Social and economic dimensions in European lifelong learning policy

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While social cohesion is generally acknowledged to be an aim of the European Union’s lifelong learning policy, it is typically seen as subordinate to the ‘growth’ and ‘knowledge economy’ dimension. Brine (2006a) and Field (2006), for instance, locate the origins of EU lifelong learning policy in the White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness, Employment (CEC, 1993), rather than in the education White Paper, Teaching and Learning: Towards a Learning Society (CEC 1995). On this analysis, social inclusion and citizenship are at a discount and/or framed in terms of employability (Edwards, 2002; Field, 2006). In a recent twist on this approach, Robertson (2007), though conceding that a ‘social welfare Europe’ approach made Europe distinct until around 2005, a new “‘crisis” discourse’ and ‘globally-oriented “education” policies and programmes’ oriented toward ‘a more open, globally-oriented, freer market Europe’ have now displaced it.

Without denying the predominance of economic drivers in contemporary educational policy formation, this paper suggests such accounts underplay the significance of the ‘social dimension’ in EU lifelong learning policy, and of its potential for development. Amid an ‘economism’ shared across international lifelong learning, EU institutions have nurtured programmes emphasising citizenship and social cohesion. Vocational concerns inevitably predominate; but the space it provides for a ‘social agenda’ is a distinguishing feature of EU lifelong learning policy.

Early development

Education was marginal to the original design of the European Community, and – with very minor exceptions – ‘taboo’ in debates at European level until the early 1970s (Blitz, 2003, pp.4). In 1974 – influenced by the first enlargement – Education ministers encouraged ‘co-operation’ in various priority sectors, while preserving ‘educational traditions and policies in each country’ (CEC, 1979, pp.2). The themes of co-operation and diversity enabled the Commission to develop education policy while minimising conflict with member states: the Commission creatively conflated education as a universal value with the economic requirements of the single market.

In the 1980s further incremental extension in the Community’s educational profile was supported by European Court of Justice decisions and by the formation of a Directorate General within the Commission. The focus remained limited – chiefly supporting improved school curricula and quality, with a marked European content. Concern with lifelong learning (in the post-compulsory sense) remained limited: in a mid-1980s statement on ‘The European Community and Education’ it was confined to school-to-work transitions and ‘adult anti-illiteracy campaigns’ (CEC, 1985). But the low profile of lifelong concerns in the 1980s mirrored the attitudes of most international organisations.

The impact of Maastricht

Only with the Treaty of Maastricht (1992) did the European Union achieve an unambiguous element of competence in education: to make ‘a contribution to education
and training of quality and to the flowering of the cultures of the Member States’. This remained circumscribed by the principle of subsidiarity. The Treaty made few explicit references to lifelong (i.e., post-initial) learning – chiefly in relation to economic priorities. The Community was, for example, to ‘implement a vocational training policy’ which should aim to ‘facilitate adaptation to industrial changes, in particular through vocational training and retraining’ (Article G). However, the new general authority to contribute to ‘education and training of quality’ provided a basis for broader policy development. Though still circumscribed by subsidiarity, Member States could no longer object on principle to Commission activity in education after Maastricht. However, policy had to be developed within the constraints of the Treaty: the Treaty-makers clearly thought education was mainly initial education – and insofar as they thought of lifelong learning at all, they saw it in vocational terms.

When lifelong learning re-emerged internationally in the 1990s, the emphasis was firmly on economic performance (Field, 2006). However, within the EU this allowed new space for non-economically-oriented policies: the new agenda was closer to mainstream EU concerns. Subsidiarity had meant education was mainly a matter for member states: an EU role had to be closely related to core EU aims: educational measures had to be justifiable as furthering the common market.

This legal framework shaped how the DG for education developed policy when lifelong learning re-emerged in international policy debates in the early 1990s. Chiefly they framed it in economic terms. Growth, Competitiveness, Employment (CEC, 1993), not an education White Paper, but that made it more important: to address globalisation, ICT, and competition from Asia and the USA, lifelong learning and ‘continuing training’ were essential. Lifelong learning was now ‘foregrounded’ in a suite of policies entirely consistent with central EU aims and educational objectives specified at Maastricht. The education White Paper (CEC, 1995) argued for lifelong learning within this framework.

However, from the mid-1990s, utilitarian and economic aims began to be complemented by ‘more integrated policies’ involving ‘social and cultural objectives’ (Dehmel, 2006, pp.52): various programmes (Socrates, Leonardo da Vinci, etc.) included lifelong learning as a strong theme; 1996 became European Year of Lifelong Learning. The trans-European dimensions of these programmes (e.g., encouraging exchanges of teachers and students across EU member states) were contributions to building European identity and citizenship.

By the turn of the century, therefore, lifelong learning was a distinctive feature of EU education policy. Of course, international organisations and some member states had moved in a similar direction. But for the EU lifelong learning had become both an organising theme linking a range of policies in education with other areas (notably economic policy and social exclusion), and the home for several programmes designed to strengthen Europeans’ identification with the EU.

**Lisbon and the open method of co-ordination**

The Lisbon European Council (March, 2000) set a new policy framework, drawing on the ‘knowledge economy’ (and similar ideas popular in the later 1990s) bound up with discourses of modernisation and change. The ‘new strategic goal’ was to become ‘the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world ... with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion’ by 2010 (CEC, 2000). This included ‘modernising’ the European social model and building an ‘active welfare state’.
To this end, education and training systems had to adapt to ‘the demands of the knowledge society and to the need for an improved level and quality of employment’. Adults were given a central position: specifically, ‘unemployed adults’ and employed people ‘at risk of seeing their skills overtaken by rapid change’ (CEC, 2000). Various activities were also specified, including a European lifelong learning basic skills framework, greater mutual recognition of qualifications, and programmes for ‘mobility of students, teachers and training and research staff’ (Socrates, Leonardo, Youth) (CEC, 2000). All these were in step with Maastricht.

Lisbon also brought the ‘Open Method of Co-ordination’ to education (Hantrais, 2007). Two elements of the OMC have proved key for lifelong learning: subsidiarity, and the emphasis on agreed timetables and goals, indicators and benchmarks, and ‘monitoring, evaluation and peer review’ (CEC, 2000). The monitoring implied – subsidiarity notwithstanding – 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 monitoring, evaluation and peer review ‘organised as mutual learning processes’ (CEC, 2000).

In fact, Lisbon brought an increase in the volume and specificity of lifelong learning policy. There was, of course, no attempt directly to organise educational activity within member states. But EU policy recommendation, monitoring and evaluation of progress against benchmarks using a growing range of indicators probably had a significant impact on national policies.

A new educational space

Central features of European lifelong learning policies have been in step with dominant international policy trends since the early 1990s. In the EU’s case, however, this ‘economism’ can be traced back to a long-standing market orientation. In other words, similarities between EU and international policy reflect path-dependency from the EU’s origins, rather than recent globalisation. Despite this ‘market’ orientation, however, concerns with social inclusion, citizenship, and social cohesion are evident, though often articulated in language compatible with the market, reflecting the parameters of EU competence.

How are we to account for this? The main current explanation is Lawn’s view that a ‘new European space’ for education or learning exists within the dominant, market, discourse (Lawn, 2002, pp.20): a new approach to policy-making, involving the creation of a ‘new cultural space’ in which ‘new European meanings in education are constructed’ (pp.5). He argues that the EU’s new methods of policymaking (e.g., extensive use of policy networks; invitations to academics, educationalists and other interested parties to form working groups; use of ‘expert panels’ as part of consultation exercises) enable those involved to inform emerging policy agendas and the values that underpin them – and so to contest neo-liberal influences.

There are difficulties with this view. How well does it accord with the role of the OMC in other policy areas (such as employment)? (cf Rhodes, 2005; Zeitlin, 2005). It seems to describe actors rather than what they do (cf Holford, forthcoming); and it emphasises process rather than outcomes. In relation to this last, Robertson (2007) argues that, in response to the sense that the Lisbon strategy was failing, and the EU falling behind, a new ‘crisis discourse’, and ‘globally-oriented “education” policies and programmes’ emerged from 2005, undermining ‘the idea of a European civility’ and the ‘iconic status of the European Social Model ...’.
How far does EU lifelong learning policy retain a ‘social purpose’ dimension? Holford (2008) traces how far it has been displaced by ‘knowledge economy’ discourse in three recent EU policy papers: *Efficiency and Equity in European Education and Training Systems* (CEC, 2006a), *Adult Learning: It is never too late to learn* (CEC, 2006b), and *Key Competences for Lifelong Learning: European Reference Framework* (CEC, 2007). Briefly, in none is the language of ‘knowledge economy’, or ‘knowledge society’, prominent. In *Efficiency and Equity* there are two references to the latter, and one to ‘knowledge based economy and society’. In *Adult Learning*, neither term appears at all. *Key Competences* contains just two references to ‘knowledge society’, one (in the Foreword) to ‘knowledge-based society’, and none to knowledge economy; the word ‘globalisation’ occurs just twice.

**Conclusion**

EU education policy has always had a strongly vocational emphasis – reflecting the founding treaties rather than ‘globalisation’. From the early 1990s, a parallel concern to establish a European identity emerged. Paradoxically, because it sat well with the EU’s ‘common market’ dimension, the ‘economic competitiveness’ orientation of international lifelong learning provided space for lifelong learning policies to develop which give a place to citizenship and social cohesion.