

# Key competences for the development of lifelong learning in the European Union

**Dr Dejan Hozjan**

Professor on Faculty of Management and Faculty of Education,  
University of Primorska, Slovenia

## SUMMARY

### **Keywords**

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**This paper discusses certain developments in education policy in the European Union since the implementation of the Lisbon strategy. Greater focus on lifelong learning as a means of increasing the competitiveness of the European Union, and establishment of several new, efficient policy tools (above all the 'open method of coordination') have, in a relatively short space of time, opened up national policies in education and training, resulting in 'Europeanisation' of these policies and even the beginning of a process of formation of common European core skills in education and training: a model of 'key competences' that the European citizen should possess to be able to meet the challenges of the increasingly complex environment that surrounds us.**

## Introduction

In the past few years, in the European policy arena and as part of the process of identifying new ways of making Member States more competitive, education and training have seen very brisk development. This is all the more interesting because of objective obstacles to the Europeanisation of policies. Some areas in which, barely a decade ago, we could scarcely talk of stronger European links (and not at all at transnational level), but which were key to realising adopted objectives, have suddenly found themselves at the centre of several of the most dynamic processes currently under way in the European Union. New opportunities and possibilities have been created in certain areas previously inaccessible to European influence, allowing us to meet a need that has been around for some time for a stronger European dimension in formulating several sectoral policies. Education policies, in particular gradual formulation of common European core skills in lifelong learning, are prominent among them. This paper will throw some light on two aspects of creating and developing the key competences model for lifelong learning.

The paper first defines the context in which, in a relatively short period of time, the first steps have been taken in a potentially very thorough process of formulating common European positions on national education and training policies; or to put it in more concrete terms, a set of reference competences has been formulated that people in Europe should possess in the more competitive environment faced by the European Union; this is primarily reflected in the European framework for qualifications.

The second aspect on which the paper focuses is more important and politically more significant. Creating a model of key competences can also be seen as an innovative approach to formulating 'soft policies' (from the sphere of social policies) developed at the beginning of this decade. This is key for understanding a phenomenon that has arisen in the past few years in areas which, until recently, were very deeply imbued with the principle of subsidiarity. We are referring here to the 'open method of coordination', which is gradually, through a side door as it were, opening up a space for the quiet (and occasionally also concealed) Europeanisation of parts of several national policies and, consequently, for harmonising fairly heterogeneous national systems.

## The Lisbon strategy and creation of the key competences model

The starting point for the search for relevant responses to both aspects outlined above was the European Council that took place in Lisbon in 2000. Whenever we speak about the platform for formulating the key competences model, we cannot ignore the Lisbon strategy and the decision taken at that meeting.

The concept of lifelong learning was identified as one of the key instruments for realising the objectives set in Lisbon. The reason for this was simple: the ambition for the European Union to become, in a relatively short time (by 2010) the most competitive, knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of growing both in economic and social terms (therefore with better employability and social cohesion), included, from the very start, acknowledgement that this would not be possible without the most efficient and effective use of its own competitive advantages. The response to the basic question – where might Europe exploit its competitive advantage over, say, North America – was logical. A less expensive workforce, lower environmental standards, the weaker role of the state in ensuring social cohesion, rich natural resources and similar elements could not, in the conditions pertaining in Europe at the turn of the millennium, assuredly, provide a proper basis for formulating cohesive, sustainable strategies. The most natural approach was deemed to be one that emphasised the rich potential of human resources.

Two preconditions had to be met to put the concept of maximising human potential to work in ensuring the growth of European economies. The first was linked to development of a sufficiently effective system of investment in human resources that would also include the need to establish a sufficiently solid and commonly compatible system of education and training. The second related to providing enough work-active and appropriately qualified citizens whose competences would support the objectives outlined in the Lisbon strategy. In their essence, both had two major limitations. Achievement of the first was hindered by education policies being dominated by the principle of subsidiarity. This prevented a sufficiently uniform, harmonised and consequently efficient system of response to the needs of a competitive international environment. The second was marked by a relatively unfavourable demographic picture in European Union Member States, primarily as a result of the ageing

population, which compels States among other things to adapt the older population to changes in the external environment through a continuous system of additional training. The idea was therefore that enforcement of the concept of lifelong learning would allow Europe to close the development gap primarily through the optimal use of human potential.

The dilemma arose of how to confront all these challenges. In policy areas strongly or at least predominantly the domain of nation States, which affect support for the Lisbon objectives, there were insufficient and above all insufficiently effective levers. The measures that generally supported the concept of lifelong learning until Lisbon were restricted to national or regional level. The philosophy of the 'partial approach' did not therefore inspire optimism, because it was clear that global challenges demanded a global approach. It was also clear that answers could no longer be found merely within formal education systems. It was even clearer that the situation demanded common, European core skills. The objectives set could not be achieved as long as there were 15 commonly inconsistent systems.

In Lisbon an attempt was made to find answers to both these dilemmas at the same time. To support the substantive starting points, a method of formulating policy was revived which has, in at least two cases, already yielded good results. A 'magic' connection was made that for now is yielding adequate results.

## Development of the key competences model

Adapting European education and training systems to new requirements dictated by an increasingly competitive international environment has, as already noted, become a reality. One of the main components is promoting basic skills to support this process. Gradually, as part of the concept of lifelong learning, a reference framework of competences began to be formulated to identify the key competences that should enable individuals in Europe to be regarded as properly qualified to perform a successful and creative role at the workplace, as part of a professional career and while playing a competent role in society. This is all with the aim of providing effective support for the work of Member States in meeting the objectives set and at the same time creating an appropriate reference framework at European level. There are several important markers here.

As mentioned, one of the conclusions of the European Council in Lisbon was that the European framework must define new basic skills, which would be one of the key measures in Europe's response to globalisation. The European Councils of Stockholm (2001) and Barcelona (2002) endorsed the concrete future objectives of the 'European system' of education and training and the 'Education and training 2010' work programme. These objectives included a range of skills and specific objectives for promoting the learning of foreign languages and developing entrepreneurship, and the overall need to improve the European dimension in education.

The European Commission communication on lifelong learning contains a new emphasis; it identifies 'new basic skills' as a priority and stresses that lifelong learning must cover the period from pre-school education to post-retirement age. The report of the European Council on the broader role of education, adopted in November 2004, stressed that education contributes to preserving and renewing the common cultural background in society, and is particularly important at a time when all Member States are challenged by the question of how to deal with increasing social and cultural diversity. Moreover, enabling people to enter and remain in the world of work is an important part of the role of education in strengthening social cohesion.

In May 2003, the European Council adopted five benchmarks, demonstrating a commitment to measurable improvement in average European performance. These benchmarks – for reading literacy, early school-leaving, the completion of upper secondary education and participation of adults in lifelong learning – are closely linked to the development of key competences.

The joint European Council/European Commission report on the 'Education and training 2010' work programme, adopted in 2004, reinforced the need to ensure that everyone is equipped with the competences they need as part of Member States' lifelong learning strategies. To encourage and ease reform, the report suggests developing common European references and principles, and gives priority to the key competences framework. This recommendation was intended to contribute to developing quality education and training by supporting and supplementing Member States' actions to ensure that their initial education and training systems offer all young people the means to develop key competences to a level that equips them for further learning and adult life. Adults should also be able to develop and update their key competences through consistent and comprehensive products from the lifelong learning project.

Eight key competences have progressively been identified (and put into operation) within this reference framework. These are:

1. communication in the mother tongue;
2. communication in foreign languages;
3. mathematical competences and basic competences in science and technology;
4. ICT competence;
5. learning to learn;
6. social and civic competences;
7. sense of initiative and entrepreneurship;
8. cultural awareness and expression.

For the purposes of our discussion, individual elements of these competences are not important <sup>(1)</sup>. It is, however, important to realise that the key competences defined constitute a multifunctional package of knowledge, skills and values that all individuals require for their personal fulfilment and development, and for their social inclusion and employment. It is important to know and understand that these competences are conceived as a combination of knowledge, skills

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(1) To illustrate better how thoroughly the core skills that should be possessed by everyone in Europe have been defined, we will define one of them. It is precisely in this 'breadth' of definition that the great importance of the formulation of such commonly comparable competences is to be found. We have chosen the 'learning to learn' competence as it is defined in the proposal for a recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for lifelong learning: 'Where learning is directed towards particular work or career goals, the individual should have knowledge of the competences, knowledge, skills and qualifications required. In all cases, learning to learn requires an individual to know and understand his/her preferred learning strategies, the strengths and weaknesses of his/her skills and qualifications, and to be able to search for the education and training opportunities and guidance and/or support available. Learning to learn skills require first the acquisition of the fundamental basic skills such as literacy, numeracy and ICT skills that are necessary for further learning. Building on these skills, the individual should be able to access, gain, process and assimilate new knowledge and skills. This requires effective management of one's learning, career and work patterns, and, in particular, the ability to persevere with learning, to concentrate for extended periods and to reflect critically on the purposes and aims of learning. Individuals should be able to dedicate time to learning autonomously and with self-discipline, but also to work collaboratively as part of the learning process, draw the benefits from a heterogeneous group, and to share what they have learnt. Individuals should be able to organise their own learning, evaluate their own work, and to seek advice, information and support when appropriate. A positive attitude includes the motivation and confidence to pursue and succeed at learning throughout one's life. A problem-solving attitude supports both the learning process itself and an individual's ability to handle obstacles and change. The desire to apply prior learning and life experiences and the curiosity to look for opportunities to learn and apply learning in a variety of life contexts are essential elements of a positive attitude' (Annex to the proposed recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for lifelong learning – General approach, 2005/0221(COD)).

and attitudes adapted to individual circumstances and with very close common links. Through this approach, the range and understanding of competences from the typical school context (competences acquired through individual subjects or the links between individual subjects) are transferred to the wider societal and cultural context.

At first glance, this 'achievement' looks somewhat banal. However, when one understands the principle that has become the driving force behind this process (creation of common European core skills in education and training), this phenomenon acquires a whole new dimension.

## The open method of coordination and development of the key competences model

It was clear from the starting points of Lisbon that the objectives set could only be of assistance to Member States and could in no way become obligatory. There was therefore awareness that the diversity of national priorities was solid and inviolable. The European Union was faced with an extremely difficult task: to define a sufficiently robust method for harmonising national policies at those points crucial for ensuring that the concept of lifelong learning in Europe would have enough vitality.

The decision to revive the open method of coordination was the only logical one <sup>(2)</sup>. This method can be defined as 'a tool that enables mutual comparison and learning, which reduces the risk which is a constituent part of every change and reform' (Goetschy, 2003a, p.14). It both defines the anticipated results or objectives in an individual area; and it is also an instrument for identifying best practices as they are formulated in various European countries. It constitutes a collection of ideas and experiences for formulating appropriate measures for achieving the objectives or results set at national level. The basis for the success of this method is use of indicators and standards.

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<sup>(2)</sup> The open method of coordination was formulated in 1993, at the time of the Maastricht treaty, when coordination of a common economic policy (European monetary union) was under way. The second example of use of this method was during preparation of the European employment strategy, which was adopted in 1997 at the European Council meeting in Luxembourg and endorsed in the Amsterdam treaty.

One could say that the open method of coordination comprises four defining elements:

- (a) definition of guidelines, in combination with specific timetables for achieving short, medium and long-term objectives;
- (b) establishment, where possible and appropriate, of quantitative and qualitative indicators, adapted to the needs, opportunities and interests of individual Member States or individual sectors as a means for comparing instances of best practice;
- (c) translation of these European guidelines to national and regional levels by defining specific targets and adopting measures (taking account of national and regional differences);
- (d) periodical monitoring and evaluation (for more, see Lisbon European Council, 23 and 24 March 2000. Presidency conclusions, p. 34).

## Basic determinants of the open method of coordination

It is clear from the starting points presented that this method constitutes a new dimension in formulating policies in education and training. However, it does not provide ideal responses to all the dilemmas, for several reasons. Several negative aspects will be presented below.

The method is extremely complex in horizontal and vertical terms, since it includes many players entering the process at different levels. Consequently, quick solutions are out of the question and it is impossible to categorise. Because of this, and because decisions are implemented by nation States, it is fairly unpredictable, which can cause great difficulties when planning policies. Theoretically, it makes rapid qualitative progress impossible. However, numerous experiences show that such progress has nevertheless been made in certain phases <sup>(3)</sup>.

The open method of coordination also gives rise to many methodological issues because clear sanctions cannot be established in monitoring implementation of agreements by supervisory bodies, chiefly the European Commission. It is therefore difficult to establish

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<sup>(3)</sup> A good example is the discussion on language competences at the Council of Ministers for Education, where progress has been practically blocked, due to national sensitivity (therefore, unequal starting points as a result of heterogeneous national systems) on the part of several countries with a poorer tradition of foreign language learning (author's note).



a closed circle through which consistent policy cycles might come into being. Some (Syrpis, 2002, p. 7) also characterise the open method of coordination as a 'Trojan horse', enabling an encroachment into the principle of subsidiarity and into policies that are primarily the concern of nation States. It also constitutes a threat to 'communitarian methods', since the possibility of the formulation of 'soft law' threatens established instruments and institutional bases that are part of the primary legislation of the European Union. It can therefore also threaten transnational elements in those areas in which the Union has already asserted them (see Goetschy, 2003a). Nor does this approach have any clear influence over the policies of national governments; it allows Member States merely to 'repackage' in some way the obligations adopted according to the 'Emperor's new clothes' principle, when in reality they have withdrawn from these obligations (see Scharpf, 2003). The possibility of conflict with individual national interests is also a major problem.

However, the open method of coordination also has many positive aspects, and these are of course crucial for confirming the thesis presented in the introduction – that this method provides unimagined potential for development and enables establishment of common European education platforms. It is a type of third way, an alternative to two inadequate approaches, supranationalism and intergovernmentalism. It is also a way of reconciling the fragmented European mosaic of mutually incompatible education systems and the desire to create a superstate. Larson (2002, p. 6) therefore talks of a new 'modus vivendi'.

The method also constitutes a new model that simplifies a search for answers to common questions while taking account of national diversity. It can bind Member States to common objectives without, however, compelling them to harmonise or change their existing policy approaches and institutional bases (see Hemerijck and Berghman, 2004; Rodrigues, 2001). The common definition of several key competences has a positive effect on the attainment of comparable standards in education and training. At the same time, it has the power indirectly to influence national education systems, which can result in redefining specific systemic solutions at national level, even including changes to curricula, without external constraints, merely with internal leverage.

The open method of coordination constitutes a cognitive and normative tool for the defence and construction of a consensus around various practices and paradigms in Europe in those areas with

common objectives and values (see Vandenbroucke, 2002; Ferrera, 2001). It also has potential for experimental learning, since it 'compels' Member States, in a fairly obligatory manner, to exchange information, compare practices, and so on. Some (Zeitlin, 2003a) maintain that the open method of coordination is a means of promoting democratic participation in the EU, since it opens up new opportunities within the range of policy tools, including civil society (non-governmental organisations, social partners, etc.) as well as subnational players (regions). The method forces national governments to include these players in decision-making, which is extremely important for formulating such sensitive policies as education and training.

Perhaps the most important positive characteristic of the open method of policy coordination is that it opens up infinite possibilities for deepening the European dimension in soft policies as well. It will allow us to speak, some time in the future, of a stable and more clearly structured European education sphere – one which is, for now, merely imaginary.

## Conclusion

This discussion has established that the Lisbon strategy represents a major turning-point in the process of formulating a European education sphere. It constitutes a substantive change, the start of a new, qualitative cycle in education and training. An intensive and innovative policy process has been initiated. It also represents a high-quality addition to the approaches and tools used in formulating policies which has, in parallel with those which already exist, made inroads in a revolutionary way into fields that were previously the express domain of sovereign national policies.

All the same, there is no room for excessive idealism. It is true that new perspectives are being opened up in the development of a European education sphere. The bases nevertheless remain the same. Discussions at the Council of Ministers for Education demonstrate the reality of the situation. It is primarily the larger countries (Germany) and those with relatively inflexible national education systems (Italy) that most often put the brakes on favourable trends and, owing to their fear of overpenetration of innovative and rapid solutions into their national systems, exert a strong influence over the future development of common core skills in education. The principle of 'one step forward, three steps backward'

is frequently encountered. Progress is nevertheless being made. A parallel principle has been created. Shifts are noticeable. Thanks to the processes that have been outlined in this paper, we can say today that the European Union is entering the realm of education, even primary education, by a side door, which would have been unthinkable a few years ago. This is surely a new dimension in developing a democratic culture in the European Union.

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