

# Changes of Education Policies within the European Union in the Light of Globalisation

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ABSTRACT Education issues have traditionally not played a central role within the European Union (EU). This has gradually started to change in recent years. At the Lisbon European Council in March 2000, the heads of states and governments of the EU member countries, in response to the challenges of globalisation and the information society, set out a new strategic objective for the coming decade: 'Becoming 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'. This implies major changes, and education will be among the areas affected. Two questions can be raised in relation to this development: (1) How can a European education policy be created within the existing framework of the EU? (2) What could be the content of such an education policy? This article sets out to answer these questions by examining new methods of working and the initiatives that have been undertaken. It goes on to look at some of the problems and challenges confronting the EU in adapting Europe's education and training systems to the demands of the knowledge society, and, using an examination of how the EU is trying to find new methods for cooperation in the field of education and how elements of a European education policy can be found in present initiatives, it explores some scenarios setting out how the work of the EU and a European education policy can develop.

## Introduction

The concept of globalisation can be defined in many ways. Most definitions would contain a reference to technological change and the ways in which this has increased competition in the world market (see, for example, Martin & Schumann, 1997; Carnoy, 1999; Castells, 2000). The concept has been

questioned by, for example, Hirst & Thompson (1996). According to their analyses there are no reasons to talk about a globalised economy, but instead an increased internationalisation of the world economy in recent years. In this economy 'the formation of trading blocks, and the development of new national strategies that take account of internationalization are by no means exhausted' (p. 196). Ehrenberg (1998) argues that globalisation is a myth used to support political and economical changes pushed for by big companies. Reiter (2002) notes that the focus on globalisation has led to an internationalisation of many issues which traditionally have been regarded as domestic policies. Many governments have in recent years tried to identify strategies which would make their countries more competitive in international markets. The question this article will deal with is how this has been reflected in the approach towards education in the European Union (EU).

Within the EU, the topic of how to make Europe more competitive in relation to its two main competitors, the USA and Japan, has been discussed on several occasions. At the Lisbon European Council on 23-24 March 2000 this was one of the main issues for discussion. Already in the preamble to the Presidency Conclusions from Lisbon it has been noted that:

The European Union is confronted with a quantum shift resulting from globalisation and the challenges of a new knowledge-driven economy. These changes are affecting every aspect of people's lives and require a radical transformation of the European economy. The Union must shape these changes in a manner consistent with its values and concepts of society and also with a view to the forthcoming enlargement. (Lisbon European Council: Presidency Conclusions, paragraph 1)

Under the headline 'The Way Forward', a new strategic goal for the next decade is stated: '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: Presidency Conclusions, paragraph 5).

The Presidency Conclusions from the Lisbon summit continued with a number of recommendations on what to do in order to reach the strategic goal. The conclusions talk about completing the internal market and the application of an appropriate macroeconomic policy mix. In addition to traditional economic measures, the need to invest in people is also mentioned (Lisbon European Council: Presidency Conclusions, paragraph 5). What this could mean is further developed under the headline 'Education and Training for Living and Working in the Knowledge Society'. Under this headline, a series of measures related to Europe's education and training systems is mentioned. For the first time in the history of EU summits, education and training is described as a major tool for implementing a strategic goal.

## Education in the EU

The new interest in education and training should be seen in the light of the earlier role education has played in the EU. Even if it could be argued that the EU was founded both to achieve general goals such as building a sustainable peace in Europe and more concrete objectives such as facilitating trade within Europe, the focus has traditionally been on economic cooperation. Education has never played a central role in EU policy. The reason for this is not only that the focus has been elsewhere, but also a widespread hesitation among EU member states to transfer any power over education to a European level. This is expressed in the Maastricht Treaty on European Union, Chapter 3, Articles 149 and 150 (former Articles 126 and 127).

Article 149:

1. The Community shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging co-operation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity.
2. Community action shall 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, inter alia by encouraging the academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study;
  - promoting co-operation 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;
  - encouraging the development of distance education.
3. The Community and the Member States shall foster co-operation with third countries and the competent international organisations in the field of education, in particular the Council of Europe.
4. In order to contribute to the achievement of the objectives referred to in this Article, the Council:
  - acting in accordance with the procedure referred to in Article 251, after consulting the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, shall adopt incentive measures, excluding any harmonisation of the laws and regulations of the Member States;
  - acting by a qualified majority on a proposal from the Commission, shall adopt recommendations.

Article 150:

1. 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.

2. Community action shall aim to:

- facilitate adaptation to industrial changes, in particular through vocational training and retraining;
- improve initial and continuing vocational training in order to facilitate vocational integration and reintegration into the labour market;
- facilitate access to vocational training and encourage mobility of instructors and trainees and particularly young people;
- stimulate co-operation on training between educational or training establishments and firms;
- develop exchanges of information and experience on issues common to the training systems of the Member States.

3. The Community and the Member States shall foster co-operation with third countries and the competent international organisations in the sphere of vocational training.

4. The Council, acting in accordance with the procedure referred to in Article 251 and after consulting the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, shall adopt measures to contribute to the achievement of the objectives referred to in this Article, excluding any harmonisation of the laws and regulations of the Member States.

The Treaty provides for the development of an exchange of information and experience on issues common to the education systems of the member states, but not for a common education policy and certainly not for harmonisation of the education systems. It should also be noted that the fact that the EU makes a distinction between, on the one hand, general education (paragraph 149) and, on the other hand, vocational education and training (paragraph 150) reflects the reality in some of the EU countries, but not in others. It may also be significant that the EU traditionally has shown more interest in vocational education and training than in general education and, by making this distinction, a possibility has been kept open to act in one field but not in the other. In the past, one of the EU's major concerns in the field of education and training has been related to mobility and how to make sure that qualifications and diplomas are recognised on equal terms among all member states.

### **New Working Methods**

It is possible to discuss to what extent the framework expressed in paragraphs 149 and 150 could be used to develop European educational cooperation, but the fact is that a number of new initiatives have been taken without reference to this framework. Instead of building on the provisions in the treaty, two new approaches have been adopted, one referred to as the new open method of coordination and the other as different 'processes', partly outside the traditional EU framework.

*The New Open Method of Coordination*

The new open method of coordination is referred to in the Presidency Conclusions of the Lisbon European Council (paragraph 7) as the method that, together with existing processes and a strong guiding and coordination role for the European Council, will be the tools to implement the new strategic goals (see above). This method is used within several areas. In the European Commission's White Paper on European Governance (European Commission, 2001a), the 'open method of co-ordination', is discussed:

The open method of co-ordination is used on a case by case basis. It is a way of encouraging co-operation, the exchange of best practice and agreeing common targets and guidelines for Member States, sometimes backed up by national action plans as in the case of employment and social exclusion. It relies on regular monitoring of progress to meet those targets, allowing Member States to compare their efforts and learn from the experience of others.

In some areas, such as employment and social policy or immigration policy, it sits alongside the programme-based and legislative approach; in others, it adds value at a European level where there is little scope for legislative solutions. This is the case, for example, with work at a European level defining future objectives for national education systems. (p. 21)

What the open method of coordination could mean in the field of education is described by the European Commission, DG Education and Culture, on its website (European Commission, 2002a):

While respecting the breakdown of responsibilities envisaged in the treaties, this method provides a new co-operation framework for the Member States with a view to convergence of national policies and the attainment of certain objectives shared by everyone. It is based essentially on:

- identifying and defining jointly the objectives to be attained;
- commonly-defined yardsticks (statistics, indicators) enabling Member States to know where they stand and to assess progress towards the objectives set;
- comparative co-operation tools to stimulate innovation, the quality and relevance of teaching and training programmes (dissemination of 'best practice', pilot projects, etc.)

It can be noted that, in spite of the reference to the responsibility envisaged in the treaties, this method seems to introduce new elements for cooperation. There is a reference to convergence of national policies, which obviously is supposed to be understood as something other than harmonisation. The way to achieve this convergence is through the three steps mentioned above: (1) you identify certain objectives; (2) you define yardsticks to use to measure the

progress related to the objectives; and (3) you create tools to achieve the objectives.

In the text quoted above, the words 'yardsticks' and 'indicators' are used. According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, the word 'indicator' is to be understood as a 'person, thing, that points out or gives information, e.g. a pointer, needle, recording apparatus, on a machine etc. showing speed, pressure, etc.' (Hornby, 1974, p. 441). In the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (vol. 12, p. 253) it states, 'Many kinds of apparatus are included under this name, which generally, implies devices to reveal conditions not otherwise apparent to the eye or hearing'.

It should also be noted that, in the same context as that in which the word 'indicators' is used, the terms 'benchmarks' and 'benchmarking' are also frequently referred to. Historically, the terms refer to the marks which female mill workers made in their benches in order to compare how much they could spin during a day. According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, a benchmark is 'a surveyor's mark cut in stone or some durable material to indicate a point in a line of levels for the determination of altitudes over a given district' (vol. 3, p. 393). Benchmarking has been described in other contexts as an ongoing examination and learning process to discover, analyse and introduce the best working methods. Many companies use these terms to describe processes whereby they: study the structures of other companies and try to incorporate the best ideas into their structures, try to increase the general awareness of costs, results and processes in relation to competitors, look for new methods to solve problems, and establish realistic goals.

The references to 'indicators', 'benchmarks' and 'benchmarking' can also be related to what Power (2002) calls 'The Auditing Society'. According to Power, there has been a growing interest in the United Kingdom in 'a certain set of attitudes or cultural commitments to problem solving' (p. 4). It is probably safe to say that this increased interest has also been visible in other EU countries. Central elements in this set of attitudes are accountability, evaluation, control and quality. Auditing practice in the public sector has 'received a decisive stimulus since the mid-1980s as programmatic commitments to the reform of the public sector administration' (p. 52). Power underlines the important role of quality audit in this context:

Quality audits are used because quality must be made measurable. As systems become the primary focus for inspectors and auditors, technical difficulties of performance measurement become invisible. A new market for assurance services has emerged which demands a tight coupling between quality performance, however that is to be defined, and processes to ensure that this performance is visible to a wider audience, whether this is the customer, the regulator, or even the customer as a regulator. 'Making quality auditable' is therefore a form of impression management in which the object of audit has shifted from operation to system control over operations. Without audit and the certification that follows from

audit, quality remains too private an affair. One might conclude that there is no quality without quality assurance. (p. 60)

'Indicators', 'benchmarks' and 'benchmarking' did not formerly have a very precise and clear meaning in the educational context, but they have now started to be used frequently. In general terms, in the international educational discussion, indicators can be seen to refer to comparable information on issues mainly related to three areas:

- statistical information on education budgets, educational costs, teacher/student ratios etc.;
- information on the structures of the educational systems; and
- student achievement.

How the new open method of coordination and indicators can be used can probably be illustrated by how the European Commission has dealt with the issue of quality in education over recent years. In order to strengthen cooperation at European level on the evaluation of quality in school education and in order to prepare envisaged pilot experiments, various preparatory activities were embarked upon by the Commission in 1995-97. In 1996, the Ministers of Education received a note from the Commission on the Quality of School Education. The purpose of this note was partly to take stock of preparatory activities undertaken in 1995 and partly to set out future prospects for cooperation at European level. The Commission expressed its intention of launching a pilot project on Quality Evaluation in School Education in the beginning of 1997, and this message was well received by the Ministers, who stressed the need to step up cooperation at the European level in this area.

In the school year which started in August 1997, the EU launched a pilot project on quality evaluation in school education. The objective of the project was to find answers to three questions: 'What makes a school good?', 'How can we find out?' and 'What can we do with the answers we get?' Schools in different countries sought answers to these questions in a variety of ways.

The European pilot project involved 101 schools in 18 countries participating in the SOCRATES programme.[1] As far as possible with a relatively small sample of schools, they represented a range of socio-economic backgrounds and geographical locations. Half of the schools had pupils at lower secondary level and half had pupils at upper secondary level. The schools in the project had freedom to pursue a course of evaluation suited to their own context and stage of development, but they were expected to share some methods and a common core of issues to evaluate and to exchange ideas and information with other project schools.

In 1999 the EU Pilot Project on Quality Evaluation in School Education came to an end. The EU organised a conference on the pilot project in Vienna in November 1998. It was concluded that the project had raised the awareness of quality issues in the schools. It was also noted that the project had helped to improve the quality of education during the project period. The European Commission had worked together with the experts involved to summarise the

experiences of the project and to draw up conclusions. A final report (MacBeath et al, 1999) was published in June 1999.

Partly as a result of the pilot project and partly as a result of many other developments, the European Commission raised the idea of developing some types of indicators related to quality education. In the final communiqué of the Conference of the Ministers of Education of the EU and the acceding countries held in Prague in June 1998, the European Commission was invited to set up a working committee of national experts with the objective of identifying a small number of key indicators or benchmarks to assist national evaluation of systems in the area of school standards. This project became known as the EU's project on 'Indicators and Benchmarks of Quality of School Education'. A first progress report on the work of the Committee was presented for the Ministers of Education from the EU countries and the acceding countries in Budapest in June 1999 (European Commission, 1999a). The report contained criteria for the selection of indicators. The indicators were selected on the basis of three selection criteria: political relevance of the area; comparability; and validity of the data. Special attention had been paid to areas covered by data which already existed. On the basis of a list of indicators identified, it was decided to prepare a *European Report on Quality of Education*.

In a second progress report (European Commission, 1999b), the results of the selection of indicators by the Working Committee was presented. A limited number of 16 indicators was proposed covering the areas of:

- *attainment* (mathematics, reading, science, foreign languages, learning to learn, information and communications technology [ICT], and civics);
- *success and transition* (drop-out rates, completion of upper secondary education, participation rates in tertiary education);
- *monitoring of school education* (parental participation, evaluation and steering of school education);
- *resources and structures* (educational expenditure per student, education and training of teachers, participation rates in pre-primary education, number of students per computer).

The *European Report on Quality of Education* was presented by the European Commission in May 2000 (European Commission, 2000) and discussed at a conference of Ministers of Education of the EU and the acceding countries in Bucharest in June 2000. In the final communiqué, the ministers stressed:

the importance of strengthening the qualitative information base, to measure and monitor the capacity of the education system to meet its social, economic and cultural goals. In this perspective the definition of a group of common competencies – while fully respecting national systems specificities – can represent an important support to the development of mutual co-operation, especially in the strengthening of quality and in the creation of valid indicators.

On this issue the Ministers of Education welcomed the European Report on Quality of School Education, which is the result of the mandate given



to the Commission at the Prague Conference in 1998. This report constitutes the first step at European level to identify quality indicators supporting the strengthening of the Common European House of Education. Thus they invite the Commission to continue its work, together with national experts designated by the ministers, developing specific European methodologies to make full use of the quality indicators. These methodologies should contemplate a dynamic view of the situation of educational systems, considering their evolution rather than just a static approach. They should also take into consideration the methods targeting soft qualifications. In order to implement the conclusions from the Lisbon Summit indicators aiming lifelong learning should be developing. The objective is to provide for self assessment and, through European co-operation, to lead to the identification of best practices, rather than ranking. Indicators are important in the open co-ordination method as a follow-up of the Lisbon European Council and to provide for political discussion on relevant developments regarding quality of education in the countries participating in this Conference. The Commission is therefore invited to continue the work in the field of quality indicators and to present to the Ministers more detailed proposals on potential future initiatives. (Fourth Conference of European Ministers of Education, Bucharest 18-20 June, 2000, Final Communiqué)

The work on quality indicators should also be seen in the light of the recommendations of the Lisbon European Council, which called on education ministers 'to undertake a general reflection on the concrete future objectives of education systems focusing on common concerns and priorities while respecting national diversity ... and presenting a broader report to the European Council in the spring in 2001' (Lisbon European Council Presidency Conclusions, paragraph 27). Following this mandate, a report on 'the concrete future objectives of education systems' (Council of the European Union, 2001) was presented to the Stockholm European Council in March 2001. This could be described as the first EU document to set out a coherent general approach to national education policies in the Community context. The report was structured around three principal objectives:

- i. improving the quality and effectiveness of education and training systems in the EU;
- ii. facilitating the access of all to education and training systems;
- iii. opening up education and training systems to the wider world.

The Stockholm European Council decided to continue pursuing follow-up work on concrete future objectives in the form of a work programme to be presented at the European Council's spring summit in 2002. A document entitled *Detailed Work Programme on the Follow-up of the Objectives of Education and Training Systems* (Council of the European Union, 2002) was submitted to the 2002 spring meeting of the European Council in Barcelona and was adopted by the summit.

The report on the *Detailed Work Programme* emphasised that, in order to live up to the Lisbon goals, it would be desirable to recognise educational policy as an independent element of the work. Five ambitious but – according to the report – realistic goals were set for the common educational policy strategy.

- i. High quality in education and training, and Europe will be recognised as a worldwide reference for quality.
- ii. Education and training systems will be more compatible, to improve the students' possibilities for moving between the individual education and training systems.
- iii. Holders of qualifications, knowledge and skills acquired anywhere in the EU will be recognised throughout the Union.
- iv. Europeans, at all ages, will have access to lifelong learning.
- v. Europe will be open to co-operation with all other regions and should be the most-favoured destination of students and researchers from other world regions.

The strategy put forward in the report involved two activities: to support the member states in their efforts to improve the quality of their educational and training systems; and to further transnational cooperation, thereby ensuring greater openness and equality. The member states themselves define how they are going to achieve their goals, but with a view to best practice and the objectives set. Implementation of the *Detailed Work Programme* will be supported by different forms of cooperation, such as statistical work, pilot projects, networks, and visits from decision-makers as well as cooperation with other organisations, e.g. the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the Council of Europe.

The work programme is structured around three principal objectives which are broken down into 13 associated objectives, which in turn involve a total of 42 core areas, each with its own proposals for indicators and benchmarks incorporating various elements of educational and training policy, such as lifelong learning, basic skills, ICT and mobility in higher education. Throughout the work programme, a distinction is made between concrete, often quantitative, indicators and proposals for the exchange of experience with a greater focus on the qualitative aspects of educational and training policy. For each indicator it is taken into consideration that the EU average will be compared partly with the average of the USA and Japan and with the average of the three best EU countries, without giving the names of these countries.

As a result of the work programme, eight working groups, mainly composed of national experts, have been appointed. These groups deal with: teacher and trainer education, basic skills, ICT in education and training, increased participation in mathematics and science, best use of resources, mobility and European cooperation, opening learning and strengthening links with working life and society. The tasks of the groups have been to find good

examples in their respective area and further develop benchmarks and indicators.

Another example of how the new method for open coordination has been used is the European Commission's 2001 initiative 'to launch a European-wide debate on a comprehensive strategy for implementing lifelong learning at individual and institutional levels, and in all spheres of public and private life' (European Commission, 2001b).

In November 2000, based on the conclusions of the 1996 European Year of Lifelong Learning and subsequent experience gained at European and national levels, the Commission issued a Memorandum on Lifelong Learning. This formed the basis for a European-wide consultation. The member states, the European Economic Area (EEA) countries, and candidate countries each conducted their own consultation involving relevant national bodies. At European level, the Commission consulted the social partners, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, and also organised a consultation of European civil society. The Commission also consulted various international organisations, in particular the Council of Europe, the OECD and UNESCO. In all, some 3000 individual submissions were sent to the Commission, the member states, the EEA and candidate countries, and to European institutions and bodies representing civil society and the social partners. Some 12,000 citizens participated in meetings and conferences organised as part of the process.

Based on the results of the consultations, the Commission adopted the Communication on *Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality* on 21 November 2001 (European Commission, 2001c). This was regarded by the Commission as 'an important contribution to achieving the strategic goal set at Lisbon for Europe to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based society in the world' (European Commission website, 2001a). The Communication makes proposals which are thought to make it easier to realise a European area of lifelong learning:

- The Communication proposes a broad definition of lifelong learning, defining it as 'all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence, within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective' (p. 9).
- Six 'building blocks' for a strategy for lifelong learning are set out in order to assist member states and other actors (pp. 11-14):
  - *partnership* between decision-making levels (e.g. national, regional and local) and between public authorities and education service providers (schools, universities, etc.), the business sector and the social partners, local associations, vocational guidance services, research centres, etc.;
  - *insight into demand for learning* in the knowledge-based society – which will entail redefining basic skills, to include, for instance, the new information and communication technologies;

- *adequate resourcing*, involving a substantial increase in public and private investment in learning. This includes the effective allocation of existing resources and encouraging new forms of investment;
- *facilitating access to learning opportunities* by making them more visible, introducing new provision and removing obstacles to access;
- *creating a learning culture* by giving learning a higher profile, both in terms of image and by providing incentives for the people most reluctant to opt for learning;
- *striving for excellence* through the introduction of quality control and indicators to measure progress.
- Proposals for actions at all levels. This includes an approach to valuing learning, which is supposed to make it easier for citizens to move freely between learning settings, jobs and countries. The Communication identifies six ‘priorities for action: Valuing learning, Information, guidance and counselling, Investing time and money in learning, Bringing together learners and learning opportunities, Basic skills and Innovative pedagogy (pp. 15-25).
- The Communication explains how the implementation of the European area of lifelong learning will be taken forward using existing structures, processes, programmes and instruments, and through the development of a limited number of indicators. A first report on quality indicators of lifelong learning was published by the Commission in the beginning of July (European Commission, 2002b).

#### *Processes*

The other new working method can be referred to as ‘processes’ partly outside the traditional EU framework. The main ‘process’ has been referred to as the Bologna process, but recently the Commission has also tried to introduce something which has been called the Bruges–Copenhagen process.

The Bologna process started with a meeting in May 1998 where the Ministers in charge of higher education of France, Italy, United Kingdom and Germany signed at the Sorbonne University in Paris the so-called Sorbonne Declaration (*Joint Declaration on Harmonisation of the Architecture of the European Higher Education System*). The declaration focused on:

- a progressive convergence of the overall framework of degrees and cycles in an open European area for higher education;
- a common degree-level system for undergraduates (Bachelor’s degree) and graduates (Master’s and doctoral degree);
- enhancing and facilitating student and teacher mobility (students should spend at least one semester abroad), removing obstacles for mobility and improving recognition of degrees and academic qualifications.

The Sorbonne Declaration stressed the universities’ central role in developing European cultural dimensions. It emphasised the creation of the European area

of higher education as a key way to promote citizens' mobility and employability and overall development.

On 19 June 1999, 29 European Ministers in charge of higher education signed in Bologna the Declaration on establishing the European area of higher education by 2010 and promoting the European system of higher education worldwide. The Ministers affirmed in the Bologna Declaration the following intentions:

*Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees*, also through the implementation of the Diploma Supplement, in order to promote European citizens' employability and the international competitiveness of the European higher education system.

*Adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles*, undergraduate and graduate. Access to the second cycle shall require successful completion of first cycle studies, lasting a minimum of three years. The degree awarded after the first cycle shall also be relevant to the European labour market as an appropriate level of qualification. The second cycle should lead to the master and/or doctorate degree as in many European countries.

*Establishment of a system of credits* – such as in the ECTS system [European Credit Transfer System] – as a proper means of promoting the most widespread student mobility. Credits could also be acquired in non-higher education contexts, including lifelong learning, provided they are recognised by receiving Universities concerned.

*Promotion of mobility* by overcoming obstacles to the effective exercise of free movement with particular attention to:

- for students, access to study and training opportunities and to related services;
- for teachers, researchers and administrative staff, recognition and valorisation of periods spent in a European context researching, teaching and training, without prejudicing their statutory rights.

*Promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance* with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies.

*Promotion of the necessary European dimensions in higher education*, particularly with regards to curricular development, inter-institutional co-operation, mobility schemes and integrated programmes of study, training and research.

Convinced that the establishment of the European area of higher education required constant support, supervision and adaptation to the continuously evolving needs, the Ministers decided to meet again 2 years later in Prague in order to assess the progress achieved and the new steps to be taken.

Two years after signing the Bologna Declaration, the Ministers in charge of higher education of the 33 European signatory countries met on 19 May 2001 in Prague to follow up the Bologna process and to set directions and priorities for the coming years. In the Prague Communiqué (Communiqué of the Meeting of European Ministers in charge of Higher Education in Prague on

19 May 2001), the Ministers reaffirmed their commitment to the objectives of the Bologna Declaration and emphasised as important elements of the European Higher Education Area:

- lifelong learning;
- involvement of students; and
- enhancing the attractiveness and competitiveness of the European Higher Education Area to other parts of the world (including the aspect of transnational education).

The Ministers decided that the next follow-up meeting for the Bologna process should take place in 2003 in Berlin to review progress and to set directions and priorities for the next stages of the process to the European Higher Education Area.

This series of meetings and the cooperation between the countries who have signed the Bologna declaration between the meetings are usually referred to as the Bologna process or sometimes also as the Sorbonne–Bologna–Prague process.

With the objective of promoting ‘similar action [to that of the Sorbonne–Bologna–Prague process] in the area of vocational training’ (paragraph 44 of the Conclusions from the Barcelona European Council, 2001) the European Commission on 10-11 June 2002 took the initiative to start what was referred to as the Bruges process. Representatives of 29 European countries (EU member states, candidate countries and EEA countries) and social partners met in Brussels to discuss how, through increased cooperation, to improve the quality and performance of vocational education and training in Europe (European Commission, 2002c). The aim which was agreed upon was that by 2010 citizens would be able to use their qualifications and skills as a ‘common currency’ throughout Europe. Another aim was to enhance the overall status and reputation of vocational education and training. The quality and performance of vocational education and training in Europe were considered to be central to achieving the Lisbon goal of becoming the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based society in the world. The transfer of qualifications and skills between jobs, sectors and countries was regarded a precondition of lifelong learning and increased mobility (European Commission, 2002d).

The initiative taken in Brussels was followed up by a resolution approved by the Education Council on 12 November and by a conference in Copenhagen on 30 November 2002 attended by the Education Ministers of 31 European countries and the European Commission. The Conference adopted a declaration on enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training, referred to as ‘The Copenhagen Declaration’. The declaration identified four main priorities to pursue through the enhanced cooperation: strengthening the European dimension in vocational education and training, increasing transparency through improved information tools, recognition of competences and qualifications, and quality assurance. The year 2010 was set as a target for the completion of the activities and it was stated that measures are

voluntary and developed through 'bottom-up cooperation' (European Commission, 2003).

### **Elements in a European Education Policy**

At the European Council in Lisbon on 23-24 March 2000, education played a prominent role in the strategy drawn up to make Europe more competitive. In the Presidency Conclusions of the summit it was recommended that the European education and training systems should adopt a new approach. The EU member states, the Council and the Commission were asked to take the necessary steps within their areas of competence to meet a number of targets.

As shown above, a number of initiatives have been taken in the field of education during recent years. Even if it is a series of actions within various initiatives partly comprising different issues, there are certainly a number of common elements in these initiatives. Already in the Presidency Conclusions of the meeting of the European Council in Lisbon, the recommendations indicated key areas of what could be described as a European education policy:

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. This new approach should have three main components: the development of local learning centres, the promotion of new basic skills, in particular in the information technologies, and increased transparency of qualifications.

The conclusion continued and called upon the EU member states, the Council and the Commission to take the necessary steps within their areas of competence to meet a number of targets, among them to establish a European framework which should 'define the new basic skills to be provided through lifelong learning: IT skills, foreign languages, technological culture, entrepreneurship and social skills'.

Based on these recommendations and the initiatives described above, key elements of a European education policy can be summarised as follows:

- recognition of qualifications and diplomas at all levels in order to facilitate mobility within the EU.
- improving the quality of education at all levels.
- expanding the concept of education to the broader context of lifelong learning.

Within these broad orientations, there is a wish to improve what is referred to as 'new basic skills'. This concept is still not well defined. An assumption could be that it includes what has been traditionally referred to as basic skills (reading, writing and arithmetic) with the addition of 'new skills' in IT, languages, technology, entrepreneurship and social competence.

When the 'European education policy' is summarised in this way it seems fairly clear that the main idea behind the new interest in education is closely linked to the idea that Europe should 'become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world' (Lisbon European Council: Presidency Conclusions, paragraph 5).

The emphasis on a European recognition of qualifications and diplomas is very much linked to the key idea of a European single market, where labour also can move freely between countries without major obstacles. If students, both in traditional tertiary education and in vocational education and training, could more easily move between countries, this would contribute to creating a more 'Euro-oriented' workforce and would make it easier for big European companies to attract the most qualified persons from the whole of Europe. The idea is that this would make European companies more competitive in the world market.

Quality is a complex concept. What quality is and how quality can be improved in education are not issues where there is easily an agreement between countries and educational experts. Quality education can be seen as an education preparing young persons for the world of work. It can also be regarded, in a broader way, as an education preparing young people not only for the world of work, but also for their private lives and life as active citizens in a democratic society. This difference should not only be reduced to be a question of a more or less labour market oriented education, but also a question of how best to prepare young people for the world of work. A broader approach could be argued to create more flexibility and also help people to come to terms with other parts of their lives. The question related to this is whether broad skills and flexibility are needed or if more clearly specified skills and qualifications are preferred. It is also a question of whether the efficiency of the labour force can be regarded only as an issue related to the workplace or if it should be seen in a broader context of how the whole of society functions. A labour market oriented education would meet the immediate needs of the labour market and it would be easy to measure to what degree the education system manages to do this. Which approach the EU has adopted can not easily be seen in the different texts and documents which have been produced. The fact that the interest in education has emerged at the same time as the objective to become 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world' could lead to the conclusion that the reasons behind this interest are merely labour market oriented, but this might not necessarily be the case.

The concept of lifelong learning can be discussed in the same way. Is lifelong learning an approach which will help to improve the efficiency of the employees? If that is the case, the emphasis is most likely to be on in-service training and vocational education and training in general. If, on the other hand, lifelong learning is seen as a right of the individual, not only to get a better job, but also as a way of self-fulfilment, the approach would be on securing an individual right to education and reasonable costs for the individual to continue his/her education through all ages of life. Both these elements seem to be



present in the different documents published by the EU, but the more utilitarian perspective of lifelong learning as something linked to employment seems to dominate. In the Communication on *Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality* (European Commission, 2001c), a broad definition of lifelong learning is used which includes different perspectives, but the fact that education and training have been raised in immediate relation to the efforts to make the European economy competitive could lead to an assumption that the objectives behind this interest are merely labour market oriented.

A summary of this short discussion on the elements of a European education policy is whether the purpose of emphasising education is to improve the quality of the European workforce or the quality of life of the European citizens. Certainly, this is to oversimplify a difficult issue, but it is still important to see where the emphasis lies in the policy, even if there is more than one purpose behind different measures.

### **Problems and Challenges**

It is not only the general orientation of European education policy which could be discussed; there are also several other problems and challenges confronting the new attempts within the EU to adapt Europe's education and training systems to the demands of the knowledge society. Four such problems and challenges will be examined: how to improve quality; how to follow up on benchmarks; how to find the resources for lifelong learning and what is the difference between harmonisation and convergence.

A method to improve the quality of education which was described above was the establishment of indicators and benchmarks. By doing this in, for example, the *European Report on Quality of Education* (European Commission, 2000), the idea has been to create a discussion and a possibility to learn from each other. When an attempt is made to compare the quality of education in different countries, it is obviously important to collect information about a large number of different variables. Exactly what data should be collected can be discussed to some extent, but there is one piece of information which must be included and that is information about what is sometimes referred to as the outcome of the educational process. This is another concept which could be discussed and interpreted in different ways but, even if the outcome can be described in very broad terms, a part of it is certainly the knowledge and skills which the students have acquired as a result of their education. It was clearly stated in the *European Report on Quality of Education* that the EU had to rely on data which already existed. In the report, data from the TIMSS [2] study was used. When the *European Report on Quality of Education* was published in 2000, the results of the first PISA [3] study had still not been published. The interesting thing with the PISA study is that the interpretations made in the study are not only simple comparisons of the students' results on the PISA tests, but also a more far-reaching discussion on how different ways of

organising the education systems are related to students' results. The PISA study argues:

While all countries show a clear positive relationship between home background and educational outcome, some countries demonstrate that high average quality and equality of educational outcome can go together: Canada, Finland, Iceland, Japan, Korea and Sweden all display above-average levels of students performance on the combined reading literacy scale and, at the same time a below-average impact of economic, social and cultural status on student performance. Conversely, average performance in reading literacy in the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, and Luxembourg is significantly below the OECD average while, at the same time, there are above-average disparities between students from advantaged and disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. (PISA, 2001, p. 210)

The same point is even more clearly emphasised in an article by Andreas Schleicher, one of the main researchers responsible for the PISA study:

the data from PISA 2000 suggests that both overall variation in student performance and the relative proportion of that variation that is found between schools tend to be greater in those countries which explicit differentiation at an early age between types of programmes and schools. PISA also suggests that the effects of social clustering are larger in school systems with differentiated types of school than in systems in which curriculum does not vary significantly between schools. (Schleicher, 2001, pp. 26-27)

The German results have been especially controversial in this context. Germany had among the lowest average scores on the PISA tests and the German education system is one of the most selective systems in Europe.

If the discussion of the PISA report is compared with the discussions in the *European Report on Quality of Education*, it is striking that the EU report contains to a much lesser degree critical analysis comparing countries. The purpose of the report is to help countries to improve the quality of their education systems, but at the same time the report often fails to make the type of analytical comparisons which could point at what needs to be done to improve the systems. When, for example, some key policy issues concerning reading are discussed, the EU report is content to underline that 'public libraries and bookshops can make an essential contribution to reading skills' (European Commission, 2000, p. 18). Obviously, the next EU report on quality of education will have to include the PISA results, but will it only include the results without the policy implications indicated in the PISA report?

It is an 'official secret' that all types of reports making comparisons between countries' education systems are controversial. Few countries like to have their education systems portrayed in a bad way in international reports. Such reports will feed the opposition with arguments in the next election. Controversies around comparative education studies have occurred within the

OECD and the lack of analysis in the EU report was probably a result of a diplomatic approach avoiding what could be interpreted as appraisal and criticism of individual governments. This is partly reflected in the declaration from the Bucharest meeting when it states that what is preferred is 'identification of best practices, rather than ranking' (Fourth Conference of European Ministers of Education, Bucharest, 18-20 June, 2000, Final Communiqué). If future reports using indicators and benchmarks are to avoid controversies, to what extent will they be an instrument which will help countries to examine critically their education systems? Or to put the question in another way – to what extent will governments be happy to have their education policy described as a failure in European reports? What German government would be happy to have the whole selective structure of the German education system questioned in an official European report?

To evaluate whether a benchmark has been reached or not could be very difficult. The discussion about quality above may give some hints about this problem. A very clear benchmark which was set in the Presidency Conclusions of the Lisbon European Council was that the Council called on 'the Member States to ensure that all schools in the Union have access to the Internet and multimedia resources by the end of 2001, and that all the teachers are skilled in the use of the Internet and multimedia resources by the of 2002 (Lisbon European Council: Presidency Conclusions, paragraph 11). According to some information from the Commission, this objective has been met, but up to March 2003 no major report from the EU had been published evaluating in more detail the extent to which this access is a reality. Compared with many other much more vague benchmarks, this would be fairly easy to evaluate. Benchmarks like this may give a hint about the relationship between the wording in official declarations and its implementation. The lack of serious evaluation of whether the benchmark has been reached or not may reflect a wish to avoid publishing embarrassing lists, showing that some member states are far from reaching the benchmark. Which government would like to be number 15 on such a list?

Another difficult issue which is not really dealt with is how to make lifelong learning a reality. Obviously, the key problem here is not which structure to create, but where to find the money to do it. If the quality of the traditional education systems is to be improved it is unlikely that this can be done without additional investment in education. If then, on top of this, an expanded education system is created giving more people access to education and training, there is certainly a need for even more additional resources. In the EU document on lifelong learning (European Commission, 2001c) it is argued 'that overall investment levels need to be raised significantly' (p. 18). Even if it could be argued that the financial responsibility for lifelong learning should be shared between the state, the companies and individuals, it would still mean that resources have to be found. Of course, the EU is not in a position to tell governments what investment they should make, but to what extent is the EU itself prepared to change the priorities in its budget? Despite increases in the EU

budget for education and training, this budget line still does not correspond to more than 0.5% of the total EU budget. Would it be politically possible to transfer money from the EU agricultural subsidies to the education sector? This raises the whole question of the extent to which the desired changes and improvements in education are supposed to cost anything or whether it is mainly a matter of reallocations within the education sector.

Finally, the whole problem of the mandate given to the EU in education can be raised. It has clearly been stressed earlier that harmonisation is not the objective of different EU activities in the field of education. In the description of the new open method of coordination given by the European Commission (2002a), the concept of convergence is used. The two words have different meanings. Harmonisation is related to doing things in the same way. Convergence is when things tend to move towards each other. Even if there is a distinction between the two concepts, it could also be argued that convergence is a first step or a necessary move towards harmonisation. The new working methods used in the European educational cooperation, especially the new open method of coordination, open up new possibilities to move on with issues without formal decisions. Ministers of Education at European summits give their approval to continued work in a certain area, but they do not take a formal decision. Depending on the will of governments to share information this working method can make it both easier and more difficult to follow the processes. This is, of course, more sensitive in countries with a federal structure than in other countries. From this perspective, it is not a surprise that the German *Bundesrat* (the German parliament upper chamber composed of representatives of the *Länder*) expressed their fears at their session on 1 March 2002 that the method of open coordination could contradict the principle of national diversity within the EU (Bundesrat, 2002).

For the future use of the open method of coordination, the Commission concludes in its White Book on European Governance (European Commission, 2001a):

The Commission plays an active co-ordinating role already and is prepared to do so in the future, but the use of the method must not upset the institutional balance nor dilute the achievement of common objectives in the Treaty. In particular, it should not exclude the European Parliament from a European policy process. The open method of co-ordination should be a complement, rather than a replacement, for Community action.  
(p. 22)

The Commission continues:

The use of the open method of co-ordination must not dilute the achievement of common objectives in the Treaty or the political responsibility of the Institutions. It should not be used when legislative action under the Community method is possible; it should ensure overall accountability in line with the following requirements:  
– It should be used to achieve defined Treaty objectives.

- Regular mechanisms for reporting to the European Parliament should be established.
- The Commission should be closely involved and play a co-ordinating role.
- The data and information generated should be widely available. It should provide the basis for determining whether legislative or programme-based action is needed to overcome particular problems highlighted. (p. 22)

In an article critically examining the ongoing process within the EU related to the European Convention, two Swedish Euro-sceptical politicians assume that the rather critical view expressed by the Commission on the open method of coordination is related to the fact that the method has not turned out to be very effective in the area of employment policy. Guidelines have not managed to guide or change national policy (Schmid & Eriksson, 2002).

### **Future Scenarios**

The Lisbon Summit represents in some ways a breakthrough for education policy in the EU. More emphasis has been given to education and a series of initiatives have been taken. The question now is how this cooperation will continue within the EU and in other contexts. Based on the examination of how the EU is trying to find new methods for cooperation in the field of education and how elements of a European education policy can be found in present initiatives, it is possible to explore some scenarios for how the work of the EU and a European education policy can develop. Four different scenarios are examined below:

1. The present initiatives, where the new method of open coordination and 'processes' outside the normal framework of the EU are used, will work well. A gradual process of convergence will take place through discussion and exchange of experiences and it may even be possible to talk about some degree of harmonisation of some elements of education policies in the EU countries. As a result of such a development, the method of open coordination will be the main working method within the education sector, sometimes supplemented by separate initiatives such as the Bologna process and the Bruges-Copenhagen process.

2. Present initiatives will lead to a number of reports, conferences and other types of exchange of experiences, but it will mainly be a discussion at European level, without much importance for the development of the national education and training systems. The main difficulty will turn out to be the transfer of lessons learned at a European level to a national context. Some of the initiatives will remain and others will fade out. The European Commission will have to look for other methods to gain momentum again for education issues within Europe.

3. Present initiatives will work well and education will become a more important part of the EU agenda, but the different methods used to deal with education matters will be seen as an obstacle to gaining more efficiency. This

will raise the questions of whether the importance of education should not be reflected in EU treaties and the need to have one general working method including all educational initiatives. As a result of this, the role of the EU in the field of education will be emphasised more and with the right to introduce legislation

4. It will turn out to be very difficult to get any results from the different initiatives. This will mainly be a result of differences between different national approaches. Even if some reports were to indicate certain measures as critical for the improvement of quality in education, some countries will argue that these conclusions are not relevant in their specific educational environment. There will be a general frustration among those involved and gradually the interest in education at European level will disappear. Education as a European strategy to achieve a better position in the world market will be abandoned.

Depending on how the role of the EU and the role of national governments in the field of education are regarded, these scenarios may look more or less attractive. None of them seem to be totally unlikely.

### **Some Conclusions**

The question this article has tried to deal with is how strategies to make Europe more competitive on the international market have been reflected in the approach of the EU towards education. Obviously, education is one of the elements in a European strategy to become more competitive. The main objectives of the European education policy seem to be the recognition of qualifications and diplomas within the EU, improving the quality of education and expanding the concept of education to the broader context of lifelong learning. In order to work with these objectives, the EU has developed new working methods; one is referred to as the new method of open coordination and the other is different types of 'processes', partly outside the traditional framework of EU cooperation. Whether this new interest in education will lead to any actual changes in the EU countries is still an open question, as well as the question of whether education will play a more dominant role in EU cooperation or not.

What would argue in favour of the EU playing a more active role in this field and actively influencing the policy of the member states is the need for Europe to play a more important role on the world arena in respect of the development of new technology and in world trade. What may work against this development is the fact that education policies are still very much a national responsibility, with many specific national interests. The objective of a European recognition of qualifications and diplomas may be possible to achieve without too many controversial changes in national education policies, but strategies to achieve quality education is a much more national political question where strategies are embedded in a national political context. Few countries are prepared to make radical changes in their education policy just because the EU would push in a certain direction.

## Notes

- [1] SOCRATES – the European Community action programme in the field of education.
- [2] TIMSS – Third International Mathematics and Science Study.
- [3] PISA – Programme for International Student Assessment.

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