From symbols to numbers: the shifting technologies of education governance in Europe

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Introduction

This paper focuses on the changing nature of education governance in Europe. It looks at the shifting discourses and policy practices of the European Commission in relation to education and discusses the reasons for what is presented as a substantial shift in the tools and resources for governing the European education space. The paper suggests that, alongside other significant developments, the knowledge economy has had a major effect on education governance in Europe: this has entailed a rapid change of policy discourse and practice, moving from constructing a European ‘culture’, to a Europe of (lifelong) learning governed by numbers. Education is now widely re-conceptualised as learning through the use of new statistical categories, indicators and benchmarks which measure standards, performance and outputs. The paper discusses the new technologies of governance that have powered the shift from (adult) education to (lifelong) learning and makes a case for the significance of recognising and studying them further.


Since the 1970s, education, although at the cusp of the European Community’s broader agenda, has slowly been paving the way for integration, not only on the symbolic and discursive plane, but also through cooperation at a policy level, mobilizing networks, associations and a number of education players across Europe. The second half of the 1980s in particular was marked with the emergence of major community programmes in higher education and vocational training (Pépin, 2006). The Erasmus programme, named after the widely-travelled philosopher, theologian and humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam, became the most well-known of all and perhaps the symbol of cooperation in education across Europe.

Further, one of the most significant developments of the 1980s was the European Council’s decision to create an ad hoc ‘Committee for a People’s Europe’. The Committee produced two influential reports (Adonnino, 1985) as part of the project of building Europe through education and culture: their recommendations included strengthening the European cultural sector and providing reciprocal recognition of equivalent diplomas and professional qualifications (Shore, 2000). There were suggestions for the foundation of a European Academy of Science, European sports teams, school exchange programmes, voluntary work camps for young people, and, in general, the introduction of a stronger European dimension in education, including ‘the preparation and availability of appropriate school books and teaching materials’ (Adonnino, 1985, pp. 24). Ironically, supra-national Europe was going through a process of serious nation-building.

With the introduction of the European flag, the era of the ‘Euro-symbols’ had began: the Community funded the formation of an ‘EC Youth Orchestra’; an ‘Opera Centre’; the conservation of the Parthenon and monasteries in Mount Athos; the ‘European Literature Prize’; the ‘European Woman of the Year’ award; —the list can go on (Shore, 2000). The
new Europe was being constructed with the tools of what Shore calls a ‘conservative
current of nineteenth-century social evolutionist thought’ (2000; 50). Nairn also describes
the process of the building of the European identity, not as the end of the nation-state, but
the creation of a ‘super-nation-state founded on European chauvinism’ (Nairn, 1977,
pp.16). Retrospectively, it is interesting to note that at the beginning of the 1990s Europe’s
constructed ‘Other’ was not illegal immigrants from the east, but the wave of
Americanisation dominating Europe from the west. *Le défi américain* repeatedly appears in
Commission discourse and other official documentation as threatening the European
common cultural heritage, which, although had deep roots in the history of the European
peoples, the Commission still needed to ‘defend’ it and raise ‘awareness’ around it (Shore,
1996).

At the beginning of the 1990s, the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the
outlook of German reunification had already led to a commitment to reinforce the
Community’s international position through the Treaty on European Union (TEU) in 1992.
Known as the Maastricht Treaty, it was to become a landmark in the history of the
European integration as the culmination of the ‘Single European Act’ of 1985 which
established the objective of the common market. In addition, after more than fifteen
years of activity, the fields of education and culture acquired a clear legal basis within the EU
policy framework.

Above all, the Treaty on the European Union was the first time that education and culture
were being acknowledged as an inherent part of the integration process. Vocational
training was slightly weakened in the new arrangement, since it lost its unique standing
and became part of the wider framework in the cooperation in education, culture and social
work. Although the process had already started in the 1980s, these were the first firm
steps in the shift from the ‘technocrats’ Europe’ to a ‘Europe of the peoples’. Although
articles 126 and 127 of the Treaty (1992, online) declared that there would be no
harmonization of European education systems, neither a common European education
model would be promoted, fields of activity such as language learning, youth exchanges,
collaboration amongst educational institutions and especially student and teacher mobility
were to receive far greater economic sustenance and policy significance as the
‘complementary’ competences of the European Union (TEU, 1992, online).

The two new education programmes, ‘Socrates’ and ‘Leonardo’, with significant amounts
of funding (933 million Ecu for Socrates and 794 million Ecu for Leonardo), were also
included in the pantheon of names of imminent European scholars. They both run from
1995 to 1999. Socrates had the objective ‘to contribute to the development of quality
education and training and the creation of an open European area for cooperation in
education’ and in particular ‘develop the European dimension in education in order to
promote citizenship’ (Pépin, 2006, pp.170). It followed three strands: Higher Education
(Erasmus), School Education (Comenius) and Language Learning (Lingua). The
instruments of cooperation, according to the programme, would be institutional contracts,
transnational projects, mobility and networks. ‘Leonardo’ aimed at implementing a
Community vocational training programme. Both programmes were continued for a second
phase (2000-2006) and are now replaced by the new Commission’s Lifelong Learning
programme –the first time that, rather than a scholarly, a more ‘pragmatic’ name has been
given to a European education programme.

However, as already stated, public support for the European Union in the ‘90s was
dropping. The De Clercq report (1993) stated that ‘European identity has not yet been
engrained in people’s minds’ (1993, pp. 2); that, by adopting a more ‘human face,
sympathetic, warm and caring’, Europe had to be promoted as a ‘brand’ product, in order to speak to the hearts of European individuals: ‘The Commission should be clearly positioned as the guarantor of the well being and quality of life of the citizen of Europe… must be brought close to the people, implicitly evoking the maternal, nurturing case of ‘Europa’ for all her children’ (De Clercq, 1993, pp.9).

However, as with the old empires, the arrival of success for the Union had perhaps already sown the seeds of a crisis. Due to enlargement and globalisation, debates were soon to change the focus of the integration process from uniting the peoples of Europe under a common destiny, to finding urgent and joint responses to the paradoxical competition-social cohesion agenda.

Indeed, as early as 1994, the ‘White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment’ supported the need to take action in the field of lifelong learning. In 1995 the White Paper ‘Teaching and Learning –towards the learning society’ had already begun constructing the Europe of the knowledge economy. Europe’s culture and civilisation appeared of less significance in this new hegemonic discourse: ‘Tomorrow’s society will be a society which invests in knowledge, a society of teaching and learning, in which each individual will build up his or her own qualifications. In other words, a learning society’ (EC, 1995).

Measuring Europe: Lisbon (2000) and after
‘Learning’ and the ‘knowledge society’ were soon to become the new dominant discourses in the process of fabricating the space of European education. Even though an interest in measuring educational performance through numerical data was evident as early as the mid-70s, the concepts of indicators and benchmarking received the European education ministers’ explicit attention for the first time in 1999 in a conference in Prague. The Ministers stressed the need for a more coherent approach for all Community action and for a structured framework for political discussion and activities over the coming years. Hence, they decided to set up a group of national experts who would devise a list of indicators of quality in school education in Europe. According to the Commission, ‘the objective was … to identify the quality-related problems which were politically most relevant for European countries, and then determine which of the existing indicators —mainly from Eurostat, the OECD, the IEA and Eurydice— could shed most light on these problems’ (Pépin, 2006 pp.196-7). The sixteen Indicators for quality assurance (Pépin, 2006) were constituted on the basis of triangulating existing data that at this point deemed useful; in a sense, most of the work towards establishing the new quality assurance framework for European education was already in place. What was necessary now was to coordinate data, organizations and minds towards the requirements of the new knowledge economy.

In the field of higher education, the Bologna process (1999) set out to achieve a ‘coherent and compatible’ European area of higher education by 2010 with the introduction of a simplified system of more transparent and comparable degrees across Europe. This would entail the convergence of national systems under a common framework of bachelor’s, master’s degrees and doctorates (Corbett, 2005). In addition, the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), which had already been devised for the needs of the Erasmus programme had to be taken into account, as well as ensuring the European cooperation in quality assurance.

However, the turning point towards an increased interest in setting standards for education systems in Europe was the Lisbon Council of 2000. According to the Presidency conclusions, ‘the European Union is confronted with a quantum shift resulting from globalisation and the challenges of a new knowledge-driven economy’ (Council, 2000).
Apart from setting specific objectives, such as an increased investment in human resources, the establishment of a European framework for lifelong learning and the fostering of educational mobility, the Council also suggested a new style of policy formation, the ‘Open Method of Coordination’ (OMC) (Council, 2000). Indicators and benchmarking are at the heart of this new policy tool, since OMC was declared as the new ‘soft’ form of governance.

Nonetheless, apart from establishing new strategic goals and the policy frameworks to push them, the Lisbon European Council was significant for one more reason: although it was essentially an economic treaty, apart from focusing on employment and economy (the two more ‘traditional’ areas for joining efforts in the past), it was the education ministers who were appointed this time with the mission to achieve the Lisbon goals for 2010.

According to the official European Commission overview of the pre- and post-Lisbon developments, the quantification of certain aspects of school life was regarded as a positive step forward: ‘While the setting of quantified targets is not unusual in areas such as employment or the economy, it was a very new and bold step at European level in a field like education. Targets have the merit of being explicit and making it easier to assess the progress made’ (Pépin, 2006, pp.208).

Indeed, a year later, the Education Council asked from the Commission to draft a report on ‘The concrete future objectives of education systems’ (Council, 2001). The objectives came under three strategic goals: education and training in Europe should by 2010, according to the report, become more effective and with improved quality, more accessible and more open. The Heads of States or governments approved the work programme in 2003 and committed themselves to the new vision for European education: a ‘world quality reference’ by 2010. It was the first time in the history of the European education space that no reference was made to the common European cultural or educational heritage—the focus now was on a projected image of a competitive and social Europe.

The work programme for 2010 was also the first time when OMC was applied as a governing tool. Alongside the old methods of networking and exchanging good practice, a concrete set of standards would now act as the new governing technology in the field of European education. From now on, the production of statistical reports by Member States would double. New categories of educational structures were being invented, such as participation in compulsory schooling or learning-to-learn. A different European education space was in the making, governed by numbers and quality standards.

However, despite the new framework of action, the acceleration of Asian economies (mainly China and India), the enlargement of the European Union in 2004 and the ever-dominant pressures for securing social cohesion and promoting European citizenship, led to new challenges. According to the first Commission’s report regarding the progress of the ‘Education and Training 2010’ agenda (Commission, 2002), there was an urgency to implement the Lisbon goals, since data were presenting an alarming picture in regard to a number of indicators for European education systems. In the light of the Kok report (2004) which warned about the very modest achievements in relation to ‘Education and Training 2010’, the Commission adopted a reformed, much tighter strategy towards ‘Education and Training 2010’, with the focus on even stricter growth and employment objectives.

**Conclusion**

For a long time in the history of the European education space, education governance was exercised through technologies of the ‘self’ (Foucault et. al, 1988) which had
systematically been working towards establishing new normative categories and constructing new meanings: these were notions like the ‘common European values’, the ‘common culture’, or the notion of ‘Europeanness’. The paper discussed the approaches taken in the construction of a European subjectivity, which, by often being astonishingly direct and almost propagandistic, were sometimes harshly criticized and rejected (Delanty, 1995). The old European myth was indeed a myth of high, elitist European culture, a myth of Enlightenment ideals commonly created and treasured by the European peoples – white middle- or upper-class men, in their majority. Nevertheless, these ideals had a strong social dimension which became particularly appealing and promising after the devastation and despair of the two World Wars. The Member States of the Union were invited in a project to build a social Europe which would establish itself as the significant ‘Other’ against the inhumanity of an economic system of winners and losers, which was accelerating to global dominance.

At the same time, national education systems remained more or less the same; they welcomed exchanges and networks as the additional European ‘extra’, which offered a fresher flavour of cosmopolitanism in their somewhat stale school curricula of the old Europe. Despite the systematic efforts to create a common European education space, education in the pre-Lisbon era remained largely a national topic. In the face of globalization and the dominance of the knowledge economy, new and urgent technologies of persuasion had to be devised; the voluntary nature of the previous arrangement was too loose to respond to the severe economic challenges of both the education and the wider market. Creating, regulating and monitoring, or in other words, governing the European education space now had to be based on statistics and what Rose calls ‘governing by numbers’ (1991). In fact, one of the greatest post-Lisbon developments in the history of the EU is the weight given to education and training in Europe; first, for the EU, rather than an area at the periphery of policy-making, education and learning have now become central in constructing Europe itself. Europe does not need to pre-exist in the hearts and minds as it was before –it is being created, sorted, systematized, scrutinized and constantly improved through the new soft governance tools of comparison and benchmarking. Hard EU regulation, in areas such as agriculture or trade for example, often meet the resistance and criticism of ‘Euro-sceptics’; ‘soft’ law (Lawn, 2003), on the other hand, is self-imposed and self-adhered; it is effective, manageable and economical; it looks optional and ‘light-touch’; it seems objective and forward-looking; it relates to current concerns. Second, for the member-nations, in the field of education, Europe has become the relatively friendlier face of globalization; it gives them a platform to raise their voice; it offers them a quality assurance framework, many of which would otherwise have to devise it on their own; it often provides them with best practice advice, leaving the content of the curriculum intact; above all, it offers them a scapegoat, blaming which they can undisputedly justify the necessity for modernization and reform.

However, the key point is that measuring education systems in specific ways also frames what is expected from them –it eventually transforms education systems and the purposes of education according to the two fundamental messages of the hegemonic, global knowledge economy discourse: first, that ‘knowledge’ is considered as the key ‘indicator’ to economic well-being, both individual and national; second, that there is an urgent need to restructure education systems so that they fit to the new post-national economic reality of globalisation. Knowledge, depoliticized, handled by state but also for-profit organizations, flexible and lifelong, is preferred to education systems, which are often seen as an obstacle to the operation of a free education market (Dale and Robertson, 2007). The concept of lifelong learning (LLL) fits perfectly with this new status-quo: on the one hand, based on the acquiring of knowledge and skills throughout life, it is independent
from state, public provision and therefore powers the rapidly expanding global knowledge industry; on the other, it is proposed as the solution to unemployment, therefore promoting the European social policy agenda. Above all, through the Commission’s new lifelong learning programme (2007-2013), it has now been extended to compulsory education which comes under the same LLL umbrella category.

The experience of governing the European education systems, and governance in general, is that once categories are constructed, realities are soon to follow along. The new technology of the governance of the European education space through indicators and benchmarks is not only to be seen as the project of fulfilling Brussels’ requirements of achieving specific goals and objectives. Instead, it has to be examined as the deeply penetrating, consciousness-moulding and thus serious business of constructing new categories of (educational) thought and action – the project of re-inventing a ‘new’ European identity of competitive advantage and responsible individualism. According to Hacking, ‘the bureaucracy of statistics imposes not just by creating administrative rulings but by determining classifications within which people must think of themselves and of the actions that are open to them’ (1991, pp.194). Both indicators and benchmarking as well as the lifelong learning policy agenda are not merely to be seen as a discursive, cosmetic or surface change, but in fact could be understood as the very process which has become one of the central components of building the new Europe of the knowledge economy.

There seems to be a serious imbalance in the history of the construction of the European education space: from almost obsessively focusing on the ‘big’ history of a very remote past that belonged to few and was of interest to even fewer, Europe has turned to an almost anxiety to forecast, control and shape a one-way future. There is now an urgent need to recognize and further study the meaning of this shift in order to capture its full impact on the future of education in Europe and beyond.

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References


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Notes

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2 This is the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. Since its inception in 1958, the IEA has conducted more than 23 research studies of cross-national achievement. Examples are the Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMS, 1995; 1999; 2003; 2007) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Studies (PIRLS, 2001; 2006).

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