Policy learning
Applying the changing learning paradigm for policy advice on VET reforms in transition countries

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Abstract

This paper explores the opportunities for applying active or new learning principles for educational reforms in transition countries. The focus is on policy ‘learning’. Briefly, this concept was developed to argue that systemic reforms of vocational education and training (VET) in transition countries (and indeed any kind of major reform in any country) will only be successful and sustainable if policy development, formulation and implementation are firmly based on broad ownership and embeddedness in existing institutions. The concept of policy learning has been developed in a critical discussion with more traditional approaches of policy transfer and policy copying. It emphasises not just involvement but active engagement of national stakeholders in developing their own policy solutions based on the understanding that there are simply no valid models but at most a wealth of international experience in dealing with similar policy issues in other contexts. The concept has major implications for foreign assistance and in particular for the role that individual and institutional policy advisers can and should play in their cooperation with colleagues in partner countries (1).

This paper will discuss different dimensions of the new learning concept but will focus in particular on how international assistance, such as provided by agencies like the European Training Foundation (ETF), can better contribute to sustainable reform of national education systems (2). It is argued that there are many similarities between the current international discussions about new learning, the new professionalisation of teachers and of our own view about the role of international policy advisers. Educationalists are discussing the need for teachers and trainers to shift from being transmitters of expert knowledge and skills to students – who are largely considered to be passive receivers of information – towards becoming facilitators of learning processes of persons that want to become competent themselves. If systemic policy reform is about national stakeholders having – and being willing – to actively learn new policies rather than being told what to do, then international advisers should take proper notice of these discussions. After all, the new learning paradigm

(1) The policy learning approach has been formally endorsed by the ETF general Advisory Forum conference in 2003 and reinforced by the Advisory Forum conference in June 2006. See formal Statements on www.etf.eu.int.

(2) The ETF is the European Union’s Centre of expertise supporting vocational education and training reform in third countries in the context of the EU external relations programmes. For details www.etf.eu.int.
is firmly based on new insights about how people learn and about how more experienced experts can help them to become competent.
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Introduction

Multilateral and bilateral donor agencies increasingly issue declarations about the need to contextualise knowledge and secure ownership of development policies by involving local policy-makers and other stakeholders in policy development and implementation (1). Yet, policy transfer through imposing or copying (selective knowledge about) policies and models taken from other contexts still dominates the day-to-day operational practices of the donor community (King, 2005; King and McGrath, 2004; Grootings, 2004; Ellerman, 2005).

Development agencies and their staff normally act as classical school teachers who assume to have the right knowledge and know best what has to be done. True knowledge just needs to be transferred to partners who don’t know the truth (yet) and partners should implement measures that are presented to them as best practice. Local policy-makers and local stakeholders are regarded as passive knowledge and instruction receivers who do not possess enough relevant prior knowledge and experience. Accordingly, development or reform is normally seen by many agencies as a process of social engineering that will be successful if properly managed technically. In reality, most reform projects are short-lived because they do not fit in context and there is no local ownership. Reforms are often not sustainable. On the contrary, they tend to come and go with the donors and their agencies.

One reason for the gap between declaration and actual behaviour is an understanding, often only implicit, of why and how people learn and develop new knowledge and expertise. The standard assumption underlying most traditional learning approaches is that someone (the donor representative) possesses the right knowledge and learners (the local policy-makers and other stakeholders) who do not have this knowledge should simply listen carefully and then do what they have learned.

New learning theories, instead, argue that learners are more successful in acquiring, digesting, applying and retrieving new knowledge when they have been actively engaged in these processes. Facilitating active policy learning rather than policy transfer may, therefore, have better chances to contribute to sustainable reformed systems (4).

Section 1 will set the scene by broadly outlining the substantial challenges facing countries in transition such as the countries of Eastern Europe, the West Balkans and the former Soviet Union. Section 2 will summarise briefly what active or new learning is about. It will also

(1) Most recently also the World Bank, who announced in August 2004 an overhaul of its guidelines for policy-based lending (From adjustment lending to development policy lending), in recognition of the fact that there is no one blueprint for reform that will work and that, therefore, governments must take ownership of reforms to develop a programme that the country needs. While this apparently puts lending governments in the driver seat, to use a classical development aid expression, governments are still not asked whether they wish to sit in the car at all (see also King, 2005).

(4) Others would argue that good governance, participation of civic society, fight against corruption and sound legal frameworks are more important. This paper will simply pay attention to the learning aspects which have been neglected so far.
indicate wider implications of active learning for formal education systems, informal learning and the roles and responsibilities of main stakeholders, in particular teachers and learners. Section 3 will present the systemic nature of education reforms in transition countries and the role that international donors play in assisting such reforms. Section 4 will introduce the concept of policy learning as a translation of the principles of active learning to the field of reform policy assistance. Section 5 will present some practical implications and contradictions of the policy learning concept. It will argue for a different role for donor agencies and consultants based on similarities between the roles of teachers and policy advisers in facilitating learning. Section 6 will suggest that knowledge sharing should be an integral aspect of policy learning. Finally, Section 7 indicates possible modes and areas for further research.
1. The challenges facing countries in transition

A widespread impoverishment has been the consequence of change in all transition countries. Institutional impoverishment in vocational education has led to the disappearance of innovative capacities within the educational system, in particular the vocational education part of it. VET systems have been forced to focus entirely on operational day-to-day provision of education and training at the cost of development. This was also the result of the closing down of central support systems, for ideological and financial reasons, especially those for curriculum development and in-service teacher training in vocational education. The building up of new support structures to replace the former ones has been slow (5).

There is a dramatic lack of resources, financial, human and conceptual, to rebuild the vocational education and training (VET) system. Instead, a specific constellation of aid and cooperation is in place. The donor community now greatly influences whether skills development is taken up as a policy priority, what focus these policies take and how they are being developed and implemented. The combination of individual memories, institutional legacies and donor policies, in most countries, means that the key issue is seen by most national stakeholders to be the absence of funds to purchase up-to-date teaching equipment, renovate premises and pay decent salaries, in short: restore an institution that was perceived to be doing just fine.

VET reform processes, however, are ongoing in all transition countries. These are donor-led and designed by international experts with foreign technical assistance dominating the implementation in the countries. Here local education and VET experts are very often employed as local experts and as a consequence there is a quite strong familiarity with EU policy frameworks (in fact often higher than in EU Member States) as well as individual, national West European examples of good practice. But these development activities are externally defined, technocratic (done with another purpose than understanding and recognition), and normally carried out as short-time activities under sharp deadlines. While these activities may provide a living for local academics, they do not lead to the building up of professional research capacities. Educational science, including VET, is theory as well as practice, and develops both knowledge about practice and theoretical knowledge. As practice, cf. teaching, learning and guidance, it belongs to the education system, and as theory it belongs to the scientific system. Expressed in German language this difference appears clearly: education as Erziehung (practice) and as Erziehungswissenschaft (theory).

(5) In the ETF Yearbook 2004 and 2005 (Grootings, 2004; Grootings and Nielsen, 2005) we have analysed wider aspects of the impoverishment of vocational education and training, such as the need to distinguish between modernisation needs and systemic reform needs. We have also pointed at the neglected position of teachers and trainers and the need to think in terms of a double role for them (being both educational professionals and stakeholders in education reform) in order to bring the reform of vocational education and training forward.
A serious challenge for countries in transition is the fact that their own donor-led VET reforms take place in a period of radical change of European and global VET policy frameworks. How can countries cope with this and how do they avoid to jump into automatic policy taking and policy copying under the pressures from many interwoven discourses and EU processes of VET policy today?

Even though there are divergences and convergences in the development of VET policies in Europe, there are identifiable common discourses running together in all countries. In almost all countries it is possible to identify three levels of policy formation and discourse:

(a) globalisation as a discourse frame for VET policies in Europe;

(b) EU VET policies with a focus on the Lisbon objectives, the Copenhagen process, the Bologna process (for higher education, including higher VET), and the introduction of the open method of coordination in EU policies;

(c) national VET policies and reforms.

These challenges are facing most ETF partner countries, in particular countries with EU candidate status but also those countries which have been given an EU membership perspective (the Western Balkans). For all these countries a sharpened focus must be placed on how and through which mechanisms these policy discourses can possibly be transformed into practice within the national VET system.

Each country has to find national solutions in a European – and global – context, and this is a formidable task for transition countries. European cooperation can support and inspire countries, there are good possibilities for shared learning – but the real efforts and the hard work will have to be made at home through own national priority setting and policy decisions. Policy-makers and practitioners at all levels, therefore, have to develop the capacity to become policy learners and policy interpreters, as there is a variety of models, measures and practices open to achieve the same goal. There is in all transition countries a huge need to develop institutional capacities to translate goals into nationally preferred practices and to manage the internal processes involved. There are a number of critical elements of the policy-making chain which must be identified and overcome and the task is increasingly seen as one of devising new approaches to help countries ‘shape’ own policies and to overcome barriers to implementation. Reforms are major social learning processes, and the challenge still remains how to organise such policy learning activities in the coming years. There is an urgent need to come to grip with and conceptualise what the new learning paradigm might contribute to when applied to educational reforms in partner countries.
2. Active learning

Engaging students in successful learning has always been a key problem for educationalists since the development of formal education systems that provided standardised school-based education programmes which were obligatory to attend.

The policy debates have been coloured by the dominant understanding of why, what, where and how people learn and how people can be motivated to learn at all. The traditional behaviourist and cognitive approaches on which much of the standardised (formal and non-formal) education has been based have assumed that learning is basically a steady accumulation of discrete entities of knowledge and skills that can be presented to learners as if filling empty vessels (6). Hager (2004, p. 411) has pointed at five further assumptions that follow from this understanding of learning: There is one best way of learning; learning is essentially an individual activity; learning which is non-transparent is inferior or, in other words, tacit knowledge does not really exist; learning centres on the stable and enduring (facts and proven evidence) and learning is replicable.

In contrast, by seeing learning as a continuous – and highly selective process of exchange between individuals and their environment – constructivist approaches argue that people give their own meaning to information. They do so based on what they already know and framed by how they have become accustomed to see the world around them. They select and retain what is relevant for them. In doing so they construct their own understanding of reality as a basis to intervene and act. Different people, therefore, may give different interpretations to the same thing, may retain different aspects and may act differently on the basis of the same information.

Constructivists also argue that there are many ways through which people can learn without someone else passing on pieces of expert knowledge (Verloop and Lowyck, 2003); that learning is foremost a social activity (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998); that there is a lot of tacit learning taking place which is not easily to be categorised and demonstrated but which is there when needed (Schön, 1983); that learning is dynamic and very much context-bound and that good learning, therefore, depends on meaningful learning environments (Kolb, 1984; Simons et al., 2000). In combination these insights are now known as new learning or active learning. While there are currently many attempts to introduce active learning techniques in traditional education settings, a more holistic active learning approach has developed into something like a new paradigm. Based on the principles of active learning several countries are now reforming parts of their public education systems.

Obviously, much of what is now receiving attention as new learning has been around already since decennia in the writings of school innovators such as Dewey, Montessori, Froebel, Steiner, Freinet and others, and has been practised in schools that are based on their (6) For a critical presentation of these various learning theories see Driscoll (2000).
pedagogical approaches. Until recently, attempts that combined different learning outcomes and alternative ways of learning have remained marginal to mainstream education and training. Most public education became characterised by the single model of expert teachers and trainers passing on bit-by-bit their knowledge and skills to pupils and students who knew nothing or at least not enough.

The emergence of an increased interest for the new learning paradigm during the 1990s is the combined result of fundamental changes occurring in the labour market (7) and new insights and research results from a whole range of disciplines that are dealing with the question of how people learn and retain new information (8). The new learning approaches give a more active role to learners in managing and shaping their own learning processes based on the understanding that good learning cannot be achieved when learners remain passive receivers of information and instructions.

The active learning paradigm stresses the need for new criteria for – and new kinds of – learning outcomes. For reasons of employability in a world characterised by fast changing job requirements and growing insecurity, learning outcomes should not just be more relevant at a given moment but they should be durable, flexible, meaningful, generalisable and application-oriented (Simons et al., 2000, p. 1-2).

New kinds of learning outcomes have become important as well. These include the ability to learn, think, collaborate and regulate. People should be able to adapt quickly to changing situations, be able to cope well with continuing uncertainty, and know where and how to find the information that they need to deal with the challenges of their work and life situation (9).

The need to cope with new (social or key) competences has been a major drive behind curriculum and education reform in many countries since the early 1990s. But while initially these reforms have concentrated on the ’new’ contents as additions to existing curricula and standard approaches, it is now increasingly understood that traditional ways of organising learning are unable to deal with these new learning insights and requirements (10). The key

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(7) OECD (1996). Moreover, declining public budgets have also contributed to attempts to make education more efficient and effective and neo-liberal policy agendas on the left and the right have placed the responsible and autonomous citizen back on stage again. Changes in organisation of work within companies also build on responsible workers able to foresee and prevent rather than to react ex post or too late. The overall economic and political climate of the 1990s has been very receptive for active learning insights. Active learning is more than a scientific approach to learning.

(8) These include, besides psychology and educational science (Driscoll, 2000) also brain research (OECD, 2002b).

(9) These are also called social or key competences.

(10) In many Anglo-Saxon countries education reform has in fact taken the form of establishing an assessment system that could measure learning outcomes assuming that these could be the result of very different learning processes and arguing subsequently that the nature of these learning processes therefore would not be relevant at all. The black box approach to learning has been a typical characteristic of economist approaches of education and training.
issues in education discussions currently, therefore, are not so much about the ‘what’ but about the ‘how’ questions: how can new learning outcomes be achieved?

From the side of educational sciences, attention for ‘new’ learning outcomes follows from a better understanding about how experience and information is represented in memory and about the kind of learning activities that learners apply. Three different ways of representation are normally distinguished: Episodic representations are based on personal, situated and affective experiences. Conceptual or semantic representations refer to concepts and principles and their definitions, while action representations refer to what can be done with episodic and semantic information. People differ in terms of their preferred modes of representations. Because conceptual and semantic forms of representation have traditionally been regarded of a higher (intellectual) order, theoretical knowledge has been seen as more important than practical knowledge and learning – with the head as superior to learning with the hands.

The traditional curriculum, therefore, consisted of (unrelated) theoretical subjects plus – in vocational streams – practice periods to apply such theoretical knowledge. For modern educationalists, however, good learning outcomes mean rich and complex memory representations whereby there are strong interrelated connections between the different ways of representation. They also argue that these connections can start from any of the three different modes of representation (Simons et al., 2000, p. 3; Driscoll, 2000, Chapter 8; Pieters and Verschaffel, 2003).

For educational professionals, the key question is how they can promote new learning outcomes through organising appropriate learning processes and developing instructional strategies. The new learning theories argue that learners are more successful in acquiring, digesting, applying and retrieving new knowledge, skills and attitudes when they have been actively engaged in these processes. Active involvement, cooperation with other learners and realistic contexts also help to increase the motivation to learn which in turn makes it easier for people to take responsibility for their learning into their own hands. In combining all this, active learning, therefore, provides strong learning environments and produces good learning outcomes. The search is now to develop operational approaches to make active learning principles work in practice (11).

Active learning implies also considerable changes in the roles that teachers and students play in education. With the growing attention towards active learning, there is a shift of responsibility from the teacher to the learner. The teacher becomes more an organiser and facilitator of learning processes than the transmitter of expert knowledge or skills; whereas the learner is asked to actively participate in identifying learning needs and in managing the process of acquiring new knowledge. Teachers have to be able to identify what learners already know and how they learn best and then to guide them to find the information that can increase their knowledge further. In terms of structure of the educational system, active

(11) See the various contributions in Simons et al. (2001) for an account of experiences from different domains.
learning insights give strong arguments for creating open and flexible pathways in education, providing a rich variety of learning environments, and recognising prior and informal learning outcomes (Kok, 2003; Simons et al., 2000; Driscoll, 2000; Verloop and Lowyck, 2003; Grootings and Nielsen, 2005; OECD, 2005).

This new understanding of learning has considerable implications for the organisation of formal education (structures and contents), for informal and non-formal learning (recognition and validation) and the role of policy-makers, teachers, students and other stakeholders in education. The active learning paradigm is of relevance for any learning situation where people seek to acquire new knowledge and understanding in order to be able to act competently in a changing context. In the following section we will explore what active learning means for policy-makers in transition countries when faced with reforming their education and training systems.
3. Education reforms in transition countries as learning processes

Transition countries are very diverse and different but have all in common that they are undergoing a fundamental change of their main societal institutions, including the system of education. They are seeking to change from centralised authoritarian societies with some form of state planned economy towards more democratic societies with a market based economy. For that reason they can be called transition countries. However, contrary to the way the term transition has been used so often, nobody really knows a priori where the transition will lead to. There are perhaps general characteristics of democratic market based economies but there are no blue prints that countries simply can apply.

What will come out of the reform process in each transition country will depend to a large extent on how local policy-makers and other stakeholders will manage to use the resources that their countries have built up in the past, including the inherited physical and human infrastructures of their education systems (Grootings, 2004). Transition countries differ from developing countries in the sense that they used to have well-established and – at the time – effective and successful education systems. These have become impoverished as a result of continued underfunding and have increasingly lost relevance for a new labour-market context: the issue is, therefore, reforming and transforming obsolete systems rather than building new ones from scratch.

The reforms in transition countries are systemic as they imply changes that are both system-wide and system-deep. Reforms are system-wide, in the sense that they require changes in all aspects of the institutional arrangements of the countries. For education and training this means that all the building blocks of the education system need to be reviewed and revised: from delivery, provision, assessment, funding, quality assurance, administration and governance up to research and development. But changes are also system-deep since they require the development of new relations between education and training, on the one hand, and other changing institutions in society, on the other. In transition countries these are in particular the relations between schools, the labour market and private enterprises. This asks for fundamentally new definitions of the roles of the main stakeholders in education and training as well as for changes of established working routines of education and training organisations.

These are complicated processes as all these other institutions are undergoing systemic changes as well. Vocational schools, for example, have now to educate and train for open and uncertain labour markets and no longer for agreed numbers and jobs in hosting companies that were basically interested in hoarding labour. However, in most countries labour markets are still under development and private sectors only gradually emerging. Teachers who have always been told how many students they would have and what they should teach them are suddenly in a situation where there is nobody anymore to tell them anything. Developing new roles and relationships is for individuals essentially a process of learning new knowledge,
skills and attitudes in order to become competent in a changing context. Reforming a national education system is a collective learning process of all stakeholders (Grootings, 1993).

A major challenge for transition countries facing systemic reforms of their VET systems is to build up and strengthen their own capacities to formulate reform policies, not just capacities to implement imposed or borrowed policies. Reforms of VET in transition countries (and indeed any kind of major reform in any country) will only be successful and sustainable if policy development, formulation and implementation are firmly based on broad ownership and fit within existing institutions. The concept of policy learning reflects this understanding. Policy learning emphasises not just involvement but active engagement of national stakeholders in developing their own policy solutions. It is based on the understanding that there are no universally valid models that can simply be transferred or copied from one context into another. At most there is a wealth of international but context-specific experience in dealing with similar policy issues that can be shared (12).

The discussions about new learning are relevant for education and training reforms in transition countries. They provide key criteria for successful reform and reform assistance. Education reform can only be sustainable if reform policies are owned by local stakeholders and are embedded in the context of the country. Educational reform is really about stakeholders being motivated to learning new ways of how to organise education and training systems: system wide and system deep. Learning is about developing new roles for all stakeholders at all levels in all the building blocks of the system. The challenge for donors and aid agencies, therefore, is not to sell prefab ‘what’ solutions but to find the appropriate answer to the question ‘how to help people help themselves?’ (Ellerman, 2004; 2005) (13).

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12 See Grootings (2004) for a longer discussion about ETF vision and its role to foster and support policy learning among its partners.

13 Ellerman (2005) has summarised this challenge into three Dos (starting from present institutions; seeing the world through the eyes of the client; respect autonomy of the doers) and two Don’ts (don’t override self-help capacity with social engineering and don’t undercut self-help capacity with benevolent aid)
4. Policy reform is policy learning

Applying active learning insights to a review of VET reform experiences in transition countries further supports the need to think in terms of policy learning (14).

VET reforms in transition countries have often heavily depended on the presence and contribution of international donors. There is a mix of positive and less positive experiences. Especially in initial phases of transition but sometimes also long after, donors have played a key role in developing awareness of the need for VET reforms, influencing the reform policy agenda and providing resources for strategy development and implementation. Often, however, donors or their experts in the field have showed little knowledge of specific national transition contexts and no understanding for the knowledge, experience, views and expectations of people involved in education and training. Very often also, they have entered the partner countries with standardised one-fits-all packages of assistance. Capacity building was usually focused on developing appropriate capacities to implement what donors thought would be necessary.

In turn, many national policy-makers, certainly in initial stages of transition but sometimes also long after, were more interested in receiving funding than in policy-making. They were convinced that the key problem was the impoverished state of their educational infrastructures. Moreover, they have often been unable to assess the fitness of donors’ proposals for best practice for the institutional context of their own VET systems.

This combination of donor and recipient expectations and behaviour has created problems of sustainability of many donor-supported reform initiatives. With the departure of the donor the reform usually came to a halt. With the limited resources that donors can make available practically nowhere system wide changes had been started anyway. Much of the earlier assistance to VET reform in the partner countries was guided by principles of policy copying and policy taking. The guiding principle on the donor side seems to have often been: we know your future and your past is irrelevant. Because international assistance has underestimated the relevance of institutional context, policy copying and policy taking has not contributed to system-deep VET reforms either. Stakeholders and policy-makers in transition countries have not been able to learn much about their new roles in a changing VET system although they may sometimes have become experts on the systems of other countries.

We may not know the details of future VET systems in partner countries but from the international experience some of the basic characteristics that modern VET systems should develop have become increasingly clear: they should be decentralised, responsive to labour-markets and learner needs, transparent, well resourced, provide flexible and open pathways for young and adults, and have a capacity to innovate and adapt to changing conditions. All modern VET systems around the world are trying to become like that. But there is no best

(14) What follows is a summary of more detailed reviews in Grootings (2004).
practice of how to organise such systems, neither in developed market economies nor in
transition countries. There are many good – and perhaps also a couple of bad context-bound
practice examples. Moreover, good practice examples not only refer to what countries wanted
to achieve in their reforms but also to how they have tried to change their systems. How to
make good use of such knowledge and experience about policy objectives and strategies if
policy copying and policy taking do not work?

The following example may further illustrate the challenges. The policy learning approach
requires an intensified focus on how to organise policy learning platforms and environments
in the countries so that a critical mass of key actors and stakeholders gradually develop VET
reform policy understanding and competence. So far, since policy-transfer and policy-copying
approaches have been dominant in the reform debates in most countries, the concept of
stakeholders has been very much influenced by the model – and indeed ideology that was
taken to be transferred or copied. In VET reform a key issue is the involvement of employers,
private industry, or – in EU language – social partners. The view is that in a market-based
economy governments cannot continue to be the sole responsible authorities for VET. The
essence of systemic reform – adaptation of VET to free educational choice, private enterprise
and labour markets – requires involvement of enterprises where graduates will have to find
employment.

The reality of the reform process in many transition countries, however, has created a whole
series of interesting contradictions. Whereas private sector or social partner involvement was
presented as a condition sine qua non for any market-based VET system, in practice
governments have faced a huge problem of disinterest from the side of the private sector
(employers and unions alike) to be involved at all. There are many reasons that can explain
this situation but one is the lack of representative organisation at national level. Another is the
absence of any professional capacity among social partners to deal with VET matters in a
reform context. The result was, and often still is, that enlightened governments have to
include the interests of the private sector into their own policy thinking and reform policy
remains dependent on a few political reform champions also because of the absence of a
professional civil servant community inside, or of an educational support infrastructure
outside the ministry apparatus.

Public educational authorities in transition countries, therefore, remain the driving force
behind VET reform, certainly at national level. The involvement of stakeholders representing
industry is not something that can be built on from the start but that has to be developed as
part of the reform process itself. Interestingly enough, if trade unions have been involved at
all in national education reform policy debates these have often been teachers unions.
Understandingly – given the state of public budgets and mounting pressures to decrease
public spending on education in many transition countries – these have been more oriented at
defending the social and material status of their membership than engaging in contents of
education reform. As a result, teachers, also through their unions’ behaviour, have become
regarded generally as major obstacles for reform. This, in turn, may sometimes even have led
to the development of policies that sought to break the power of the teacher and trainer community instead of engaging them more positively (15).

More recently, however, there is an increasing awareness that teachers and trainers should be included among the critical mass of stakeholders for reform. This is most of all the result of a better understanding of why so many education reforms all over the world have gone wrong in the past. Exclusion of teachers as stakeholders from the reform process has frequently led to national reform policies failing to trigger any changes at all inside educational institutions and classrooms. Teachers and trainers have now become recognised as crucial agents to make reforms work in their professional capacity of organisers of learning.

It has also been understood that involving teachers is not just a matter of informing them so they know what is expected from them. Nor is this only a matter of training so that they know how the new policies have to be implemented. As professionals, teachers principally know best what will work in the specific context of their own school and classroom environment, including responding to the particular learning needs of the student population that they have to cater for. Their expertise, therefore, is an important source for translating general policy initiatives into very divergent real life contexts. A better understanding of why many education reforms have not worked has, therefore, not only implications for the implementation of reform policies but impacts on the very process of policy development and formulation.

This, in turn, reflects the fact that the current reforms in VET are very complex development processes that hardly compare to the traditional reform conceptions with their clear stages of preparation, formulation, implementation and evaluation. This is especially true for reforms in transition countries that seek to combine systemic reforms with structural changes and modernisation of contents and approaches. Such reforms are not one-off social engineering events designed by external experts but ongoing change processes set within a broadly agreed reform agenda.

The reform agenda can be quite radical but requires further operational detailing, based on local innovation processes. It is because of this that teachers who are actively engaged in local innovation and experimentation are an important source of expertise for national policymakers and that reform strategies have to build on engaging teachers and trainers working inside their school organisations. Such an understanding of reform puts policy learning, capacity building and policy advice at both national and school-levels in a new perspective and at the same time with considerable more urgency than before (16). Traditional top-down

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(15) Such as through moving from so called input control (based among others on teacher qualifications) towards output control mechanisms based on occupational and educational standards with neglect of the educational and learning processes that would lead to achieving the standards. In such cases, the assessment of standard attainment has frequently replaced education and training as such.

(16) Experience from some countries such as the Netherlands also points at the need to have additional coordinating and support institutions at the sector, regional or school-type level. Such is the role that associations of secondary and higher vocational schools, on the one hand, and sector-based expertise
or bottom-up strategies have become too simplistic and are insufficient to make reforms work. Policy learning as a process requires a continuous interaction and dialogue between national and local partners, vertically, as well as among the various local initiatives horizontally.

centres are playing. Specialised local, regional and national research and development institutions in turn support these. In other words, reform, innovation or development infrastructures require more than national stakeholders and teachers in schools.
5. Facilitating policy learning in practice

A policy-learning approach may be the appropriate response to some of the key challenges related to the VET reform process in transition countries. Policy-makers and other key stakeholders should be enabled to learn to develop their own policies. But in practice there are considerable obstacles for facilitating policy learning. These stem from the many tensions between ‘what’ and ‘how’ in the relationship between experts and novices. Several of these obstacles are known from the search for operational approaches to make active learning work in classical education settings (\(^{(17)}\)). However, others are particular to the field of reform policy development.

Understanding of context-boundness or institutional fit is not easy and it is a challenge that both local policy-makers and international advisers share. While donors usually do not have a good understanding of local context (often they even do not speak the language), it can also not simply be assumed that local policy-makers understand the characteristics of their own VET system. It is difficult to question what has always been normal and the rule.

Moreover, international consultants do not always understand that the advice they provide is perhaps firmly rooted in the institutional context that they come from themselves and they are often not well informed about policies and systems from other countries. How can local policy-makers assess the fitness of what is sold to them as the latest international trend? How can international advisers properly assess prior knowledge and contextualisation of new knowledge? Policy-makers are also under stress to come up quickly with solutions. Their political mandate does not leave them much time. Advisers are bound by the financial and time resources that the donors have reserved for their projects. Also the ownership issue raises some problems especially when this is restricted to a few cooperative national policy-makers and – simply because of the design of the donor project – leaves out the vast majority of teachers and trainers in schools (Grootings and Nielsen, 2005). How can international advisers facilitate learning under such conditions?

The basic assumption underlying the concept of policy learning is not so much that policies can be learned but that actual policies are learned policies. Learning is not simply the transfer of expert knowledge or behaviour from one person to another but rather the acquisition of understanding and competence through participation in learning processes. However, policy-makers are not only policy learners. They also have to act, and acting on the political scene, especially in environments that are undergoing radical change such as in transition countries, not always leaves a lot of space and time for careful and gradual learning. They have to engage in daily political decision-making and, depending on their position in the system, active engagement in political power struggles may often take priority (\(^{(18)}\)).

\(^{(17)}\) The key issue remains how a learning situation can be established where the expert acts as a learning process facilitator and the novice can be stimulated to actively engage in learning.

\(^{(18)}\) The issue of active learning in a lateral and vertical power context needs further research.
On the other hand, policy-makers engaged in systemic reforms are in need of new knowledge which very often contradicts with established knowledge and routines. For policy-makers therefore, because they are under pressure to act, learning is more than merely a cognitive process: learning is practice. Their learning is situated learning as it is an integral and inseparable aspect of their social practice. Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that all learning is situated learning and more particularly 'legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice'. Novice learners learn best when they are engaged in a community of more expert learners; during the learning process they become more competent themselves and move from the margin to the centre.

Policy-makers in transition countries can be regarded as highly motivated novice learners and policy learning can be facilitated by letting them participate in relevant communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Such communities of practice could be created by bringing together policy-makers from different countries that have gone through or are undergoing reforms of their education systems. International and local policy analysts, researchers, advisers and other practitioners could be part of such communities as well.

However, policy-makers in transition countries may be seen as novices in terms of knowledge and expertise concerning the development of modern educational systems in market economies but they are also experts as far as their own country context is concerned. Similarly, international policy advisers may perhaps be the experts with respect to educational policy-making in developed economies but they are often novices in terms of knowledge about the particular context of the partner country. Neither local stakeholders nor international advisers really know what fits with regard to modern education policy in a partner country’s context.

The community of practice concept, therefore, needs to be further developed to properly take into account these differences in learning experience and high levels of uncertainty. Since old and new knowledge relate to different contexts there are different peripheries and centres and even those who are closer to the centre remain learners themselves.
6. Policy learning through knowledge sharing

Reforming education and training systems in transition countries implies combining old and new knowledge in changing contexts for both local stakeholders and international advisers. Policy learning is not just about learning the policies that other countries have developed but rather about learning which policies can be developed locally by reflecting on the relevance of other countries’ policies for the situation at home. Policy learning in this sense can only happen when there is information and knowledge available and shared. The principal role of donors would be to enable a reform policy learning process by providing access to such information and experience and by facilitating a critical reflection on their relevance. However, donors and their staff cannot do their learning facilitation role well if they don’t recognise that they themselves are also learners in the same policy learning process.

VET reform policy development seen as VET policy learning would have to use knowledge sharing to enable decision-makers from partner countries to learn from – and not simply about – VET reform experiences from elsewhere for the formulation and the implementation of their own reform objectives. Knowledge sharing would also enable donors and international advisers to better understand the institutional context and history of the partner country. For them, in becoming familiar with local knowledge it will also be easier to appreciate and value the expertise that partners bring into the reform process.

International donors and their policy advisers would have to take a role similar to the one a modern teacher is supposed to play: not that of the expert who knows it all and simply passes on existing knowledge but the one that recognises problems, does not know the solutions yet, organises and guides knowledge sharing and in so doing develops new knowledge for all involved in the learning process. Policy learning, therefore, can only happen in partnership.

In policy learning partnerships, the timing and sequencing of knowledge sharing is of major importance if donor assistance is to have a real impact on local ownership and contextual fit, and if it is to create the necessary motivation, commitment and capacities to sustain reforms. This would ask specific competences from policy advisers as they have to be able to judge where they themselves and their partners are in moving from the periphery to the centre of the community of practice. It would also require a rethinking of the classical development instruments such as workshops, study visits, technical assistance, pilot projects and so on with a view to developing strong learning environments for policy learning to happen.
7. Peer learning and the open method of coordination (19)

What we are talking about here is also of high relevance for EU Member States. The underlying key questions that the section seeks to discuss are: how do policy-makers learn new policy and how can they be supported in doing so? These are key questions for any institution that claims to facilitate policy learning. But facilitating policy learning in practice is different from saying that it needs to be done. Also in EU policy formulation the concept of social learning processes is more and more seen as a key instrument for channelling new policy awareness into national policy-making contexts.

7.1. Traditional peer reviews: focus on outcomes

Peer reviews of national policies have become popular among international organisations. The OECD, for example, has used this instrument widely in many policy domains. Both Member and non-Member States have increasingly become interested in having their policies reviewed by an OECD team even if the review outcomes are on occasions very critical and not always easy to be followed up.

For the OECD a peer review is a ‘systematic examination and assessment of the performance of a State by other States, with the ultimate goal of helping the reviewed State improve its policy making, adopt best practices, and comply with established standards and principles’ (OECD, 2002a). Besides its reviews of national policies, the OECD has more recently initiated also thematic reviews. These seek to emulate good, coherent and non sector-specific policy from the experience of several countries (20). OECD policy and thematic reviews have become a normal element of the international policy process in which governments have come under increasing pressure to do at least as good as governments of other countries. OECD members engage in reviews on a purely voluntary basis.

EU Member States even go one step further by agreeing to pursue common policy objectives at European and national levels. The EU has recently introduced peer reviews as an instrument in its open method of coordination, which aims at achieving greater convergence towards commonly agreed EU and Member States objectives (21). The European Commission

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(19) This section builds on Grootings et al. (2006).
(20) The OECD has organised several national education policy reviews in ETF partner countries and in many of these ETF staff have also actively contributed to the review teams, including those in South Eastern Europe, the Baltic countries, and the Russian Federation. ETF staff has also participated in several Thematic OECD reviews, such as on transition from school to work, financing of lifelong learning, adult learning, and guidance and counselling.
(21) The instrument of peer reviews was introduced in 2002 by DG Employment of the European Commission, in the framework of the community action programme on social inclusion, with the aim of monitoring
seeks to promote policy coordination, establishment of common benchmarks and guidelines, periodic monitoring, evaluation and peer review, and the sharing of good examples of practice.

The open method of coordination itself is an approach to international policy based on the understanding that countries have developed over time different institutional solutions for similar policy domains. These can neither be easily standardised nor be transferred from one national context into another but provide rich learning sources for other countries that are seeking changes in policies (22).

The directorate general for employment and social affairs of the European Commission, for example, defines the peer review as 'a voluntary mutual learning process involving the scrutiny of specific policies, programmes or institutional arrangements presented as good practice' (23). Its aim is to encourage the dissemination of good practice across Member States by assessing the effectiveness of key policies or institutions. It can serve as a useful tool to Member States to help them in the design and implementation of more effective policies. It should also contribute to the dialogue with stakeholders such as social partners and NGOs and where appropriate, people experiencing poverty and social exclusion.

As a follow-up of the EU ministerial conference on *A Europe of skills: let's do the job!* in Maastricht in December 2004, the European Commission has strengthened support to the implementation of the Lisbon objectives at national level through the introduction of peer learning (24). The Commission defines this as ‘a process of cooperation at European level, whereby reform agents from one country learn, through direct contact and practical cooperation, from the experiences of their counterparts elsewhere in Europe in implementing reforms of shared interests and concern’. It aims at mutual learning and contributing to the European area of Education and Training (25).

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(22) Although this is now generally accepted wisdom it has taken decennia of international comparative research to do away with convergence and one-best-way thinking.

(23) European Commission, community action programme to combat social exclusion 2002-06.

(24) The Maastricht conference discussed the progress made in the area of VET by the EU and its Member States in achieving the Lisbon goal of becoming the most dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world in 2010.

(25) In 2005, peer learning activities have been organised in four clusters: adult participation in lifelong learning; teachers and trainers; making best use of resources and ICT. After the nomination of peers by the Member States a preparatory meeting is organised, to be followed by two study visits and a final conference. The European area of education and training was launched as an objective by the European Commission in its memorandum on *Making a European area for lifelong learning a reality* (EC, 2001). It aims at empowering European citizens to move freely between learning settings, jobs, regions and countries.
There is an interesting development in the shift from peer reviews to peer learning and the assumptions underlying these two approaches need to be spelled out to fully appreciate the implications of this change in wording.

Peer reviews have always tended to be undertaken as a kind of external quality assessment by peers in order to come up with recommendations for improvement; hence, the reference to best practice, international standards and benchmarks. Peers needed to be respected and of a certain reputation, at least ‘of equal standing’. Not just in order to be able to assess against best practice and international standards but also for their recommendations to be taken serious by those under review. In other words, they needed to be recognised experts, knowledgeable of best practices and international standards, from which those reviewed can be expected to learn.

The problem with many peer reviews has always been that even if the peer reviewers were recognised experts this did not always guarantee that they were able to properly assess the situation under review, often because there was insufficient understanding of the specific context. This has especially been an issue in international policy reviews. As it happened, policy recommendations often are met with resistance and in particular when these also included advice on how to achieve certain objectives. Sometimes, recommendations are accepted but not followed up. In other cases the recommendations are so general that it is difficult for policy-makers to conclude what needs to be done. The fact that there is a considerable amount of contextual learning to be done by the members of the peer review team themselves has only gradually become acknowledged (26).

Clearly, also much of the standard practice of international aid is based on the assumption that foreign experts are able to review and solve an aid-receiving country’s needs. Still today project identification and formulation is basically done by foreign experts despite the fact that stakeholder consultations have now become part of these processes. The experts engaged in these kinds of reviews are representing the donor organisations, either as members of their staff or under contract for the particular exercise. Although they are rarely considered as peers they basically undertake a peer review. Much of donor aid project implementation is also done by foreign experts and is still often characterised by policy transfer, often even of policies dating from days long gone by or originating from very specific national policy environments that have only little relevance for the policy context of the aid receiving country (27).

(26) Usually, in order to prepare a review team a country is asked to provide a country background report in which it also formulates the specific questions that the review team should provide answers for.

(27) This has been a recurrent theme over the past decennia in the discussions about education aid. See for example King. (1993) and the various publications of the network for policy research review and advice on education and training (NORRAG, available from Internet: at http://www.norrag.org). For a wider discussion of these issues see also Grootings (2004).
7.2. Modern peer learning: focus on process

Peer learning, in contrast, is based on quite different assumptions. Those involved in a peer learning exercise are not necessarily in opposing roles of experts and learners; they are seen in a double role of learners and experts simultaneously. The peer learning event is also not meant as an assessment exercise but rather as providing a stimulating learning environment. Peers learn as peers. The expected outcome is not a set of policy recommendations for the country visited but eye-openers and well-thought through ideas for policies at home.

Whereas peer reviews are based on a traditional learning approach of expert knowledge transfer, peer learning – almost by definition – is based on modern constructivist learning principles, where learners actively develop new knowledge by giving sense to what they observe and share with others. However, although peer learning is closer to what we now know about how people learn, the approach is also not without problems. It poses high demands on learners and learning environments. It also requires a lot from those acting as learning facilitators (28).

Peer learning is a voluntary process that requires engagement and the ability to learn. This assumes a certain level of ‘readiness’ and ‘informedness’ in order to be able to relate the newly observed to what is already known. In organising peer learning the gap between what is known and what is observed cannot be (too) large. Such is, however, often the case in policy learning for systemic change (29). Peer learners’ current knowledge and thinking is firmly rooted in a context which is often radically different from the one under review. In such a situation it is very difficult to make good sense of what is being observed. It is almost impossible to recognise what is different.

Facilitators of peer learning, therefore, need to be able to properly assess the distance between ‘old’ and ‘new’ policy knowledge of participants in peer learning activities. In a way they need to be able to know about and think in terms of both worlds. They also need to be able to design a learning strategy to bridge this gap, possibly of course in close cooperation with the peer learners themselves. Peer learning, therefore, is more than what can be achieved with a single study visit or a one-off workshop. Peer learning is a process that develops over time and of which the outcome cannot be defined at the start. It also gives high priority to capacity building.

Policy learning is sharing experience from the past to develop knowledge for the future. It is also about sharing knowledge from abroad and knowledge that is locally produced and, therefore, about developing new knowledge as well. It contributes not only to creating more coherent system-wide reforms that fit but also facilitates system-deep reforms of VET systems as it enables all stakeholders to learn new roles and develop new working routines. It

(28) For a discussion of these issues see Grootings and Nielsen (2005).
(29) For the concept of systemic change see Grootings (2004).
will be a challenging task to develop concrete approaches that can make policy learning which is based on principles of active learning theory work in practice.

Moreover, even if policy learning takes place, this will not guarantee that new learning will lead to new policies and political action. Policy learning by policy-makers is a necessary part of the policy process but by far not sufficient on its own to produce policy changes. Other, collective and institutional factors are also at stake. Policy change remains after all a political process.

However, there will not be any policy change, unless that those who are in a position to take policy decisions themselves are convinced that a particular policy issue is important and are broadly familiar with policy measures that can be taken to address them.
8. **Indications for the type of further research needed to facilitate policy learning**

The specific form of further research should, in accordance with our argument in this section of making use of active learning methods as a methodology for reform of education systems in transition countries, reflect the new paradigm of socially organised learning processes. The setting up of research projects run by external education/VET scientists will not in itself be of sufficient help in the dynamic processes of transition if based on a linear thinking about theory and practice. Indeed, the links between scientific research, development work and practice have been strongly called into question in recent years. During the last decade OECD has made critical assessments of educational research (OECD, 1995, 2003, 2004) pointing out that educational research is too fragmented, politicised, irrelevant and its relevance for practice and policy-making is very modest. In an evaluation of financing and usefulness of English educational research (Hillage et al., 1998), the authors highlight that the connection between research, policy and practice is too weak, that research is too much governed by those who carry it out, that research normally concentrates on the consequences of political and policy decisions instead of looking into the educational challenges for policy, that there is much too much small-scale research which cannot be generalised, and that policy-makers as well as practitioners are not able to make use of the actual research results at hand.

Science and practice are often not talking about the same and have different codes. The scientific system constitutes itself based on the form of communication which has the task to produce new knowledge or new recognition, its purpose is truth and related to this the code is true/false. At least this is true for positivist research/epistemology, albeit action-research and constructivist epistemology takes another approach, closer to policy learning in communities of practice (Descy and Tessaring, 2005, p. 28-33). The education system has the task to qualify lifelong learners so that they master important and valuable knowledge and skills as defined by society; the code here is conveyable/non-conveyable or in practical terms: does it work? Educational research often finds it difficult, if it is to be science, to be a research for educational practice, it can only be a research on educational practice. Practitioners communicate mostly about practice, educational theory communicates mostly about theory and, therefore, scientists and practitioners are not very good at cross-communicating. In recent years attempts have been made to overcome the contradictory challenges for educational science, namely to conform to appropriate scientific standards (function) and, at the same time, to be capable of delivering concrete interpretations and guidelines for action (delivery) of use for the practitioner. In *Re-thinking science: knowledge and the public in an age of uncertainty* (Nowotny et al., 2001) a distinction is made between mode-1 research corresponding to traditional scientific knowledge production and mode-2 research which is a new way of producing knowledge. It is argued that the mode-2 concept is expanding because of the increasing need for interaction between science and other societal sectors such as economy, politics, education, etc. Mode-2 research is characterised by being oriented towards problem solving in specific practice contexts. It is oriented towards application of knowledge
and more focussed on producing solutions than producing new knowledge, and mode-2 approaches emphasise the importance of the involvement of both researchers and practitioners in the research process. The authors argue that mode-2 research is contextualised in a new public arena which they call agora. Research has moved from being at the centre to the agora – a place where market and politics meet and are mixed, and where private emotions and opinion meet public opinion and political consensus. Such contexts, which the authors call ‘transaction spaces’, have many similarities to the field of educational research, and the concept has also found considerable resonance in education (30). Also for ETF this ‘school’ is very interesting, as the main focus of the Foundation is not to produce new knowledge per se but to build on, communicate and increasingly ensure that knowledge is a guide for practice.

Mode-2 research takes its point of departure in the assumption that knowledge has changed character from classical scientific knowledge to socially robust knowledge, defined as relational and process-oriented knowledge. It is argued that the former hard truth ideal of science is not functional any longer because today knowledge production is distributed widely among an increasing number of knowledge environments: ‘the guardians of science (in a quasi Platonic sense) therefore must accept that one part of their job description, custody of science’s grand meta-narrative, is becoming obsolete while the other part, articulation of the countless local narratives that compromise the complex links between science and society, is increasing in significance’ (Nowotny et al., 2001, p. 191) (31).

The conclusions to be drawn from the analysis above point towards stimulating a local capacity for carrying out ‘accompanying’ research closely related to policy learning activities and based on mode-2 research. We will have to accept the, in principle, open-ended nature of this research due to the complexities of transformation society contexts. Such research must be inclusive and involve practitioners active in social learning processes as researchers, both belonging to this community of mode-2 research, in the sense that they are all involved in producing ‘socially robust’ knowledge – which is defined by five criteria: it is relational and not absolute, it describes a process towards a certain stability, it is based on a distinction between knowledge and acceptance, it is produced when research is infused with and expanded by social knowledge, and it has a strong empirical dimension which must be often tested and developed due to the fact that it is open ended (32).

(30) Learning Lab Denmark is inspired by the mode-2 concept and its annual conference is called Agora.

(31) See also Descy and Tessaring, 2005, in particular Sections 3.4.3 and 3.7.

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>ETF</td>
<td>European Training Foundation</td>
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<tr>
<td>EU</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-governmental organisation</td>
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<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development</td>
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<td>VET</td>
<td>Vocational education and training</td>
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