

Response to the Consultation on the Balance of Competences in education, vocational training and youth

1. Does EU action, as opposed to national government action, in the areas of education and vocational training generally benefit or disadvantage the UK?

Yes, EU action generally benefits the UK because the UK is an active participant of and contributor to the making of the EU's measurement agenda and soft governance in education; in other words, the UK both learns from and influences the policy making process at the EU level and thus is a significant actor in the shaping of global agendas in education. In more detail, in March 2000 the European Union member states agreed to the aim of becoming: 'the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world'; this became known as the 'Lisbon Strategy'. Because of the rule of subsidiarity, European policy in education and learning has the role of guidance and co-ordination, through the use of benchmarks and indicators, rather than legislation. This guidance or steering role has been exercised through the 'Open Method of Co-ordination' (OMC). The OMC requires the production of quantitative and qualitative indicators and benchmarks that assess EU member states against the best in the world. In order to produce these indicators, national systems have to adjust what they do and how they measure it to conform to EU requirements. Furthermore the OMC requires constant comparison through periodic monitoring, evaluation and peer review that are promoted as mutual learning processes: compliance is encouraged through this 'soft' form of governing. Evidence (Ozga et al 2011, Grek 2008; 2009; 2014; Lawn and Grek 2012) has shown that national education actors who take part in processes of shaping these measurement agendas exchange knowledge and shape policy through learning best practice from other countries and international organisations.

The emphasis both in the Lisbon Agenda (2000-2010) and the Horizon 2020 programme is on what can be measured; educational attainment and achievement are understood as essential in building economic prosperity. Quality is defined through measures related to competitive performance and economic capacity. Driving quality through constant assessment and comparison of educational performance is, therefore, a high priority within the EU. This is the general policy trend within the UK as well, therefore the mode of governance in addition to the aims of specific policies are complementary; the UK participation and influence in the framing of EU policy on education and training is essential in the UK sustaining the knowledge of other systems as well as its influence in the shaping of global policy agendas (Steiner-Khamsi and Waldow 2012)

2. Are there any specific EU activities in the areas of education and training that you consider particularly beneficial or particularly disadvantageous to the UK?

There are a number of EU policies particularly advantageous to the UK, however I would suggest that the Erasmus+ programme can be considered as being the most beneficial one. It aims to boost skills and employability and the 2014-2020 programme has a budget of €14.7 billion; a 40% increase compared to previous spending on Erasmus. Given the relatively low numbers of UK students studying abroad, the Erasmus+ programme is a promising opportunity.

3. What international bodies or arrangements other than the EU are important to education and training in the UK? How does your experience of dealing with them compares with the EU's activity in this sphere?

At the global international level, the most powerful and visible indicators are those produced by the **Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in its PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) tests**, the results of which have major impacts on national policies (Grek 2009). It is argued that such activities produce “definitions of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ educational systems, and required solutions” and that the mass media promote compliance with these solutions because they report the results ‘in such a manner that reinforces a need for urgent decisions, following lines of action that seem undisputed and uncontested, largely due to the fact that they have been internationally asserted’ (Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal, 2003; 425).

What does this mean for EU education and training? The capacity to shape and steer national systems through the ‘spectacle’ of international comparison and the requirements of data production is a key aspect of the governing of education in the EU. International testing has become one of the most productive data generation exercises for the EU, as it offers the EU the data to formulate policy (that it did not have before) as well as an important medium to connect European policy agendas to wider global ones (Grek 2009). Thus, we experience **a growing and on-going collaboration of the EU and the OECD in international assessment exercises, with the EU having usually the role of the indirect funder, through funding member states to participate, while at the same time mobilising the OECD to acquire more of a policy role** through the recommendations the OECD offers to participant countries. Interesting evidence on this developing collaboration is discussed in my article in Critical Policy Studies (Grek 2014) which has caused some interesting debates within the DG Education and Culture (EAC) at the European Commission (personal communication, April 2014). The article presents evidence on first, how and why the OECD developed the expertise to conduct large international comparative tests. When the OECD acquired relevant evidence for education policy making through PISA and other tests and surveys, it also acquired reputation and recognition in the field –characteristics that DG EAC had never managed to have. National policy makers began turning to the OECD for evidence to legitimise policy choices at home and so did the European Commission. **Since the OECD had both the data and the persuasive power to change policy direction at nation-states, DG EAC has been using it as a point of mediation between its own policy agendas and national education systems** (Grek 2014).

Thus, **transnational policy learning between international organisations and the EU has been growing** and it leads to much more nuanced understandings and thus engagement with these international actors in the making of national policies in education. Working with international actors and learning from and with them is not an either/or question any more (as evidence shows that England is much more open to the OECD policy influence than the EU); the policy networks are complex and fluid and intersect in multiple policy arenas (for example **the growing interconnections between education and labour market experts and policy makers** in the making of the OECD PIAAC study –the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competences –see my article Grek 2013). A withdrawal of the UK from these international policy arenas and a larger emphasis on national policy coordination rather than EU would simply isolate the UK and decrease its educational and wider social and economic potential.

References

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With thanks,

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