

Review of the Balance of Competences – UK

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Education and Training questions

8.1 General issues

- **Does EU action, as opposed to national government action, in the areas of education and vocational training generally benefit or disadvantage the UK? Can you point us to any published evidence or analysis in support of your view?**
- **Are there any specific EU activities in the areas of education and training that you consider particularly beneficial or particularly disadvantageous to the UK?**

Response: The voluntary nature of the cooperation of EU action in education and training, means that it cannot possibly ‘disadvantage’ any individual Member State, since it does not impose any legal obligation on countries to act (Lange, B. and Alexiadou, N. (2007) ‘New Forms of European Union Governance in the Education Sector? - a Preliminary Analysis of the Open Method of Co-ordination’, *European Educational Research Journal*, vol. 6, no. 4, p. 323).

Member States are free to ignore the Education and Training 2020 program and the particular benchmarks it sets, or they can adjust any of the targets that point towards identifying policy problems at the domestic level. With regards to UK education policy specifically, the benchmarks set through the 2000 Lisbon European Council, and the subsequent revisions (including the ET 2020) are compatible with UK education policies at least at the broad level of policy objectives. At the EU level, some of these benchmarks are clearly linked to the economic policy coordination of the Semesters, and, as far as we can judge, to the labour market policies that the UK is pursuing.

With the possible exception of the ‘foreign language learning’ benchmark, all the other benchmarks are in our view very much in line with the UK Department of Education general aims (eg. dealing with NEETs, raising attainment levels, increasing post-16 and post-18 participation in education and training).

So, in terms of the content and direction of the EU actions in education and training, there does not seem to be any conflict between national policies and EU actions.

In terms of governance of the ET2020 and the use of the Open Method of Co-ordination (OMC), there are two issues that are significant for answering the above questions:

- The issue of **effectiveness** of the OMC in identifying policy problems and in suggesting policy solutions. The method is too ‘soft’ to achieve much beyond highlighting the issues. This seems to be well within what the UK is ‘comfortable’ with in terms of EU competence. We do not find this problematic. Recommendations and Communications which are mainly the strongest action the EU can take in ET, are non-binding (Article 288 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union), although of course they do have a certain political weight.

Policy learning provides an opportunity for Member States to benefit from the experiences gained from the implementation of specific education policies in other Member States. It also provides an opportunity for Member States to ‘up-load’ their policy ideas onto the EU education policy agenda. Moreover, also depending on the specific policy learning style adopted, it facilitates international comparisons and thus can also highlight across the EU areas of UK education policy excellence (Lange, B. and Alexiadou, N. (2010), ‘How to govern for solidarity?’ in: Ross, M. and Borgman-Prebil, Y. (eds.) *Developing Solidarity in the EU: Citizenship, Governance and New Constitutional Paradigms*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 235-26).

The very nature of the OMC and the ET 2010 process enable the ‘big’ countries in the EU to shape the direction and to some extent the content of EU education policies. Key to exercising influence are also the resources that various Member States have invested in education research. The UK has chosen to be more on the margins rather than the centre of shaping EU education and training reforms. How is this manifested?

1. The UK has not taken the opportunity when producing progress reports for the Commission to identify themes and trends that are of interest to the domestic policy scene and that may also be of interest to the European Commission and could thus feed into further Commission initiatives.
2. Another opportunity for the UK to influence EU education policies to its advantage are joint Commission and Council work programs. But this has not been used much. The European Commission seeks to involve Member States in the development of education policy through these work programs and develops through these cooperative (sometimes bilateral) relationships.
3. The peer learning activities (PLAs) that were introduced in 2005-6 and were recently replaced by the Thematic Working Groups provide

opportunities for ‘policy learning’ for interested Member States. Again there are opportunities for the UK here to be more involved.

Soft policy co-ordination mechanisms, such as policy learning, however, also pose their own challenges in comparison to formal law-making. Policy learning is usually less transparent than formal law-making, and can limit accountability for developing policy (Lange, B. and Alexiadou, N. (2007) ‘New Forms of European Union Governance in the Education Sector? - a Preliminary Analysis of the Open Method of Co-ordination’, *European Educational Research Journal*, vol. 6, no. 4, pp. 326).

For further details of opportunities for the UK and other EU Member States to shape to their advantage the EU education policy agenda see the qualitative empirical research discussed in: Lange, B. & Alexiadou, N. (2010) ‘Policy learning and governance of education policy in the EU’, *Journal of Education Policy*, Vol.25, No.4, pp. 443-463.

- **Do you think the EU, as opposed to national government, should do more or less in relation to education and training? If so, where and why?**

We do not advocate less involvement of the EU in education policy-making. There is significant diversity in the schooling and tertiary education systems across EU Member States. In the light of this, it is our view that EU action should be limited to coordination of policies, as well as funding and dissemination of research, as the EU currently provides for. Important are here, for instance, the EU network of Experts on Social Aspects of Education and Training (<http://www.nesetweb.eu/who-we-are/neset-experts>) and the network of experts on Economics of Education in Europe (<http://www.eenee.de/eeneeHome.html>).

Exchange of policy ideas at the EU level, in particular in the framework of policy learning and the Thematic Working Groups can be particularly valuable. There is also increasingly good research knowledge about teaching, outcomes in schools, and particular pedagogic interventions that various countries are using for specific problems that policy makers, teachers, and pupils are facing across Europe. We are in support of the continuation of these EU co-ordinated and supported activities.

- **What other areas of EU competence or activity have an impact on ET in your sector and how?**

Areas of benefit

There is very interesting research on Early School Leaving (ESL) through the TWG on this topic (http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/expert-groups_en.htm#schools). This is not merely of academic interest. The research serves as a good map of the issues across Europe, but most importantly for policy purposes, it provides examples of interventions that various countries are taking in tackling the

problem and its roots (see final report, http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/doc/esl-group-report_en.pdf).

We do believe that countries that actively participate in the Peer Learning Activities that lead to such reports, have a lot to benefit from understanding ‘what others do’. But in order to be of benefit, participation needs to be designed as a genuine ‘learning’ exercise (for example, by sending academics together with senior civil servants involved in domestic policy development to the working group meetings). PLAs need to be more than a political ‘tick the box’ exercise.

Examples:

Denmark has a very advanced and progressive policy on the use of digital technologies in classrooms. This is something that has been the focus of PLAs in the past, and there are lots of research and policy ideas there on how ICT can be used for raising standards, and enhancing inclusion (see, <https://european-agency.org/sites/default/files/ict4i-country-reports-Denmark.pdf>)

In 2013 there was a PLA in France about early school leavers. There are significant similarities between France and the UK with respect to this problem. The evaluation of the French state’s initiatives (such as inter-agency working, second chance schools, and teacher education) could help to develop policy ideas for this problem in any country in Europe that has to tackle school drop-out rates. In particular reports that distill principles and conditions of effective policy making in relation to the specific problem are important for providing advice for a range of Member States (with of course the necessary adaptations to local schooling systems). See: http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/doc/europe-warning-systems_en.pdf

In Sweden there have been ‘free’ schools since 1992 – these are in some ways similar to the UK ones, although in Sweden they can be for-profit (albeit free at the point of delivery). There is significant evidence that such schools increase social segregation and seem to have no significant positive impact on educational standards (OECD (PISA 2012), see also *Skolverket Sweden*: <http://www.skolverket.se/press/pressmeddelanden/2014/svaga-resultat-i-ny-pisa-rapport-1.217275>). The policy message may not always be what governments want to hear, but if the UK wants evidence-based policies, such messages need to be heard.

And of course there are a number of countries in the EU that have successful vocational and technical post-16 routes and there are lots of activities that would provide useful insights into the conditions needed for reforming vocational and technical education (policy context, administrative arrangements, links with employers, qualifications recognition, teacher education, etc.). The Scandinavian countries and Germany have a lot to contribute here.

To summarize, in our view EU activities in the field of education and vocational training do not disadvantage the UK. On the contrary, we suggest that learning and

policy exchange provide benefits, and if the UK ever wishes to be more active, it could shape the direction of some of the policies in particular fields of education.

- **What challenges or opportunities are there for the UK in further EU action on education?**

Our qualitative empirical, case study based research conducted over 7 years has shown that the **key opportunity** for the UK is to think innovatively about ‘EU’ involvement in education policy making. While from a traditional perspective ‘the EU’ and ‘the UK’ are perceived as distinct policy actors, our research has highlighted that EU and UK level policy development can be very closely linked. In conducting this review of the ‘balance of competences’ it is therefore crucial to distinguish between the nature of ‘exclusive’ and ‘shared’ competences, on the one hand, and ‘supporting’ competence, as in the case of education, vocational training and youth, on the other hand. In the case of ‘supporting’ competence, EU Member States have significant power to shape the EU policy agenda and can thus minimize differences between UK and EU actions. Moreover, in terms of actual content of EU education policy there is a good fit with UK education policies - broadly conceived – since both EU and UK policies emphasize the importance of effective education systems for stimulating economic growth and enhancing the competitiveness of EU and national economies. There are a range of procedural opportunities for the UK to link economic growth and education policy, for instance through the National Reform Program required by the EU (Alexiadou and Lange, 2014, ‘Europeanising the national education space? – Adjusting to the Open Method of Co-ordination (OMC) in the UK, International Journal of Public Administration, accepted for publication, forthcoming; Alexiadou, N.; Fink-Hafner, D. and Lange, B. (2010) Education policy convergence through the Open Method of Co-Ordination (OMC): Theoretical Reflections and Implementation in ‘old’ and ‘new’ national contexts. European Educational Research Journal, 9 (3), pp. 345-358).

If the UK identifies specific EU initiatives as benefitting its domestic education policy development, there still remains, however, the **challenge** for the UK to integrate EU initiatives into its domestic policy-making structures, such as the co-ordination of international work among various departments, e.g. DfE and BIS, as well as co-ordination with the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and NI.

The Programmes

- **Can you point to evidence which shows that language learning has improved through participation in the programmes?**

UK universities record the number of UK students that participate each year in EU supported exchange programmes such as Erasmus. The point to stress here is that these

programmes should not just be understood as enhancing specific language competencies for UK students, evidenced in requirements for passing examinations at the EU partner university. Rather these programmes need to be evaluated also with reference to their contribution to content related skills developed by participating students. For instance, UK undergraduate and taught masters law students who participate in EU mobility/language programmes significantly enhance their knowledge not just in e.g. French, German, Spanish, Polish etc., but also develop crucial skills in civil, comparative, European Union and international law. These additional both language and legal subject skills enhance the competitiveness of the UK legal profession that has to compete in an increasingly global market place for legal services. UK law graduates that have participated in EU mobility programmes are thus particularly well equipped to provide the legal services that businesses operating in the EU internal market need.

Policy Coordination

- **Is it appropriate that Europe 2020 focusses on early school leaving and the completion of tertiary education?**

Yes. Europe 2020 focuses on early school leaving, and on Early Childhood Education and Care, as well as tertiary education. It is difficult not to agree with such a focus! The EU for the last 20 years has been defining itself as a ‘knowledge economy’ and the attention to both early and later stages of education are compatible with the academic human capital literature. This focus is also clearly linked to the policies that emanate from DG-Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion.

There is a lot of evidence mainly from the field of economics of education on the returns from investing in early years (the earlier, the better, see <http://www.heckmanequation.org/content/resource/why-early-investment-matters>)

These are individual returns, but also social returns, and they have been connected to issues of social equality.

- **How does policy cooperation on education in the EU compare with other organisations, for example the OECD?**

There are connections between EU and OECD initiatives (for instance some of the data the EU uses for the benchmarks come from OECD databases). But, the OECD reviews have more political strength than the EU ones. OECD reviews are still voluntary of course, but have a stronger review element and provide more direct, and often, ‘stricter’ recommendations.

- **Can you point to examples of reform in national policy which have resulted from EU cooperation in education and training?**

No, not for the UK. There are other countries in Europe that have incorporated the ET 2020 as part of their national policy objectives (Austria, Netherlands, Flanders), but we cannot identify anything similar in the UK policy scene.

- **How would you assess the costs and benefits to policy makers of participation in education policy cooperation at EU level?**

We are not familiar with the monetary cost of participation of the UK in EU cooperation activities. But, as we understand it, during the 2000s about 4 FTE civil servants – in addition to the UK staff in the DG-EAC in Brussels - have been involved. If this is indeed the case, this is a very low ‘cost’ for participation, also given the size of the UK. At the same time this is not likely to produce any genuine engagement with the process of linking national and EU education policy development. As suggested above, there could be significant benefits from wider and deeper engagement with EU actions. For this to happen and to generate policy outcomes that are beneficial to the UK, the UK would need to commit to both investment in people and show political will to engage with EU co-ordination, and to be willing to change policy thinking and administrative structures at the domestic level if needed.

Conclusion

The balance of competences in the field of education, vocational training and youth already clearly respects EU Member State sovereignty and thus reflects the principle of subsidiarity as set out in Art. 5 (3) Treaty of the European Union. Social science research evidence suggests that there are significant opportunities for the UK, both in terms of ministerial and civil service influence, to shape the EU education policy agenda, and thus policies also in other Member States. In the field of education there is a good overall fit between procedures and content of EU and UK perspectives. Both EU and UK approaches draw on benchmarks/indicators for capturing performance in the delivery of education services, and both are geared towards harnessing education for economic growth and competitiveness.

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