

Widening Participation and the European Union: direct action — indirect policy?

PAT DAVIES

Introduction

The European Union has its roots in the idea of economic union; one that was initially built around the coal and steel industries, gradually expanding in terms of the number of Member States and the terrain on which it was competent to act. Despite the fact that the modern EU is a very different animal from those early days, economic growth and competitiveness remain at the heart of the EU project, albeit in a different economic context — globalisation and the knowledge society, rather than post-War reconstruction. Not surprisingly therefore, the language of the Union and the metaphors it employs are mostly drawn from the economic domain. However, in the late 1980s there developed a growing conviction that economic growth and competitiveness could be achieved only if social policy was in place to avoid social fracture and if participation in civil society as well as in economic society was promoted through, *inter alia*, access to education and training, particularly for those groups at risk from the processes of structural change. Policy in relation to education and training in general and higher education in particular has therefore been slow to develop and has relied largely on its relationship with the economy and the labour market for its justification. However, other narratives, notably mobility and more recently social exclusion, have also been woven into the rationale for EU action in the field and a number of political imperatives, in particular subsidiarity and the ‘democratic deficit’ have shaped its response. Each of these narratives is complex and subsumes other strands and themes and thus each is a ‘group of narratives’ (Allen, 1998) and the groups are interwoven in different ways in the various domains of competence. This article seeks to unpack the relationship between these narratives and to explore the emerging policies and actions for evidence of support for widening participation to higher education in EU policy and programmes.

The Emergence of Policy on Education and Training

Commentators tend to agree that there are four distinct periods in the emergence of education and training policy in the EU: 1957 to the mid-1970s; mid-1970s to the mid-1980s; mid-1980s to 1992; and post 1992 (Brine, 1995; Field, 1998). These stages in the emergence of policy and actions in the field of vocational training and, in particular education, corresponded to a number of trends in the development of the Union: the growth in the number of Member States, the

development of the institutions and the legal bases for action, the changing analyses of the European economy and labour market, and the changing explanations of the causes and nature of unemployment. This strong link between the development of education and training programmes, the economy and the labour market is not surprising given that the *raison d'être* of the EU is primarily an economic one; what is interesting is how other narratives have been interwoven into the policies and programmes that emerged.

In the early years from 1957 to the mid-1970s, education and training were relatively minor interests, with attention restricted to the recognition of qualifications (article 57, Treaty of Rome) and the promotion of cooperation between Member States in basic and advanced vocational training (article 118). Nevertheless at that time, the European Social Fund was established as one of the Structural Funds to support vocational training and retraining and this has been used extensively by Member States, albeit somewhat controversially (Brine, 1995; 2002), and even, to some extent, more recently, by universities. In this first period, unemployment was seen as cyclical; in the second period from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s it began to be seen as structural, although a significant response was slow to develop. While still mainly focused on vocational training, interest in education was growing, as can be seen in the Action Programme in the field of education (Council Resolution, 1976), the setting up of Eurydice — the information network on education and training —, and perhaps more significantly, in 1981, the Task Force on Human Resources, Education, Training and Youth. This led to the extension of training policy towards compulsory schooling and employment with a linkage that constructed the concept of ETE (Education-Training-Employment) (Brine, 1995) and in this period CEDEFOP (the Centre européen pour le développement de la formation professionnelle) was created, first in Berlin and then in Thessaloniki.

The breakthrough in terms of the EC's competence in education in general and higher education in particular came in the third period from the mid-1980s to 1992 when education and training were part of the major push towards the achievement of the single market and a growing concern with the globalisation of markets and the restructuring of employment and the labour market was felt. It was also a period when unemployment, particularly youth unemployment, continued to rise in most Member States (Brine, 1995). Partly in response to these conditions and analyses, there was an extension of competence, as the definition of vocational training was extended and interest in education grew significantly. The Single European Act (SEA) of 1986 and the subsequent drive for more involvement in training were possible because they corresponded to the wider policy objective of creating a new human resource development policy in order to boost the competitiveness of Europe's businesses; and the Task Force for Human Resources, Education, Training and Youth was not slow to build up its policy brief (Milner, 1993). In terms of its legal competence, there were several court judgments in 1985 and 1986 ruling that higher education constituted a form of vocational training (Field, 1998; Meehan, 1993) and that the Erasmus programme met the definitional criteria. This opened the way, albeit a somewhat bumpy way, for the Commission to support projects in universities. While the programmes of the late 1980s focused primarily on vocational training, they were now extended in different directions: horizontally, for example, to foreign language competence in teacher education in secondary and higher education and vocational training, and

vertically, particularly through the COMETT programme, which focused on university-enterprise cooperation in the field of technology training. In addition, Erasmus promoted the mobility of university students and staff and supported joint curriculum development projects. As Field (1998, p. 47) pointed out, Erasmus 'acted as a path-breaker, enabling the Commission to pursue new initiatives, claiming that these were needed if Erasmus were to succeed'. One of these, the European Credit Transfer Scheme (ECTS), funds students to study in another Member State and to have that period recognised by their home university. This provided, for the first time, the possibility of widening the participation in study abroad but, perhaps more significantly, has survived into the current programmes and indeed, as we shall see later, has spawned other initiatives that seek to widen participation in other ways.

The Lead up to the Treaty of the European Union — Maastricht

In the early 1990s, there was a plethora of reports and Memoranda from the Commission that promoted debate about education and training. For the purposes of this article, two are particularly important. The first was the report from the Industrial Research and Development Advisory Committee (IRDAC, 1991), which argued that the skills shortage in Europe had reached crisis point and needed to be addressed as a matter of urgency, particularly by higher education institutions. The themes it set out were subsequently pursued in Memoranda from the Commission. Two — on Open and Distance Learning (Commission of the European Communities, 1991a) and on Vocational Training (Commission of the European Communities, 1992a) — were clearly relevant to higher education, but the most important in terms of the idea of widening participation was the Memorandum on Higher Education (1991b) because it is the only such document that focuses exclusively on higher education. It called for universities to support an expanding knowledge-based economy, to contribute to the single labour market for highly qualified personnel and to widen access to higher qualifications. It envisaged expansion and both structural and admissions reform to accommodate new kinds of activity:

The larger, new student population will need to be catered for within a much more diversified but nevertheless structured system of post-secondary education where the system as a whole would be more permeable to students who would receive credit for studies successfully completed in any part of it (Commission of the European Communities, 1991b, p. III).

It argued that universities should 'offer opportunities for regular updating and renewal (continuing education)', form 'partnerships with economic life' and 'a shift in policy terms in the balance of attention, investment and organization as between initial and continuing education with an increased importance being attached to the latter'. If implemented, these changes 'would bring about a blurring of the boundaries between initial and continuing education, where recurrent education throughout working life and beyond would become much more the norm in a learning society.' (p. 23). It pointed out that:

The mainstreaming of continuing education raises a number of essential academic issues which must be resolved. Foremost among these is the question

of access and the basis on which continuing education students and mature students generally are admitted to higher education courses. The positive policies which are to be observed in some institutions and which give credit for maturity and for knowledge and experience gained in the labour market would need to be adopted on a wider scale, as would the provision of preparatory courses which supply the basic preparation relevant to embarking on a particular course of higher education.' (Commission of the European Communities, 1991b, p. 4).

The underpinning rationale for these policy recommendations was thus quite clearly an economic one. This is not surprising given the absence of competence in the field of education, but it nevertheless provided support for policies at national level, already existing in some Member States, to provide special preparatory and access routes to the undergraduate curriculum for mature students (Davies, 1995).

The Memorandum also called for improved systems for the recognition of qualifications and periods of study undertaken in another Member State, thus addressing a key objective of the Community and one which had strong legitimacy: mobility and the free movement of people.

Recognition is crucial to the mobility of students and graduates within Europe whether for study or work. The variety of study and award systems throughout Europe calls for **flexible and accurate mechanisms which can handle claims for academic as well as professional recognition**. There is a great need for **an information support** for employers wishing to assess qualifications and for individuals who would wish to take all or part of their higher education in another member state. There is already considerable work going on in this area through the many inter-university agreements and through the ECTS (European Community Course Credit Transfer System) scheme within the ERASMUS programme. This work can provide the basis for further initiatives which should also comprehend continuing education students and for **agreements which would facilitate recognition** on a more widespread basis (Commission of the European Communities, 1991b, p. V).

This Memorandum was significant, if somewhat tentative. The terminology was still 'continuing education' or 'recurrent education' or 'education throughout working life or beyond' but not yet 'lifelong learning'; and the phrase 'learning society' was used only once (p. 23). The idea of 'credit' was about giving credit for studies in the formal system, with no sense of its use to cross the boundary between the professional and the academic world, although there were some hints that ECTS could be extended to continuing education and some hint at the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) (p. 24). Nevertheless, the seeds were sown for the programmes and priorities to follow and it was quite a bold document, given that it appeared in a period of great debate about subsidiarity (Duff, 1993), not only in the UK; other Member States, especially Denmark, were engaged in the same political discussions and campaigns. Education is one of the domains, along with social policy, where the issue of subsidiarity is most obvious and controversial. In the field of higher education, it is overlaid with a further

layer, namely the autonomy of universities. In this context, the Memorandum was clearly pushing at the boundaries of the possible, as evidenced in the 'predictably dusty response from the member states' (Field, 1997, p. 79).

The Emergence of 'Social Exclusion'

This period leading up to the Maastricht Treaty was significant for the emergence of another key narrative in the EU policy discourse: social exclusion. The term is usually attributed to Jacques Delors, used first in the negotiations with social partners leading up to the Treaty and derives from its use in French social policy. Combating social exclusion is therefore about seeking 'the social, political and moral insertion of subjects within this wider French social order' (Allen *et al.*, 1998, p. 13) and since some groups will stay outside the labour market or have only a very precarious relationship with it, insertion cannot rely on employment alone as the means of socialisation into the social order. The introduction of the term into the European negotiations added the promotion of social cohesion to that of economic cohesion that has always existed at European level, and was then used in a number of Commission documents.

The Community cannot be satisfied with a 'two-speed society' breeding, as it causes poverty, exclusion and frustration. The single frontier-free market and monetary union constitute growth factors for Europe as a whole, but they are also risk factors for the weakest regions and social groups and must be accompanied by more dynamic policies in the field of economic and social exclusion (Commission of the European Communities, 1992b).

Similarly, the subsequent Action programme to combat social exclusion (Commission of the European Communities, 1993b) referred to 'the potential for social fracture' that 'broader structural mechanisms' had set in motion and that threatened 'ever-closer union'. It focused on groups excluded from education, employment, housing, health and social services with special focus on gender, culture, ethnicity and race. 'Social exclusion' had become a multi-faceted relational concept; the term came to stand for a complex set of social processes (Allen *et al.*, 1998) and for the 'discriminatory dynamics' that operate in the cultural and social as well as in the economic field (Roche, 1997). In terms of education and training, it fed into a range of programmes and policy documents concerned with promoting European citizenship (Commission of the European Communities, 1993c), focusing on cultural education, equal opportunities themes and the targeting of particular disadvantaged groups.

Maastricht

It was the Treaty of the European Union (the Maastricht Treaty) of 1992 that confirmed the EU's competence in the field of education (rather than just vocational training). Article 126 of the Treaty read:

The Community shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation 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 organization of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity.

Community action was to develop the European dimension in education, particularly through the teaching and dissemination of the languages of the Member States; encouraging the mobility of students and teachers, *inter alia*, through the academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study; promoting cooperation 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; and encouraging the development of distance education. Although the recognition of the principle of subsidiarity was strong, the language was very soft, using the terms 'developing' and 'encouraging' repetitively, thus being rather ambiguous and open to interpretation. Nevertheless, the principle was established.

The political significance of the subsidiarity debate was powerful enough to ensure that it was re-iterated in the clauses on vocational training where the EU competence was already more clearly established. Article 127 of the Treaty read:

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 organization of vocational training.

And again, the aims of Community action were couched in similarly soft language: to 'facilitate', 'improve', 'stimulate' and 'develop exchanges of information'. Thus, although the Treaty established and confirmed the competence of the EU in both education and training, its powers were strongly constrained and its opportunities for action remained ambiguous.

Life after Maastricht

Most of the EU programmes — COMETT, Erasmus, PETRA, FORCE, LINGUA — were in place until 1995–96 so there was no immediate possibility to exploit this new legitimacy and what followed was a period of debate to explore the boundaries of this new competence. A series of policy ideas were published: a Green Paper on the European Dimension of Education (Commission of the European Communities, 1993c), the Delors White Paper on Growth Competitiveness and Employment (Commission of the European Communities, 1993a), a White Paper on Social Policy (Commission of the European Communities, 1994) and a White Paper on Teaching and Learning (Commission of the European Communities, 1995), all of which were relevant to education and training to a greater or lesser extent. The concern with globalisation and its impact on the competitiveness of the European economy, on the labour market and on unemployment crystallised in this period, focusing attention on the knowledge society, e-commerce and the implications of ICT for employment. In this context, the Delors White Paper (Commission of the European Communities, 1993a) was one of the most significant of these documents in terms of its reach into a whole range of policy areas, including education and training, and its impact on the actions that followed. It

contained a critical diagnosis of the weaknesses in education and training systems in the Member States: a low level of training and too many young people leaving school without basic training; the failure of education: 'a particularly important and increasingly widespread factor of marginalization and economic and social exclusion' (p. 118); a persistently inadequate development of systems and types of continuing training, the 'inequality of access' to it and limited possibilities for those in SMEs (p. 119); the lack of skills in science and technology; the 'lack of a genuine European market in skills and occupations; the lack of mutual transparency and the limited recognition of qualifications and skills at Community level; the lack of a genuine European area for open and distance learning' (p. 119).

This concern with marginalisation and social exclusion was picked up in the reform of ESF in 1994 which shifted support towards the socially excluded, 'more sharply focussed on those considered to be 'most vulnerable' to exclusion: the long-term, low-educated, low-skilled, unemployed; the young unemployed; and for the first time, those who are in work of a vulnerable nature' (Brine, 1995, p. 151).

However, the White Paper on teaching and learning (Commission of the European Communities, 1995) that came just under 2 years after the Delors White Paper also picked up these themes. The document was clearly influenced by the development of the information society and the processes associated with globalisation. It pointed to the fears and dangers of these trends: the loss of an IT production base and of European identity, and social exclusion; and identified two key challenges: an economic one and the 'urgent need to avert a rift in society'. It set up 5 key objectives for future action: to 'encourage the acquisition of new knowledge'; to 'bring schools and business closer together'; to 'combat exclusion'; to promote 'proficiency in three community languages'; and to 'treat capital investment and investment in training on an equal basis'. The proposals for actions to achieve these objectives were not radically new: a European accreditation system covering technical and vocational skills, the extension of ECTS to vocational training, support for the development of educational software, a European apprenticeship scheme, support for new forms of vocational training (e.g. how to set up in business), a European observatory system to survey innovative vocational training practices, second chance schools, a European voluntary service, support for language development and teaching with a European quality label, support for the development of measures of investment in education and training, and surveys of arrangements for encouraging investment in human resources and of ways of counting such investments as fixed assets in accounting procedures.

The White Paper was not well received. There was considerable criticism from the EU institutions, such as the Committee of the Regions and, most importantly, the Education Council, that the proposal went too far in encroaching on territory that was rightly occupied by the Member States (see Field, 1998 for a fuller account of these criticisms). Clearly, despite its weak proposals and wariness, the Commission had not struck the right note with national governments, provoking the spectre of subsidiarity once again and some of the ideas presented immediately went into hibernation.

The Embedding of Lifelong Learning

There followed a successful European Year of Lifelong Learning (EYLL) in 1996. The 5000+ projects spawned by the EYLL were innovative and therefore captured

the attention both of the public and of the Commission and the idea of lifelong learning was gradually established as a key plank of policy. The Commission report on EYLL (Commission of the European Communities, 2000, p. 2) made clear its belief that the year provided the policy impetus and the policy framework in which the idea of lifelong learning could be moved forward.

A key step in this process was the inclusion of the principle of lifelong learning in the preamble to the Amsterdam Treaty in which the signatories stated their determination 'to promote the development of the highest possible level of knowledge for their peoples through a wide access to education and through its continuous updating'. Subsequently, the new Socrates II and Leonardo II 2000–2006 programmes also used the language of lifelong learning and the new Grundtvig action in Socrates II focused on adult education in a new kind of way. Among European Councils, the Lisbon meeting in March 2000 was, as the Commission called it, 'a decisive moment' since it established lifelong learning as a clearly defined priority within the Employment Strategy. A few months later in June 2000, the Feira summit invited Member States and the Commission 'to identify coherent strategies and practical measures with a view to fostering lifelong learning for all'. Subsequent summits have endorsed the idea that lifelong learning has a key role in accompanying the transition to a knowledge-based economy and society.

What followed from the Commission was its Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (Commission of the European Communities, 2000a). Evidence from the EYLL report (Commission of the European Communities, 2000) had shown that there was interest and commitment in the Member States but monitoring of the Employment Strategy had also shown that little progress had been achieved in promoting a comprehensive strategy. Drawing on the mandate provided by the two Council meetings in particular, the Memorandum was designed to 'launch a Europe-wide debate on a comprehensive strategy for implementing lifelong learning at individual and institutional levels and in all spheres of public and private life' (p. 3) using the definition of lifelong learning enshrined in the Employment Strategy: 'all purposeful learning activity, undertaken on an on-going basis with the aim of improving knowledge skills and competence' (p. 3). The Memorandum was anxious to shift the dominance of 'formal learning' in policy thinking to a wider definition with 3 categories — formal (delivered in institutions to obtain diplomas and qualifications); non-formal (provided in the workplace and 'civil society organisations and groups', typically not leading to qualifications); and informal (a 'natural accompaniment to everyday life', 'not necessarily intentional') (p. 8). It argued that lifelong learning was located in time: 'learning throughout life either continuously or periodically'; but that it was also 'lifewide [and] brings the complementarity of formal, non-formal and informal into sharper focus' (p. 9). It focused on six key messages: new basic skills for all; more investment in human resources; innovation in teaching and learning; valuing learning; rethinking guidance and counselling; and bringing learning closer to home.

Riding on the commitment of the two Council meetings, the Memorandum was ambitious and imbued with a sense of urgency: 'lifelong learning is no longer just one aspect of education and training; it must become the guiding principle for provision and participation across the full continuum of learning contexts. The coming decade must see the implementation of this vision. All those living in Europe, without exception, should have equal opportunities to adjust to the demands of social and economic change and to participate actively in the shaping

of Europe's future.' (p. 3). It also argued for lifelong learning as an integrating concept: 'the common umbrella under which all kinds of teaching and learning should be united.' (p. 4); and re-iterated the conclusions of Lisbon and Feira: 'lifelong learning is an essential policy for the development of citizenship, social cohesion and employment'. At last it seemed that the Commission and the Councils had found a concept around which they could come together; 'partnership' and joint effort' were strong themes.

The consultation process that followed was conducted in the Member States, the candidate countries, and at European level, and 'as close as possible to the citizens themselves'. On the EU website there was an open call for comments, contributions and responses and the Commission contracted with 6 NGOs to consult 'civil society' at European level. Although the Memorandum had not addressed itself to any sector of the education and training world, the consultation process attempted to include them. The 6 NGOs were: EUA (European University Association), EAEA (European Adult Education Association), CSR Europe (Corporate Social Responsibility Europe), EFVET (European Forum for Technical and Vocational Education and Training), EVTA (European Vocational Training Association), and Solidar with the addition of the Youth Forum, together forming a 'platform' whose 7 reports formed the papers for a one-day event: 'Making lifelong learning a reality — consultation of civil society' (September 2001). In addition, the Eurydice European Unit and CEDEFOP 'decided jointly to provide an overview of action undertaken to promote lifelong education and training in different European countries' (Eurydice & CEDEFOP, 2001, p. 7); and the European associations representing the social partners also contributed. (All these consultation reports can be found on the EU website (www.europa.eu.int/comm/education/life/index.html)). The university sector was represented in this process primarily by EUA and the European Universities Continuing Education Network (EUCEN) also made an input.

The responses of the Member States (see Commission of the European Communities, 2001 for a summary and analysis) were rather mixed: 'a good measure of consensus on the core issues . . . but predictably rather less consensus on how to address these issues successfully' (Commission of the European Communities, 2001, p. 1). Once again, the issue of subsidiarity arose, with a clear majority expressing the view that European level action should on the whole be restricted to improving opportunities to exchange information and good practice and should use existing resources more effectively to target more funding towards lifelong learning. However, in general there seems to have been agreement over the re-balancing of lifelong learning more equally between the employment aspects and the cultural/citizenship aspects. There were, however, three areas of consistent concern: insufficient explicit emphasis on social cohesion and equal opportunities, insufficient attention to the diverse learning needs and demands of specific target groups, and too much emphasis on individual responsibility.

The universities' response (European University Association, 2001), not surprisingly, argued that universities should be 'a central actor' in a European strategy for lifelong learning and accept this collective responsibility. However, in the face of a wide range of pressures, 'institutions need the freedom to decide what they will do and with which resources' (p. 3), thus establishing at the outset the concept of institutional autonomy. Despite some scepticism and a plea for the European dimension of learning to be more than a comparison at EU level of

national plans and experiences, the response was generally favourable and agreed that the key to success was to build a sense of shared responsibility among all the key actors.

Following this consultation, the Commission issued its action plan to turn lifelong learning into 'a reality' (Commission of the European Communities, 2001a). The Communication argued that 'Creating a culture of learning depends ultimately on increasing learning opportunities, raising participation levels and stimulating demand for learning' (ibid p. 4) with quality assurance mechanisms in order to strive for excellence. The priorities for action were:

- valuing learning: 'a comprehensive new approach... to build bridges between different learning contexts and learning forms, to facilitate access to individual pathways of learning' (including recognition of informal and non-formal learning by the formal sector)
- information, guidance and counselling
- investing time and money in learning: 'raising the levels of investment and making investment more transparent'
- bringing together learners and learning opportunities: 'encouraging and supporting learning communities, cities and regions and setting up local learning centres', and 'supporting learning in the workplace'
- basic skills: 'identifying what the basic skills package should be' and making them 'genuinely available to everyone and in particular to those less advantaged'
- innovative pedagogy: 'new teaching methods and the new role of teachers, trainers and other learning facilitators' and support for 'ICT enabling and supporting lifelong learning'.

In order to 'drive the agenda forward', the Commission proposed developing databases of good practice, reinforcing and expanding the joint actions, facilitating the participation of NGOs and SMEs, continuing the current work on indicators related to lifelong learning and developing 'a limited number' of new ones, and developing existing and new structures for consultation and collaboration at all levels.

A detailed comparison of the Memorandum and the Communication is beyond the remit of this article. However, it is clear that they differed little in the fundamentals; what had changed was the emphasis and ordering of priorities rather than the substantive content. Indeed, in June 2001, even before the publication of the Communication in November, the Commission had launched a new kind of action — Joint Action projects — bringing together Socrates, Leonardo and Youth programmes under three key themes:

- Construction of bridges between qualifications: a system of transfer and accumulation of training credits for lifelong learning
- Guidance and advisory services, key instruments for the implementation of lifelong learning: towards a holistic approach
- Multi-purpose centres and e-learning.

The objectives of the call were: cooperation between sectors at different levels, transnational networking of different types of actors, and removing barriers between modes of intervention. All proposals were required, *inter alia*, to

demonstrate cooperation across sectors, to take account of formal, non-formal and informal learning and to be innovative in the forms of cooperation. Thus, clearly the responses to the Memorandum were already seeping into the action programmes and the themes of the (at that point still unpublished) Communication had already clearly been defined. In the second Joint Action call in June 2002 the themes were: social integration of target groups, local (multi agency) guidance networks, and the active citizenship of young people, the latter responding to the White Paper on Youth (Commission of the European Communities, 2001b) thus reacting again to some of the criticisms of the Memorandum, particularly in relation to the targeting of specific groups.

Before turning to examine how this developing EU involvement in education and training has impacted on universities and in particular on the widening participation agenda, it is important to consider briefly one other 'grouped narrative': mobility.

The Mobility Theme

The free movement of the people of Europe has been a recurring theme since the Treaty of Rome in 1957 and, as we have seen above, 'mobility' gave the Commission the opportunity to involve itself in higher education before it was technically competent to do so through the promotion of student mobility. It has been a generally powerful lever, creating the imperative for a wide range of initiatives related to the recognition of qualifications, particularly vocational qualifications. In vocational training and later education, the mobility objective has been played out in several phases. In the early years, from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s, the target was the harmonisation of qualifications and mutual recognition but this proved to be too complex and lengthy a process and for the next few years the aim was correspondence and comparison rather than harmonisation, but again this was complicated and the comparisons soon became out-of-date. Finally, in the early 1990s, the target became 'transparency', a concept that accepts that total comparability or equivalence will not be achieved in the near future, but instead focuses on 'understanding the content of awards and the grades of performance and how they align with other awards and their general acceptability for progression' (Gordon, 1999, p. 207) while remaining within the boundaries of subsidiarity. In the field of higher education a parallel process of shifting objectives took place. The European Credit Transfer Scheme (ECTS), which began in 1980s to underpin the study time spent in another Member State, stalled for some time as it grappled with complex comparisons and only became well established when it adopted a model based on 'transparency' coupled with a degree of trust and confidence between partner universities rather than a heavy and detailed examination of content and assessment. This bottom-up model has acquired a certain acceptability and respectability and it is now being considered as a possible tool for mobility in vocational training as part of the Bruges process, is being picked up in the Joint Action projects on constructing bridges between qualifications, and is a key strand in the Bologna process. Thus, although not always obviously and usually quietly, mobility has provided the underpinning justification for many interventions in education and training and continues to do so, most recently with a new twist — virtual mobility — in ICT developments.

The Involvement of Universities

Many of the funding programmes have been open to and used by universities, particularly since the Maastricht Treaty. Apart from the Erasmus student mobility programme, universities were involved in COMETT (university-enterprise co-operation in technology training), FORCE (promotion of continuing vocational training), and LINGUA (promotion of foreign language teaching). None of these early programmes really touched on the theme of widening participation in any direct way. It could of course be argued that providing grants for study abroad is a form of widening participation to élite activities and this would be so if the programme had promoted the participation of disadvantaged groups but there were no special targeting arrangements and there is no evidence that it has promoted equal opportunities. A survey (Commission of the European Communities, 2000b) showed that, although students from lower income and lower occupational status families were represented in approximately the same proportion among ERASMUS students and students generally, this was not the case for family educational background. Around 59% of ERASMUS students had one or both parents with a higher education qualification, compared to around 30% of students generally, so that this did appear to be a factor in the selection of ERASMUS students, disadvantaging those who were first generation students.

The new round of programmes beginning around 1995–6 provided more opportunities. Socrates included an adult education strand which later became known as Grundtvig after the Danish educationalist; and Leonardo, the vocational training programme, provided opportunities for higher level vocational training and pilot projects to develop new tools and methodologies. In addition, the Fourth Framework Research and Development Programme (1995–8) contained a strand on Targeted Socio-Economic Research (TSER) with an area on education and training and an area on social exclusion and social integration. The education and training area covered:

- The effectiveness of policies and actions, the European dimension and diversity: European policies in the field of education and training, adaptation to change, and European unity and diversity
- Methods, tools and technologies — quality and innovation in education and training: educational effectiveness, innovation, education, training and new technologies
- Education, training and economic development: evaluation of economic needs, organisations and training.

The social exclusion and social integration in the Europe area included: the forms and processes of social exclusion and integration, the causes of social exclusion, particularly unemployment, migration, evaluation of the impact of social integration policies, and horizontal activities and development of research infrastructures.

In all these areas, the projects undertaken by universities and their partners touched on issues related to widening participation. The Socrates adult education strand was taken up mainly by adult education organisations, but several of the projects included a university as a source of expertise or research, or as providing access to infrastructure facilities and systems (in particular ICT). Thus, a kind of ‘outreach’ activity (see Osborne in this issue) was involved and, although not directly widening the student profile in higher education, the universities were sup-

porting widening participation more generally and most of the projects were targeted at disadvantaged groups: migrants, ethnic minority groups, people with disabilities or special learning difficulties. Other examples include a project in which the university worked with museums to identify the needs of those who do not usually take advantage of what those institutions offer and to create new methods and tools to involve them; another university worked with organisations in Central and Eastern Europe to produce CDs about their history and culture for use with adult groups in Member States. There were, however, a number of projects that specifically focused on adult access to and participation in higher education: a one-year project aimed at developing modules of learning on European Studies to enable adults to enter degrees in this area; a two-year project targeted at disadvantaged groups to provide preparatory modules in the key skills necessary to study at higher education level; a three-year project on the assessment of prior experiential learning (APEL) for access to university study; and, more recently, a project concerned with increasing adult education in universities. In addition, there have been two other projects which touched on widening participation more indirectly: one concerned with the quality arrangements for adult learning in universities and one that surveyed policy and practice in promoting lifelong learning in universities in four countries, making recommendations for action at institutional, national and EU level. In 1995, Thematic Networks were introduced into the Socrates programme and a network in university continuing education was funded which was mostly concerned with issues relating to the management and delivery of continuing education and support for the development of national networks, particularly in the countries of East and Central Europe, all of which are aiming to improve the provision of continuing education and widen participation for new target groups in traditional universities but do not necessarily or directly target disadvantaged groups.

In the Leonardo projects, there has been a similar picture: many projects have been concerned with vocational training below higher education level and with the 'insertion' of disadvantaged groups into the labour market. Those at higher education level have related to the world of work but not necessarily targeting disadvantaged groups in any way. However, the accreditation of prior experiential and/or work-based learning has been a strong theme along with distance learning provision for professional training, targeted, for example, at employees in SMEs, at higher education level although not necessarily leading to degrees.

In the TSER programme, a number of research projects focused on the theme of widening participation in different ways. One explored the implications for universities of the lifelong learning agenda and has been reported in earlier volumes of this Journal (Vol. 35 No. 3, 2000 and Vol. 36 No. 3, 2001); and another investigated university access policies for adult learners, particularly socially excluded groups and communities (Bourgeois & Frenay, 2001). In the Fifth Framework Programme (projects starting in 2001), there are a number of projects focusing on universities (e.g. the response to social change and enlargement of the EU) but none that relate directly to widening participation. In the more recent *e-learning* initiative, many universities are involved in developing packages of learning, modules of degree programmes or whole degrees, and a wide range of continuing professional development courses using ICTs and ODL techniques. Many of these are targeted at groups who otherwise would not be able to participate in higher education study for reasons of work or family commitments, their rural

location, etc. In addition, the community initiatives of the ESF, particularly ADAPT, have been used by universities to develop re-training programmes for those at risk of unemployment and, as indicated above, the new Joint Action projects also have the potential to promote widening participation in higher education. In the first round of projects one is aiming to create a European architecture for the accreditation of informal and non-formal learning and its transfer into the formal sector (Transfine), bringing together experience from ECTS and APEL projects (for further information, see www.transfine.net); others are focused on guidance and advisory services and e-learning centres which could also address access and participation.

A Policy by Another Name?

It is clear from this account of the development of the EU competence in the field of education and training that there is no EU policy on higher education as such. Indeed, given the principle of subsidiarity coupled with the jealously guarded autonomy of universities, how could there be any 'high policy' in this domain? We have seen how the EU has attempted on several occasions to test the boundaries of its competence in this area and been rebuffed, but there has nevertheless been a slow and persistent growth of activity that has recently crystallised around the idea of lifelong learning. This is a highly contested and slippery concept, but the Commission seems to have developed the ability to manage this ambiguity to its advantage and to find ways to fund the kinds of project that it wishes to support and universities have developed a number of out-reach activities under this banner. Nevertheless, the concept of lifelong learning in universities that can be inferred from Commission communications and EU funding programmes is largely (although not exclusively) confined to the employability narrative rather than the social inclusion narrative; it tends to be interpreted as continuing professional development and work-based learning rather than inreach activities that open up the mainstream high status curriculum to disadvantaged groups. One recurring exception to this is the long standing commitment to supporting credit accumulation and transfer in various forms — firstly the transfer of credit between universities for studies in the same disciplinary area (ECTS), then the transfer of learning from the world of work to formal education (accreditation of work-based learning) and finally accreditation of non-formal and informal learning for the accumulation of credits from different sources and their transfer into the formal sector (APEL). This support has been evident in a range of programmes — Socrates, Leonardo, TSER, and the Joint Action programme — over the 10 years since the Maastricht Treaty. Cynics might argue that this is because the Brussels version of the Chinese wall was quite effective and the Socrates office did not know what was going on in the Leonardo office and vice-versa. No doubt there is an element of truth in this proposition since the administrative problems have been widely discussed. However, there are other reasons for the 'success' of the idea. Firstly, APEL is genuinely capable of playing both to the employability and the social inclusion imperative and to the fundamental objective of mobility, all of which have widespread support in principle from Member States. Secondly, it is able to be interpreted in a radical form as a means of challenging, or indeed overthrowing, existing power structures in institutions but also as a marginal palliative to such pressures for deep and wide institutional change. It may be that the

current focus on guidance and advice suggests that another theme of this kind has been identified. This view of EU 'policy' is not intended to imply cynicism but rather to acknowledge the constraints placed upon the Commission and the boundaries around its competence. Clearly, the themes that can play to several legitimated objectives have more chance of success than those that are more marginal or less clearly within accepted jurisdiction.

One of the key elements of a widening participation policy is however absent from the EU discourse. Despite increasingly frequent references to equal opportunities and the recognition that social exclusion is a structural rather than a cyclical problem or a matter of individual fault, the communications and the action programmes that follow are couched in negative terms of avoiding social fracture and promoting social cohesion rather than of a more positive philosophical and active commitment to social justice. Of course, the use of a strong social justice narrative could bring the Commission into unfruitful or, even worse, damaging conflict with Member States. It is also the case that the theme has been taken up by other organisations, notably the Council of Europe, which has financed wide-ranging projects on access to higher education, most recently on the implications for universities of the urgent need to promote social cohesion in a wider geographical Europe (Council of Europe, 2001). Although, for Ministries of Education, agreeing with the pronouncements of the Council of Europe carries no legal commitment for the countries that sign up to them, it is precisely this fact that allows the Council to pursue this agenda and that inhibits the Commission from doing so. Nevertheless, we have seen several recurring themes in the EU actions and programmes that could be called an indirect policy.

The layers of subsidiarity that lie between the Commission and the universities of Europe also impact on the effectiveness of EU funding initiatives. There is little evidence that the results, products and experiences of the many relatively small projects supported by the Commission with the potential to widen participation have been incorporated into routine practice or have had an impact on anyone beyond the individual activists involved in the projects. They have undoubtedly allowed the 'converted' to develop their expertise but there is no evidence that they have reached the 'unconverted' and so the impact has been limited and fragmented. However, the Commission is aware of this problem and is developing more of the kind of projects that seek to bring these experiences together: Joint Action programme projects, Gruntvig 4 project networks and Thematic Networks. One official also recently commented that the Commission would like more universities to be more active in the Grundtvig programme, which is where projects addressing the social inclusion/social justice agenda can most easily be pursued. Further, in some Member States, the kind of widening participation initiatives that have been undertaken in the UK and France for example have not been possible without legislation and legislation is a long process. Impact as well as policy development are a long game at European level. Nevertheless, there does seem to be a sense among some officials at least that things are 'coming together'. As one commented in a recent meeting 'we used to have programmes but no policy, now we have some policy and we can start to act more coherently'. It is sometimes difficult from the outside to see precisely what or where this policy is, but there does seem to be a clearer view of what is possible and not possible, a better understanding of the timescale — the short and the long game — and at least the vision of a new kind of coherence and focus to the EU debate about

actions in the field of education and training. It remains to be seen how far this can be translated into a more effective focus on widening participation in higher education across an expanded Europe.

REFERENCES

- ALLEN, J. (1998) Europe of the neighbourhoods: class, citizenships and welfare regimes, in: A. MADANIPOUR, G. CARS & J. ALLEN (Eds) *Social Exclusion in European Cities. Processes, Experiences and Responses* (London, JKP).
- ALLEN, J., CARS, G. & MADANIPOUR, A. (1998) Introduction, in: A. MADANIPOUR, G. CARS & J. ALLEN (Eds) *Social Exclusion in European Cities. Processes, Experiences and Responses* (London, JKP).
- BOURGEOIS, E. & FRENAY, M. (2001) *University Access Policies and Practices across the European Union; and their consequences for the participation of non-traditional adults*. Final Report to the European Commission of TSER Project, SOE2-CT97-2021.
- BRINE, J. (1995) Educational and vocational policy and construction of the European Union, *International Studies in the Sociology of Education*, 5, pp. 145–163.
- BRINE, J. (2002) Further education participation, European expansion and European erasure, *British Education Research Journal*, 28, pp. 21–36.
- COFFIELD, F. (1996) *A Tale of Three Little Pigs: building the Learning Society with straw*. Proceedings of a European conference on Research on Lifelong Learning: implications for policy and practice (Newcastle, University of Newcastle, School of Education).
- COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES (1991a) *Memorandum on Open and Distance Learning in the European Community* (Brussels, Task Force on Human Resources, Education, Training, Youth).
- COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES (1991b) *Memorandum on Higher Education in the European Community* (Brussels, Task Force on Human Resources, Education, Training, Youth).
- COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES (1992a) *Memorandum on Vocational Training in the European Community in the 1990s* (Luxembourg, OOPEC).
- COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES (1992b) *The Community's Battle against Social Exclusion*. CEC European File, 4/91.
- COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES (1993a) *Growth, Competitiveness, Employment: the Challenges and Ways forward into the 21st Century* (Luxembourg, OOPEC).
- COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES (1993b) *Action Programme to Combat Social Exclusion and to Promote Social Solidarity* (Brussels, DGV).
- COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES (1993c) *Green Paper on the European Dimension of Education* [COM (93) 457 final 29 September 1993].
- COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES (1994) *European Social Policy: A Way Forward for the Union* (Luxembourg, OOPEC).
- COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES (1995) *Teaching and Learning — Towards the Learning Society* (Luxembourg, OOPEC).

- COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES (1997) *Communication from the Commission — Towards a Europe of Knowledge* [COM (97) 563 final].
- COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES (2000) *Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the implementation, results and overall assessment of the European Year of Lifelong Learning (1996)* (A5-0200/2000 final) (Luxembourg, OOPEC).
- COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES (2000a) *A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning. Commission Staff Working Paper*. SEC (2000) 1832 (Luxembourg, OOPEC).
- COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES (2000b) Survey into the socio-economic background of ERASMUS students. Report from the Commission COM (2000) 4 final.
- COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES (2001) *Summary and Analysis of the Feedback from the Member States and EEA Countries as part of the Consultation on the Commission's Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* (Brussels, CEDEFOP).
- COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES (2001a) *Communication from the Commission: Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality* [COM (2001)678 final].
- COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES (2001b) *A New Impetus for European Youth* (Luxembourg, OOPEC).
- COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES (1976) *An Action Programme in the Field of Education* (OJ C 38/1 19.2.76).
- COUNCIL OF EUROPE (2001) *Lifelong Learning for Equity and Social Cohesion: a new challenge to higher education*. Final conference report (Strasbourg, Council of Europe).
- DAVIES, P. (Ed) *Adults in Higher Education. International Perspectives in Access and Participation* (London, JKP).
- DUFF, A. (Ed) (1993) *Subsidiarity within the European Community* (London, Federal Trust for Education and Research).
- EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY ASSOCIATION (EUA) (2001) *The Memorandum on Lifelong Learning. Results of the EUA Consultation* (Brussels, EUA).
- EURYDICE & CEDEFOP (2001) *National Actions to Implement Lifelong Learning in Europe* (Brussels, Eurydice European Unit with the European Commission, Directorate-General for Education and Culture).
- FIELD, J. (1997) The Learning Society and the European Union: a critical assessment of supranational education policy formation, *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 1, pp. 73–92.
- FIELD, J. (1998) *European Dimensions. Education, Training and the European Union* (London, JKP).
- GORDON, J. (1999) Approaches to transparency of vocational qualifications in the EU, *European Journal of Education*, 34, pp. 203–217.
- IRDAC (1991) *Skills Shortages in Europe* (Brussels, Industrial Research and Development Advisory Committee of the Commission of the European Community).
- MEEHAN, E. (1993) *Citizenship and the European Community* (London, Sage).
- MILNER, S. (1993) Understanding the impact of social actors on policy making at EC level: corporatism, European integration and training policy, in: L.

HANTRAIS & S. MANGEN (Eds) *The Policy Making Process and the Social Actors* (Loughborough, Cross National Research Group, Loughborough University of Technology).

ROCHE, M. (1997) Citizenship and exclusion: reconstructing the European Union, in: M. ROCHE & R. VAN BERKEL (Eds) *European Citizenship and Social Exclusion* (Aldershot, Ashgate).