

Education in the Lisbon Strategy: assessment and prospects

Luce Pépin

Introduction

2010 sounds the end of the EU economic and social Strategy initiated in 2000 for 10 years by the Heads of State and Government in Lisbon and the launch of a new decade of action ('EU 2020'). It was not easy to make a comprehensive and objective assessment of such an ambitious and broad Strategy, especially since the context of the EU changed so much between 2000 and 2010. During this period, the number of EU Member States almost doubled, from 15 to 27. The very promising economic context in 2000 was superseded by an unprecedented economic and financial world crisis 10 years later.

By taking education on board, the Strategy defined in 2000 marked a turning point in the history of education cooperation at the European level. It is interesting to try and understand to what extent. This analysis cannot however be solely based on the prism of this strategy and its 10 years of action. Community cooperation in the field of education indeed began some 35 years ago. The Ministers of Education met for the first time at Community level in an inter-governmental framework in 1971 and formally adopted (at Council level) the first education action programme in 1976. The trajectory of their cooperation since then speaks volumes not only about the originality of this field which will have been the first to implement the principle of subsidiarity, but also about its *raison d'être* in the Lisbon Process and the place it occupied therein (Pépin, 2006).

A Logical Inclusion of Education in the Lisbon Strategy

Education was taken on board in the Lisbon Strategy not only because this new process betted on the knowledge-based economy and society. This development must be seen as a continuation of the activities carried out and the stances taken so far. One cannot therefore talk of a rupture or change of direction, but rather of continuity, with, however, an unquestionable strengthening in the mode of cooperation as a consequence of the implementation of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), the engine of the Lisbon Strategy. It was indeed quite logical to take education on board, given the developments in this sector at Community level, especially as from the 1990s when the concepts of the knowledge society and economy and, above all, lifelong learning emerged (Pépin, 2007). In his 1993 White Paper ('Growth, competitiveness, employment') which gave a clear analysis of the challenges to be met by the Union for its entry into the 21st century, Jacques Delors had already stressed the necessary adaptation of the education and training systems. He considered these two fields as crucial to face the challenges in matters of employment, alongside those of growth and competitiveness, 'betting on' lifelong learning as 'the overall objective to which the national educational communities should make their own contributions' (European Commission, 1994). It was on this basis that the year 1996 was

declared ‘European Year of Lifelong Learning’. During this period, the Treaty of Amsterdam, which was signed in 1997, also brought its stone to the edifice, underlining ‘the need to promote the development of the highest possible level of knowledge for EU peoples through a wide access to education and through its continuous updating’. For the first time, employment had a specific Treaty chapter on a coordinated European Employment Strategy (EES) whose implementation was to be measured through guidelines and national action plans for employment (an OMC that did not yet carry that name!). Lifelong learning is also one of the four objectives of this Strategy, making closer cooperation between the employment and education sectors all the more necessary. Hence, education and training were to occupy a very clear place (guidelines 23 and 24) in the integrated Guidelines for the economy (GOPE) and for employment (EES) which were applied as from 2005. Let us add to these arguments that, in the initial ‘Lisbon spirit’, the aim was to mobilise forces in key fields where the Union does not have specific competences or where these are limited (as in the case of education) in order to advance alongside an economy-based and a social Europe.

A Mitigated but Globally Positive Assessment

Relaunching and Consolidating Community Cooperation

The ‘Education and Training 2010’ OMC: a very broad action programme

In the conclusions adopted in Lisbon, the Heads of State and Government agreed on the necessary ‘modernisation of the education systems’. They aimed to make the EU ‘the most competitive and dynamic knowledge economy in the world’ by 2010. The education and training systems in Europe had to become no less than a ‘world quality reference before 2010’ (European Council, 2002). The Lisbon Strategy thus brought education from the periphery to the centre, with huge ambitions that some considered unrealistic. But more importantly, it offered Ministers of Education the opportunity to make themselves heard alongside those responsible for the economy and employment (Pépin, 2006). ‘The positioning of this sector in this strategy has both implied a strengthening of the visibility of the education sector at the European level as well as an opening up of the sector to influences from other policy areas’ (Gornitzka, 2006).

In the strategy document and the work programme on the future objectives of the education systems (later called ‘Education and Training 2010’) which they adopted respectively in 2001 and 2002 (EU Council, 2001; 2002), the Ministers of Education defined their position in relation to the mandate given to them by the Heads of State and Government in Lisbon. They made it clear that the education OMC will have to be implemented in full compliance with the treaty obligations. ‘The new Open Method of Coordination will be applied as an instrument for the development of a coherent and comprehensive strategy within the framework of Articles 149 (education) and 150 (vocational training) of the Treaty’ (renumbered articles 165 and 166 in the Lisbon Treaty that came into force on 1/12/2009). Ministers fixed three main common strategic goals: the education and training systems must take up the challenge of quality and efficiency; they must be accessible to all in a lifelong learning perspective, and they must be open to society and the world. These three axes are divided into 13 operational sub-objectives¹.

This comprehensive work programme enabled policy cooperation in matters of education and training to establish a single and coherent framework of objectives which was also to apply to the Lifelong Learning Action Programme (2007–2013). One positive impact of the Lisbon Strategy in the field of education and training is that it made it necessary to bring coherence among the different and sometimes compartmentalised cooperation activities that had existed so far. The Copenhagen Process for enhanced cooperation in vocational education and training, the implementation of the lifelong strategies and the follow up to the recommendation and action plan on mobility were integrated in ‘E&T 2010’ as from 2005, thus offering the possibility to contribute more strategically to the overall Lisbon process without limiting the action to the sole aspects evoked by the Heads of State and Government. Moreover, higher education, which initially had quite a weak position in the ‘E&T 2010’ programme because of the parallel development of the Bologna Process, quickly confirmed its role in relation to the Lisbon Strategy, following two important Commission Communications on ‘The role of the universities in the Europe of knowledge’ and on ‘Mobilising the brainpower of Europe: enabling higher education to make its full contribution to the Lisbon strategy’.

Education is a whole and to broach it only in its strict links with the imperatives of the Lisbon Strategy would indeed have been reductionist and risky in relation to more than 20 years of cooperation in this sector. This non-restrictive and integrative approach will also prove crucial when, in 2005, the European Council adopted a refocusing of the objectives of the Strategy in matters of growth and employment. Maintaining an education OMC with a large spectrum, in association with other OMCs such as the one on social inclusion, certainly contributed to rehabilitate more clearly the social dimension of the Lisbon Strategy at the end of its course and ensure its inclusion in the new ‘EU 2020’ perspectives. Some economists criticised the multiplicity of the domains involved in the Lisbon Strategy and asked that policies such as the social or educational policies be left to each Member State. ‘This line of reasoning tends to ignore the legitimacy dimension and the protection function to be fulfilled by these OMCs’ (Goetschy, 2009). In the second half of the implementation of the Strategy (2005–2010), work in the field of education (e.g. on efficiency and equity² or on key competences for lifelong learning³) was thus able to highlight at the Community level aspects that had become less of a priority because of the refocusing of the general strategy, but which continued to be very relevant to strengthen the EU position, both at the economic and the social levels.

A Flexible ‘Tool Kit’ to Broach Common Issues

The OMC enabled cooperation actors to deal with issues of common concern to the Member States in a continuous way at the European level and no longer according to the priorities of the Presidencies that change every six months. The work carried out with the tools of the OMC helped to have in-depth reflection, broad consultations and concrete policy developments in important issues such as key competences to be acquired by all pupils before the end of compulsory education or the recognition and transparency of competences and qualifications for which concrete progress had become highly necessary (Recommendation setting up the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning⁴ and Recommendation setting up a European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET)⁵). These flexible instruments are meant to produce real

effects on the education and training systems and policies. This is already the case with the EQF which led to the development of National Qualifications Frameworks in several countries and will have a tangible impact on the transparency of qualifications and competences and on the validation of prior learning, thus bringing support to mobility and the development of a European labour market.

The OMC tools also facilitated the design of 'Common European Frameworks' on other central issues to the implementation of the E&T 2010 programme such as quality assurance⁶, guidance⁷, non-formal education and training⁸ and mobility⁹. Such non-binding frameworks offer Member States and stakeholders commonly defined principles, references and tools to support national reforms and give them a European dimension. Better than the cooperation tools that prevailed before, the OMC improved the monitoring of the implementation of the objectives set in common, especially through national progress reports prepared by the Member States every two years. Such reports led to joint Reports of the Council and the Commission which fixed the contribution of the field of education and training to the annual Spring meetings of the European Council on the Lisbon Strategy. These regular reports could be seen as burdensome and inefficient from the point of view of their contribution to improving national reforms. Yet they remain an important tool, together with the annual report on benchmarks and indicators, not only to facilitate a collective monitoring of the implementation of the E&T 2010 programme, but also to identify relevant national policies and progress and feed the mutual learning process between Member States.

A Breakthrough in the Fields of Indicators and Benchmarks

Concerning the central tool of the OMC, i.e. the indicators and benchmarks, the Ministers of Education took an important step in May 2003 on a topic about which they had been reticent for a long time at Community level. They adopted five benchmarks, called 'reference levels of European average performance'¹⁰, supported by 29 indicators (brought down to 16 in 2007). Yet they took the precaution of stressing that these benchmarks were European averages, that they did not define national objectives to be reached and that they did not impose decisions on national governments. The domains mainly concerned school education (e.g. school failure; key competences; reading competences) and had an obvious political sensitivity since they highlighted the weaknesses and, in some cases, the failure of policies led so far in relation to these aspects. The main value of the benchmarking approach is to keep Member States and stakeholders mobilised on key issues of common concern for citizens, such as school failure. The aim is to ensure and maintain a collective effort towards the realisation of the benchmark as an 'ideal', even though it proves difficult to reach. Quantitative objectives are set through the OMC, 'not only for them to be reached, but to keep the Member States under pressure so that they intensify their efforts in the agreed direction. The target of a 3% investment of the GDP in research will not be reached. But this does not mean it is not efficient!' (Bruno, 2009).

With the OMC, the quality and use of education indicators and statistics at EU level were very much improved. Cooperation between Member States was strengthened on the sensitive issue of the comparison of systems and the follow-up

of the policies, with a stronger role of coordination, diagnosis and monitoring of the European Commission. ‘Questioned by some, the OMC’s aim was to develop a culture of evaluation (through benchmarking, a calendar, comparisons, assessment of results and the development of statistical tools) both at EU and national levels, taking advantage of new public management tools already under way in many Member States’ (Goetschy, 2009).

A Weak Implementation that Hinders the Success of the Strategy

The Objectives will not be Reached

In its general evaluation report of the Lisbon Strategy (European Commission, 2010a), the Commission states that, ‘while the Strategy had delivered tangible benefits and helped forge consensus around the EU’s reform agenda, the delivery gap between commitments and actions had not been closed’. The education and training sector does not escape this verdict, even though the evaluation shows progress (EU Council, 2010) rather than stagnation or regression. One must also take into consideration the fact that the vast reforms expected by the E&T 2010 programme cannot provide results that can be measured over only 10 years. The same is true of the five benchmarks adopted by the Council in 2003 and that will not be reached by the end of 2010 (except for the number of graduates in mathematics, science and technology which was already reached in 2005) (European Commission, 2009b). Having said that, one must regret that more substantial progress had not been achieved by the end of the Strategy in areas (e.g. failure at school; level of education; level of reading competence) which are crucial for the implementation of a knowledge society that is accessible to all. The average percentage of young people in the EU who leave school early and constitute an at-risk population in terms of social exclusion remains high: 14.9% compared to the agreed benchmark of less than 10%. It is interesting to note that the best achievers come from the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland. Reading competence figures are also most worrying: the share of 15-year-olds who meet severe problems rose from 21.3% in 2000 to 24.1% in 2006 (the objective was a reduction of 20% compared to the year 2000). This benchmark is obviously maintained for 2020 (the average rate of young people concerned will have to be below 15%) and will be extended to mathematics and science. Although the participation in lifelong learning activities seems to be progressing in quantitative terms, the Commission observes that ‘the implementation and further development of lifelong learning strategies remain a critical challenge. Strategies are coherent and comprehensive only in a number of cases and some still focus on specific sectors or target groups rather than the full life-cycle’ (European Commission, 2009b). The requirement by the European Council in 2005 that all Member States set up such strategies by 2006 was still far from being fulfilled in 2009.

A Well-established European Framework but a Weak Ownership at National Level

What about the implementation at national level and the added value the Strategy was supposed to bring to the development of reforms adapted to the needs of each country in the direction of the common objectives agreed upon at the European level? Deficits in the implementation of commitments taken at European level and the weak involvement of stakeholders had already been the subject of severe

observations in the mid-term review of the Strategy in 2005. They are highlighted once again in the evaluation report of the Commission in 2010 (European Commission, 2010a). These criticisms concern the Lisbon Strategy as a whole, but are also valid for the education and training sector. Even if the situation seems better than in 2005, there is still a lack of national ownership of the Strategy and its instruments. Stakeholders are not systematically involved in the preparation of the national (biennial) reports on the implementation of the 'E&T 2010' programme and in the follow up of the Strategy at the national level. Whereas social partners participate at European level in the Coordination Group (ETCG) in charge of the follow up of the implementation of the 'E&T 2010' programme and in the meetings of the Clusters, they are almost absent from the Peer Learning Activities (PLAs) organised at the national level by the States. Only certain PLAs benefited from the participation of stakeholders¹¹. Their involvement would not only help to give greater legitimacy to the outcomes of these mutual learning activities, but would also help to better disseminate the information amongst the citizens and ensure a better knowledge and ownership of this European process by the actors in the field. Without this ownership at every level, the Lisbon Strategy (and 'EU 2020') would be condemned to inefficiency and remain the prerogative of a limited circle of actors (mainly decision-makers and experts).

Peer Learning Activities: an impact that is difficult to measure

In order to make the most of the positive or negative experiences in matters of reforms related to the eight priority domains agreed upon and choose the best political options, Peer Learning Activities (PLAs) have been substantially developed since their launch in 2005 and have been a factor of more intense cooperation between Member States. Since 2005, they have been mainly organised through clusters of Member States on reform issues of common interest. These Clusters are made up of ministry representatives and national experts and representatives of the Commission. PLAs organised at national level with the support of the Commission grew from 8 in 2006 to 18 in 2007 to come back to a more realistic figure of 11 in 2009. The 8 clusters presently in operation deal with the following issues: ICT; access and social inclusion; key competencies; training of teachers and trainers; the modernisation of higher education; the recognition of learning outcomes; making best use of resources; and maths, science and technology. PLAs are certainly amongst the most interesting axes of the OMC, but also amongst the most difficult to implement and evaluate in terms of direct or indirect impact on the decisions taken in matters of reform at national level. The work carried out and its results are disseminated on the Commission website 'Knowledge System for Lifelong Learning (KSLLL)' (www.kslll.net), thus reinforcing the transparency of the process without, however, providing an indicator as to the use that is made of it at the national level. If an impact assessment were made, one would certainly see great differences between those Member States that have committed themselves to a strong national reference to and ownership of the Lisbon Strategy and those which had not or had only to a limited degree. How to improve the implementation potential of the findings and recommendations of these PLAs and link them more effectively to the national decision-making processes and mechanisms remain central issues. The impact assessment on national reforms of such a valuable mutual learning process should be given greater and more systematic consideration in the future.

Prospects and Challenges for 2020

In June 2010, the Heads of State and Government adopted the successor to the Lisbon Strategy, 'Europe 2020: A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth', proposed by the Commission (European Commission, 2010b). Although they remain ambitious as to the objectives, they no longer adopt an incantatory tone as in 2000 when they aimed to make the Union 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge economy in the world'. The financial crisis has struck, growth is not there and the pressure on public budgets is historical, boding a situation where the divide could widen between the political ambitions expressed on the importance of investments in the knowledge-based economy and society and the financial means that will be devoted to these ambitions by States which are turned more and more towards solutions coming from private investments. A major challenge of the next decade will be to secure an adequate level of public investment in education and training that meets the needs in matters of excellence, but also and above all those of the largest numbers and in particular the most fragile. If we look at the countries that have succeeded best with respect to the objectives of the Lisbon Strategy, it is those with high public investments in education and training. Hence, there is no contradiction between high public investments and growth. One should make sure that the reforms carried out by the States are both efficient and equitable. Policies should be evaluated with the yardstick of these two dimensions which should be seen as interdependent and indissociable to ensure a proper modernisation of public policies.

Education keeps a high profile in the new 2020 Strategy agreed upon by the European Council which emphasises the need to give priority to implementation. It is indeed considered one of the five strategic objectives which should guide the actions of the Member States and the Union in the future. These objectives aim at encouraging employment, improving the conditions of innovation and research and development, reaching the objectives in the fields of climatic change and energy, improving the levels of education and favouring social inclusion by reducing poverty. The European Council agrees on the quantification of indicators in matters of education and social inclusion/poverty. The aim is to reduce the school drop out rate to less than 10% (same target as the one set for 2010) and raise to 40% at least the number of people aged 30 to 34 with a higher education degree or an equivalent level of studies (at present, less than one person aged 25 to 34 out of three holds a university diploma, whereas the percentage in the US is 40% and 50% in Japan). The specific challenge by 2020 will be to implement far more efficient policies to significantly reduce the rate of early school leavers. This problem has been a real plague for too long in a number of European countries and its cost for those concerned (15% of young people), the society and the economy is huge. One must face the problem not only by proposing customised measures to those concerned, but also by identifying as early as possible those who may be concerned in the system. Substantial investments in the initial and in-service training of teachers and in quality pre-school education, a crucial dimension in the educational system to prevent failure, especially of the weakest groups, are more than ever a must. We should hope for greater European cooperation in the field of early childhood education given the political standpoints of these last few years and the adoption of an

additional benchmark which aims to bring to 95% at least the participation in pre-school education of children between the age of four and the age for starting compulsory primary education by 2020.

It is essential to remedy the democratic and participation deficits which were a black mark in the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy. In 'E&T 2020' (European Commission, 2008), the Commission stresses that greater participation of the stakeholders, social partners and civil society must be amongst the priorities, 'as they have a considerable contribution to make in terms of policy development, implementation and evaluation'. It gives the example to the Member States by fixing itself as an objective the organisation of an annual meeting with the European organisations concerned. It takes a stand in relation to the lack of representation in the participation in peer learning activities by stating that 'the stakeholders will be systematically included' in these activities. The spring 2010 European Council (European Council, 2010a) followed the same direction by stating that close cooperation will be maintained with the European Parliament and other EU institutions. National parliaments, social partners, regions and other stakeholders will be involved so as to increase ownership of the Strategy (European Council, 2010a). Let us hope that these official statements will not be mere empty words!

In its proposal for 'E&T 2020', the Commission puts forward four strategic objectives that will later be approved by Ministers of Education (EU Council, 2009): 1) making lifelong learning and mobility a reality; 2) improving the quality and efficiency of education and training; 3) promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship and 4) encouraging creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship at all levels of education and training. As it had been the case with the 'E&T 2010' programme, the implementation of lifelong learning is both a goal in itself and an overarching objective. When agreeing on the 'E&T 2020' programme, Ministers of Education reaffirmed the dual role of education. The main objective of European cooperation in their field is to 'support the development of education and training systems that ensure both the personal, social and professional fulfilment of all citizens and sustainable economic prosperity and employability, whilst promoting democratic values, social cohesion, active citizenship and intercultural dialogue' (EU Council, 2009). We should expect that the 'E&T 2020' OMC will feed the general EU 2020 process more offensively with this double contribution to employment and citizenship that makes its specificity and its added value. The Member States' national reform programmes should also bear the mark of this double contribution to the economy and society at large. Peer Learning Activities should become a more efficient lever of change, especially through effective operationalisation of their outcomes and the evaluation of their impact on national reforms. The budget is the sinews of war and it is clear that the 2020 objectives will not be reached if they are not accompanied at the national and European levels by greater financial investment in education and a mobilisation of existing financial instruments. At the European level, the structural funds and more especially the social fund should be better used to support the necessary reforms for the implementation of lifelong learning. One must regret that there appears to be no explicit articulation between the education component of the EU budget and the role to be played by the EU Structural Funds (Jones, 2005).

Conclusion

The Lisbon Strategy and its successor ('EU 2020') are above all a multi-actor and multi-level political process based on a flexible and non binding working method. This strengthened cooperation tool is very relevant for sectors such as education and training which so far had been too dependent on the changing priorities of the successive EU presidencies and the lack of commitment of certain States more concerned with a minimalist application of the subsidiarity principle than an optimal exploitation of the possibilities offered by the Treaty. The positive sides of this strategy for a field such as education which has a history of 30 years of European cooperation must not hide the less convincing aspects as far as the national implementation of the European commitments is concerned. The deficit, as for the whole strategy, is also at the level of the use made of the process at the national level both by the decision-makers and the social actors. Because the ownership of the process is weak, its impact on the quality of the national reforms and the position of the Union in the knowledge-based economy and society is also very insufficient. The European results in relation to the five benchmarks fixed by the Council for 2010 are disappointing and all the more alarming that they concern essential aspects in achieving a true knowledge-based society that is accessible to all. Concrete commitments and substantial reforms and investments are necessary if the situation is to improve by 2020.

All European Councils that have been held since the year 2000 to supervise and guide the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy have given priority to the role of education and training. But the distance between the cup and the lips and words and actions is still great. Public budgets, including for education, are under historical pressure in the context of an unprecedented financial crisis. The priority the States will give or not give in the next decade to judicious and sufficient investments in human resources, and therefore in education and training, will influence greatly the capacity of the Union to succeed in the 'EU2020' agenda and the objectives of the 'E&T 2020' programme. Declining birth rates may allow education spending per head to rise, but a big risk for Europe is that the public spending pressures from the ageing society 'crowd out' the investment necessary in education to guarantee access and opportunity in the knowledge society (Bureau of European Policy Advisers, 2007). The challenge for the Member States will be to act on both fronts, bearing in mind (and this is supported by reliable studies¹²) that raising the average educational attainment of the population by one year leads to a 5% increase in growth in the short term and a further 2.5% in the long term. One should add to this the positive impact of education on health, social inclusion and active citizenship.

Luce Pépin, 120 Rue Vanderkindere, B – 1180 Brussels, Belgium, Lejeune.pépin@skynet.be

NOTES

1. These sub-objectives deal with the following issues: training of teachers and trainers; key competences; access to ICT; increase in the number of graduates in maths, science and technology and decrease in the gender imbalance; making best use of resources; developing an open learning environment; making education and training more attractive; active citizenship, equal opportunities and social cohesion; links with the world of work, research and

- society; developing the spirit of entrepreneurship; foreign languages; mobility and exchanges; reinforcing European cooperation.
2. Efficiency and equity in education and training. Council conclusions (2006/C. 298/03) and Commission communication to the Council and the European Parliament (COM(2006) 481 final).
 3. Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006, JO L 394/10.
 4. Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008, JO C 111/1.
 5. Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009, JO C 155/11.
 6. Establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET). Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009. JO C 155/1.
 7. Strengthening policies, systems and practices in the field of guidance throughout life in Europe. Resolution of the Council of 18 May 2004 (EDUC 109. SOC 234).
 8. Common European principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning. Conclusions of the Council of 18 May 2004 (EDUC 118. SOC 253).
 9. Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on transnational mobility within the Community for education and training purposes: European Quality Charter for Mobility (2006/961/EC).
 10. Council conclusions on reference levels of European average performance in education and training (Benchmarks), Document 8981/03, EDUC 83 of 7 May 2003.
 11. For more information, consult the Commission website 'Knowledge System for Lifelong Learning (KSLI)' (www.kslll.net).
 12. Particular reference to De La Fuente et Ciccone Report to the European Commission '«Human capital in a global and knowledge-based economy'», (European Communities, 2003).

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