p. 4). In the early 1970s, however, the Community began tentatively to discuss some educational issues. The results were modest: the Education Ministers adopted a non-binding and decidedly uncontroversial resolution in 1971 'to provide the population as a whole with the opportunities for general education, vocational training and life-long learning' (Blitz 2003, 5), while in 1974 – influenced perhaps by the first enlargement – they agreed to encourage 'co-operation' in various priority sectors, while preserving 'the originality of educational traditions and policies in each country' (CEC 1979, 2).

This approach – co-operation amid diversity – has continued to mark the development of educational policies and activities by the European Union and its predecessor institutions. Rhetorical assertions of the importance of education provided a basis for incremental development by civil servants; as Blitz argues, 'co-operation generated further co-operation and new ideas about the role of education in the Community' (2003, p. 15). This process continued, and gathered momentum, during the 1980s, initially with legal judgements permitting the development of an educational role by the Commission, but critically toward the end of the decade by the formation of a Directorate-General in the Commission with responsibility for education and training.

The Treaty of Maastricht in 1992 represented a new turn in European unity, with the formation of the European Union; and unlike Community and Common Market, the EU had explicit, if limited, legal authority in education. It could make 'a contribution to education and training of quality and to the flowering of the cultures of the Member States' (Article G). This general aim was limited – in

particular, it was subject to the principle of subsidiarity<sup>4</sup> – but there were also a number of very specific areas of legitimate Community activity set out, such as developing a ‘European dimension’ in education and strengthening language teaching; encouraging student and teacher mobility and recognition of qualifications; promoting cooperation between educational bodies; exchanging ‘information and experience’ on common educational issues; encouraging youth exchanges and ‘exchanges of socio- educational instructors’; and encouraging distance education. (Article G). Following Maastricht, Member States could no longer object on principle to the Commission taking initiatives in education. However, schooling rather than post-compulsory or ‘lifelong’ education, and the ‘European dimension’, were clearly at the forefront of the Treaty-makers’ minds.

The development of the Directorate-General (and various quasi-independent agencies to support educational policy-making and programme delivery, such as Cedefop<sup>5</sup> and the European Training Foundation) in the mid-1990s coincided with a marked shift in international educational thinking. In the early 1990s, lifelong learning re-emerged onto the stage after a decade or so in the policy background. As many commentators have pointed out, it re-emerged in a strongly economic form, associated with the perceived shift toward a ‘knowledge economy’. But more importantly, from the perspective of EU policy development, it was taken up as central to Europe’s economic policies, especially in the white paper *Growth, Competitiveness, Employment* (CEC 1993). Education – albeit dressed up as ‘lifelong learning’ – was now seen as central to the economic success of the European project. This was taken up in educational policy-making, notably in the white paper *Teaching and Learning: Towards a Learning Society* (CEC 1995), and in a rash of lesser policy documents during the later 1990s. By 2000, lifelong learning had become a distinctive feature of EU education policy – an organising theme, linking policies in education with other areas (notably economic policy and social exclusion), and identifying various programmes to strengthen citizens’ identification with Europe and the EU.

As we have seen, the Lisbon strategy, first enunciated in 2000, aimed to turn the EU into ‘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’ by 2010 (CEC 2000). In pursuit of this, it encouraged Europe’s education and training systems ‘to adapt both to the demands of the knowledge society and to the need for an improved level and quality of employment’. Adults (or more specifically, ‘unemployed adults’ and employed people ‘at risk of seeing their skills overtaken by rapid change’) were given a central role (CEC 2000). Other objectives, also in line with Maastricht specifications, related to lifelong learning: ‘a substantial annual increase in per capita investment in human resources’, a European framework for ‘new basic skills to be provided through lifelong learning’ (IT skills, foreign languages, technological culture, entrepreneurship and social skills), more elaborated mechanisms for ‘mobility of students, teachers and training and research staff’ through

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Under the principle of subsidiarity, in areas which do not fall within its exclusive competence, the [European] Union shall act only if and in so far as the objectives of the proposed action cannot be sufficiently achieved by the Member States, either at central level or at regional and local level, but can rather, by reason of the scale or effects of the proposed action, be better achieved at Union level’ (Treaty on European Union, Article 5).

<sup>5</sup> The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training.

Community programmes (Socrates, Leonardo, Youth), and greater transparency and mutual recognition of qualifications (CEC 2000).

The EU's approach to lifelong learning after 2000, therefore, evolved in many ways along lines set in the 1990s. The key themes continued to be competitiveness and social inclusion. Yet a focus on the overarching policy aims may overlook a number of important developments. The most commonly noted of these are at the level of detail, particularly in methodologies of policy development and implementation. We turn to these below: they are important. However, behind these lay significant strengthening of the legal status of education in the European Union. This came in two main forms. First, in 2000, the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission 'proclaim[ed]' the 'Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union' (Charter of Fundamental Rights 2000). 'Everyone has the right to education and to have access to vocational and continuing training', this asserted (Article 14). Intended for inclusion in the ill-fated EU Constitutional Treaty, the Charter's legal status remained unclear through most of the following decade. It was, however, incorporated into the Treaty of Lisbon (signed in December 2007, which came into force on 1 December 2009) as having 'the same legal value as the Treaties' (Article 6.1). The Lisbon Treaty also specified that:

In defining and implementing its policies and activities, the Union shall take into account requirements linked to the promotion of a high level of employment, the guarantee of adequate social protection, the fight against social exclusion, and a high level of education, training and protection of human health (Article 9).

Imprecisely, to be sure, this gave legal – arguably constitutional – underpinning to advocates of education in the Commission and elsewhere. In specification of detailed areas of educational activity, the Lisbon Treaty was almost identical to Maastricht. EU action should 'be aimed at':

- developing the European dimension in education, particularly through the teaching and dissemination of the languages of the Member States,
- encouraging mobility of students and teachers, by encouraging inter alia, the academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study,
- promoting cooperation between educational establishments,
- developing exchanges of information and experience on issues common to the education systems of the Member States,
- encouraging the development of youth exchanges and of exchanges of socio-educational instructors, and encouraging the participation of young people in democratic life in Europe,
- encouraging the development of distance education, ... (Treaty on European Union, Article 165.2)

However, the Treaty also gave legal force to a policy development process to help in 'achievement of the[se] objectives'. The European Parliament and the Council were empowered to 'adopt incentive measures' (excluding harmonisation of Member States' laws and regulations), while the Commission could make proposals to the Council, which could in turn 'adopt recommendations' (Article 165.4).

In reality, these features of the Lisbon Treaty provided little more than legal dressing for methodologies of policy development and implementation practices which had evolved over the

previous decade or so. This approach, often labelled 'soft governance' (Lawn 2006, Trubeck & Trubeck 2005), sought to establish common standards and practices across the EU through persuasion rather than statutory enforcement. Three initiatives, which serve to illustrate the EU's approach to developing a common framework in education and training, also show how it has done so through 'soft governance'. Now, therefore, we look successively at the EU's development of indicators and benchmarks; its encouragement of national lifelong learning strategies; and its encouragement of a European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

### *Benchmarks and indicators*

The Lisbon strategy covered the full range of EU policy and activities; one of its key elements was the so-called 'Open Method of Co-ordination' (OMC). The OMC had evolved during the 1990s, especially in employment policy, but was now given a formal role in social and economic policy development generally (Hantrais 2007). This has had profound importance for the EU's role as an actor in education and lifelong learning. Two elements of the OMC have been critical for lifelong learning. Although subsidiarity was re-stated, the Lisbon approach emphasised agreement on timetables and goals, indicators and benchmarks, and 'monitoring, evaluation and peer review' (CEC 2000). Monitoring was both of the Commission's activities and of the EU's progress, and the latter implied – despite the emphasis on subsidiarity – an increasing intervention in member states' policy and performance. European guidelines were to be 'translated' into national policies 'by setting specific targets and adopting measures', and by ensuring that monitoring, evaluation and peer review were 'organised as mutual learning processes' (CEC 2000).

Benchmarks were, in the words of the EU Council (2003), 'reference levels of European average performance ... which will be used as one of the tools for monitoring the implementation of the "Detailed work programme on the follow-up of the objectives of education and training systems in Europe"'. Indicators were to provide accurate measurement of the EU's, and member states', progress against the benchmarks. Indicators were to be 'all based on valid and comparable data' (CEC DG EAC 2003).

Indicators and benchmarks have provided a powerful mechanism by which the EU – through its Commission – has sought to influence the activities of member states. Countries' performance is measured. Those falling short of benchmarks are liable to be named (perhaps even shamed), labelled as needing to 'catch up' or as 'falling further behind'. They find themselves under pressure to address problems, and to adopt measures which are seen as 'good practice' from other countries. Of course, member states are not all equally susceptible to such influence. In Slovakia, Bulgaria or Poland, for instance, the EU's influence is more marked; while the UK, France and Germany national influences are to the fore in rhetoric of policy-making.

Arguably, the machinery of indicators and rankings pushes more 'obedient' countries towards greater dependency on Commission suggestions. Dale and Robertson (2009), for instance, see the OMC as providing the EU with a mechanism to control and discipline member states in the interests of neoliberal globalisation. Others have argued for seeing the OMC as an area of contestation, rather than as inevitably a transmission belt for the neoliberal. Holford (2008) has examined attempts to maintain social and 'citizenship' priorities within the Lisbon structure of indicators and benchmarks. Lee et al. see the OMC's significance principally as facilitating 'policy learning':



The OMC cast the Commission in a positive light by demonstrating a democratic approach to constructing EU educational and training policy, allowing the Commission to relax from its burden of regaining technocratic legitimacy. Furthermore, the OMC enabled the Commission to be exposed to, learn from, internalise, and adopt the best practices or models of lifelong learning from others. This ... was a major form of the Commission's institutional learning. Within this context, on the threshold of 2000, the Commission's lifelong learning discourse boiled down to the two equally significant aims of lifelong learning: active citizenship and employability. Thus, ... the OMC, as a wide-ranging consultation process, has been a crucial element of the formulation of the EU's lifelong learning policy since 2000. (Lee et al. 2008 p. 456)

Whatever its significance and effect, the Lisbon strategy has involved a marked increase in the volume, detail and specificity of policy-formulation in lifelong learning, and a greater intervention in the educational policies of member states.

### *Lifelong Learning Strategies*

A second exercise in 'soft governance' has been the EU's encouragement of national 'lifelong learning strategies'. By a series of European Council decisions (2000, 2002, 2004), member states undertook to 'develop and implement coherent and comprehensive LLL strategies' by 2006 (CEC-DG EAC 2009, p. 103). Lifelong learning strategies would, as the Commission saw it, operationalise European policies at the national level. They would be drawn up by member states through a process involving 'all relevant players, in particular the social partners, civil society, local and regional authorities', they would nevertheless reflect the Commission's 'principles and building blocks', setting national 'targets for an increase in investment in human resources, including lifelong learning' in each country (European Council Resolution 27 June 2002). Strategies would therefore be a mechanism by which European objectives would be translated, in a democratic and inclusive way, into the policies and practices not only of member states, but also of public and private sector agencies and social partners. 'To enhance their relevance and impact, and to motivate individuals to participate in learning, a greater involvement of stakeholders and better cooperation with policy sectors beyond education and training is needed.' (European Council 2010) Lifelong learning strategies were, therefore, exercises in policy learning.

As a mechanism, however, lifelong learning policies have been a somewhat qualified success. A 2009 Commission survey suggested that while the 'vast majority' of countries had 'progressed' in education and training, 'the coherence and comprehensiveness as well as concrete implementation of LLL policies remained for the majority of them a challenge' (CEC DG-EAC 2009, p. 103). At that time, seven countries<sup>6</sup> had adopted, and were implementing, a single 'broadly comprehensive and coherent' strategy document which

is of high relevance for policy making, covers all levels of education and is based on analysis, accompanied by specific objectives, embedded in legislative regulations with an associated

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<sup>6</sup> The Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Lithuania, Slovenia, and Scotland (UK). Austria was 'at an advanced stage in developing such a strategy' (p. 103).

budget, supported by a roadmap having performance targets and support by stakeholders. (CEC DG-EAC 2009, p. 103).

Most, however, fell significantly short of this. Lithuania, Latvia and Slovakia had adopted a document focussed on a specific target group or sector, rather than covering the 'full spectrum' of lifelong learning (Lithuania, Latvia, Slovakia). Germany's provided little more than 'an analytical framework', while the Hungarian strategy's 'relevance ... across sectors' needed 'to be improved'. In twelve countries<sup>7</sup> policies and sectoral strategies covering all key areas of lifelong learning were being implemented, these were not 'underpinned by a single LLL strategy document'. Poland and Romania were 'still in the process of developing a single strategy document' (CEC DG-EAC 2009, p. 103). The Commission also complained that 'very little information' was provided on adequate budget allocation for effective implementation, that 'only a few countries' (Czech Republic, Latvia, Slovakia) reported the approval of detailed implementation plans. Many strategies were of a 'relatively short-term nature', with 'a planning-horizon of 3 to 5 years and ... a single legislative period', and there was 'little documentation' of the 'evidence base' used to develop strategies, and to measure their progress and 'impact on national policy making across sectors' (CEC DG EAC 2009, p. 104). Overall, the European Council concluded in 2010 that 'implementation and further development of lifelong learning strategies remains a critical challenge' (European Council 2010).

#### *The European Qualifications Framework*

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF), formally adopted in 2008, provides a further example of the EU's approach to reshaping lifelong learning within member states. The rationale for national qualifications frameworks has been widely discussed (e.g., Allais, et al. 2009), Cedefop 2010, Lauder 2011, Young 2003, 2008); EQF follows a rationale and structure similar to the qualifications frameworks adopted in, for example, Scotland and New Zealand. It was designed as

a common European reference framework which links countries' qualifications systems together, acting as a translation device to make qualifications more readable and understandable across different countries and systems in Europe. It has two principal aims: to promote citizens' mobility between countries and to facilitate their lifelong learning. (CEC DG-EAC 2008, p. 3)

Its function, however, is not to substitute for national qualifications frameworks, but to encourage them: the EQF is 'a translation device' to make qualifications more readable and understandable to employers, individuals and institutions by 'providing a bridge across countries and sectors, covering general education, vocational training and higher education and facilitating the validation of non-formal and informal learning' (CEC DG-EAC 2009, p. 13).

While formally adherence to the EQF is voluntary (member states were 'invited ... to relate their national qualifications systems or frameworks to the EQF by 2010 and to develop national qualifications frameworks, where appropriate' (CEC DG-EAC 2009, p. 107), in practice countries which do not engage with the EQF tend to be isolated from the principal directions of European

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<sup>7</sup> Flanders (Belgium), Spain, France, Ireland, Iceland, Luxemburg, The Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, England (UK)

policy development. The Commission's review of progress towards the Lisbon objectives in education and training in 2009 concluded that EQF had 'triggered or strengthened the development of an NQF based on learning outcomes in many countries. Such a framework was already in operation in four countries,<sup>8</sup> but was 'a high priority ... in virtually all' (CEC DG-EAC 2009, p. 107). A Cedefop report on development of national qualifications frameworks in the 27 EU member states, candidate countries (Croatia and Turkey) and in Iceland and Norway (Cedefop 2010) concluded that all aimed to develop and introduce a NQF for lifelong learning 'responding to the EQF' (Cedefop 2010, p. 1). While there were 'differences in specific objectives and in design features' reflecting national systems, it was 'generally accepted' that they should be built on explicit qualifications levels, level descriptors, and a learning outcomes approach. While the EU encouraged countries to engage a 'broad range of stakeholders' from education, training and employment in planning and implementing NQFs, Cedefop described discussions about how vocational and higher education should relate as 'sometimes tense' (Cedefop 2010, p. 2), while the involvement of stakeholders varied 'significantly' between countries. It warned countries not to 'establish "pro forma" frameworks only loosely connected to the existing [national] systems and practices': it 'a significant number' did so, this 'could undermine the overall positive developments which currently can be observed' (Cedefop 2010, p. 2).

A deeply political enterprise, the European Union has long sought depoliticisation in its working methods. Its procedures claim to be technical and 'transparent'. To this end, the Commission has established extensive mechanisms for collecting, sorting, sifting and weighing a seemingly endless volume of data: indices of participation, frameworks for qualifications, benchmarks of performance. Generic agencies such as Eurostat provide a statistical evidence base across the entire range of European policy areas and activities, education included. These are complemented by more specialist bodies. Eurydice 'provides information on and analyses of European education systems and policies' and in comprised '37 national units based in all 33 countries participating in the EU's Lifelong Learning programme' (Eurydice 2009). The Centre for Research on Lifelong Learning (CRELL), established in 2005 within the Commission's Joint Research Centre at Ispra in Italy, provides expertise in 'indicator-based evaluation and monitoring of education and training systems' drawing on expertise across 'economics, econometrics, education, social sciences and statistics' (CRELL 2011). The Directorate General for Education and Culture has its own unit for 'Analysis and Studies': preparing 2011 version of *Progress towards the Common European Objectives in Education and Training: Indicators and Benchmarks* drew on nine of its staff, as well as thirteen from CRELL, ten from Eurostat, three from Eurydice and one from the European Agency for development in special needs education (CEC DG EAC 2011, p. 2). These agencies, underpinning the apparatus of measurement and comparison, are the unsung heroes of European 'soft power' in education.

### **The EU's aims in lifelong learning**

'We have the dimension of empire,' said Manuel Barroso. One dimension of empires, at least in their early years, is growth; as we have seen, the European Union grew very fast over the decade or so around the millennium: from 12 member states and 350 million people in 1994 to 27 member states and over 500 millions by 2007. But while growth is common to all empires, another dimension is

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<sup>8</sup> Ireland, France, Malta, United Kingdom.

shared only by those that survive: organisation – the management and control of people, institutions and territory. Historically, empires have often worked through highly devolved authority structures: the nineteenth century revolution in communications, for instance, did little to dent the British empire’s reliance on its district officers, the ‘men on the spot’, and on ‘indirect rule’. From this perspective, the EU’s principle of subsidiarity may appear practical good fortune as well as constitutional necessity. But devolution can go only so far in any common enterprise: it must be matched by co-ordination and common purpose. Thus far, this chapter has focussed on the evolution and nature of co-ordination in education. We must now consider common purpose. Many empires have found that growth and success provide purpose enough while they last; but as the EU is currently finding, they seldom do.

### *Competitiveness and cohesion*

The EU has long sought to balance economic success with social welfare. As we have seen, in 2000 the Lisbon strategy set a strategic goal for the EU: ‘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’ by 2010 (CEC 2000). The aims of the ‘Europe 2020’ strategy, which effectively replaced the Lisbon goals in 2010, are in many respects similar:

- Smart growth – developing an economy based on knowledge and innovation.
- Sustainable growth – promoting a more resource efficient, greener and more competitive economy.
- Inclusive growth – fostering a high-employment economy delivering economic, social and territorial cohesion. (CEC 2010, p. 8)

Two themes emerge clearly in both ‘Lisbon’ and ‘Europe 2020’ strategies: on the one hand, competitiveness and growth, founded on a vibrant knowledge economy; on the other, social cohesion and inclusion, strongly linked to employment. Europe’s policies for lifelong learning over the past decade have been formulated within this context. As widely noted, the emphasis of lifelong learning policies internationally has been strongly ‘economistic’ since their emergence in the early 1990s. The European Union has followed this trend, which chimed with its origins as an ‘economic community’ committed to an internal free market. As argued elsewhere, however, the EU was unusual among international organisations in maintaining a clear non-economic strand in its approach (Holford and Mohorčič Špolar 2012). This can be seen as early as its 1995 white paper, *Teaching and Learning: Towards a Learning Society* (CEC 1995), whose five key objectives for building a learning society included combating social exclusion and developing proficiency in three Community languages. In the mid-1990s, economic aims in lifelong learning began to be complemented by programmes with clear social and cultural objectives (Dehmel 2006). The trans-European dimensions of programmes such as ‘Socrates’, ‘Leonardo da Vinci’ and ‘Erasmus’ (exchanges of teachers and students across EU member states and the like) contributed to building European identity, and non-economic aims continued to be emphasised through the later 1990s, often in the language of active citizenship and social inclusion. (This also reflected Commission concerns about disengagement between Europe and its citizens.) For example, a ‘Community action programme’ was approved in 2004 ‘to promote active European citizenship (civic participation)’. It aimed, *inter alia*,

- to bring citizens closer to the European Union and its institutions and to encourage them to engage more frequently with its institutions;
- to involve citizens closely in reflection and discussion on the construction of the European Union;
- to intensify links and exchanges between citizens from the countries participating in the programme, notably by way of town-twinning arrangements; and
- to stimulate initiatives by the bodies engaged in the promotion of active and participatory citizenship. (Council of the EU 2004)

In lifelong learning, economic and social concerns have often been in tension (Holford 2006). In the EU, this is made more complex by the legal context. The EU's founding treaties provided the Union with a strongly economic rationale. In comparison, the social dimension is more weakly underpinned constitutionally. European Citizenship, as legally defined, has been described as 'anaemic' (Follesdal 2001: 314) – it confers few rights, requires few duties, and is conferred not by the EU itself, but indirectly by virtue of the nationality laws of member states.<sup>9</sup> And the writ of the EU, and its Commission, to develop policy in any area of education or lifelong learning is quite tightly constrained by the treaties and the principle of subsidiarity. Those within the Commission and beyond who wish to develop its educational role have long made a virtue of blurring the boundaries between the Union's economic and social objectives.

Some have identified a shift in the rhetoric and content of EU educational policy in the wake of the Kok report (High Level Group 2004) and the so-called 'crisis' of the Lisbon strategy (Robertson 2008), with a downplaying of social concerns and a renewed emphasis on economic competitiveness. Although this can be overstated, and contrary tendencies have been noted (Holford 2008), the direction of movement seems clear. It is apparent in the 'Europe 2020' strategy, under which priorities for education and lifelong learning have been narrowed, and incorporated into a National Reform Programme for each member state. On the basis of these, the Commission makes proposals, which are negotiated with the government concerned. Many, of course, are principally focussed on economic policy; but they also cover issues of education and training. For instance, for 2011-2012 the Commission 'recommended' the UK government:

Take steps by 2012 to ensure that a higher share of young people enter the labour market with adequate skills and to improve the employability of 18 to 24-year-olds who left education or training without qualifications. Address skill shortages by increasing the numbers attaining intermediate skills, in line with labour market needs. (EU Council 2011a)

For Slovenia the recommendations included:

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<sup>9</sup> European Citizenship comprises: freedom of movement and residence within the Union; the right to vote and stand for election in local government and European Parliament elections in one's country of residence; the right to diplomatic and consular protection from authorities of any member state; and the right to access the European Ombudsman (Preuss et al. 2003: 5).

Set up a system to forecast skills and competencies needed to achieve a responsive labour market. Evaluate the effectiveness of the public employment service, notably on career guidance and counselling services, to improve the matching of skills with labour market needs. (EU Council 2011b)

For Hungary the recommendations included:

Take steps to strengthen the capacity of the Public Employment Service and other providers to increase the quality and effectiveness of training, job search assistance and individualised services. ... In consultation with stakeholders, introduce tailor-made programmes, for the low-skilled and other particularly disadvantaged groups. (EU Council 2011c)

For Estonia the recommendations included:

While implementing the education system reform, give priority to measures improving the availability of pre- school education, and enhance the quality and availability of professional education. Focus education outcomes more on labour market needs, and provide opportunities for low- skilled workers to take part in lifelong learning. (2011d)

For Bulgaria the recommendations included: 'Advance the educational reform by adopting a Law on Pre-School and School Education and a new Higher Education Act by mid 2012.' (2011e) The Europe 2020 strategy seems, therefore, to have strengthened the policy salience of lifelong learning within the EU, and the national reform programme process suggests a stronger apparatus of 'soft power': but at the price of a further privileging of economic purpose in European lifelong learning policy.

#### *Education as international relations?*

While commentators have typically focussed on how 'cohesion' and 'competitiveness' have fared in recent EU lifelong learning policies, Dale (2009) has suggested that education plays a political as well as social and economic role in the 'European project'. The EU, he argues, has 'more than economic ambitions, ... seeing its project spreading wider and deeper than short-term collective economic benefit' (Dale 2009, p. 28). This 'distinct "Europe-centred" project' aims 'to "thicken" the discourses and institutions of Europe, irrespective of economic competition' (Dale 2009, p. 27). He sees the Lisbon goals as less about responding to *global* competition, and more concerned about competing with specified competitors (the US, Japan and so forth). On this view, the European Higher Education Area, the Bologna Process and related projects are 'ambitious global strategies' (Robertson 2009, p. 77). Bologna is not just a means of achieving uniformity across Europe: it seeks to transform higher education globally in the European image and the European interest. 'While for a long time Europe has legitimated its activities by presenting itself as a civilising rather than imperialising presence, its more explicit economic and transnational interests open it up to charges of modern-day colonialism and imperialism' (Robertson 2009, p. 78). Similar arguments could doubtless be developed around in other sectors of education and training: the European Training Foundation, for instance, works with '30 partner countries' across south-eastern Europe, north Africa and central Asia

to help transition and developing countries to harness the potential of their human capital through the reform of education, training and labour market systems in the context of the EU's external relations policy (European Training Foundation 2011).

Its work includes training and retraining to facilitate ‘adaptation to industrial changes’, encouraging ‘vocational integration and reintegration into the labour market’, ‘stimulating cooperation’ between educational establishments and firms, and ‘designing, introducing and implementing reforms in education and training systems in order to develop employability and labour market relevance’ (European Training Foundation 2011).

Dale and Robertson see such developments as part of a ‘hegemonic project’ of ‘constructing Europe, economically, politically, culturally’, which involves reconstructing governance. European education policy should, they argue, be seen in this light: as implicated in the spread of neoliberal globalisation, a key feature of which is ‘harnessing the apparatuses of the state to its own purposes in place of the decommodifying and “market-taming” role the state had under social democracy’ (Dale 2009, p. 29). The EU, in their view, is principally a mechanism which educates and disciplines nation states to this end; and the EU’s lifelong learning policies and educational governance mechanisms play their part. Soft power, from this perspective, is the EU’s preferred mode of behaviour in external and international relations, as well as in its internal affairs. There is indeed a case that if the EU is to find ‘advantage’ in a competitive world – and at the time of writing, amid the crisis of the Euro, Europe’s competitive advantages do not seem numerous – it may well lie in governance expertise; and that the technologies it has developed in the educational realm have their part to play.

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