

The EU's ambivalent involvement in education and training policies

Chiara Agostini and David Natali¹

Introduction

Since the Lisbon Strategy of 2000, the EU has increasingly focused on education and training (ET) policies. The latter have been proposed as a key component of the European knowledge-based economic model. In parallel to this emphasis by the EU, there has been broad consensus among scholarly experts and analysts. Supporters of the supply-side economic paradigm stress that education and training are investments in human capital, and are thus a productive factor that improves competitiveness and boosts economic progress (see Kolev and Matthes 2013). Advocates of the alternative demand-side perspective have supported ET by claiming that increased spending in the field reduces inequalities among citizens and boosts domestic demand through the public budget (Bsirske and Busch 2013). Education and training are also at the core of the social investment paradigm that relies on investments, such as in human capital, to support labour market participation and to confront new social risks (Hemerijck 2013; Vandenbroucke and Vanhercke 2014).

The key question we address in this chapter is: has this emphasis on education and training resulted in a coherent effort and investment in ET both at EU and national level?

This chapter argues that, despite the emphasis at European level and the broad agreement among experts, actual EU governance in socio-

1. We would like to thank Valentina Lisi for her valuable help in collecting information on the Country-Specific Recommendations on education and training for the years 2011-14.

economic matters and in the field of ET, not to mention the reforms introduced so far in the Member States, are ambivalent.

In the following sections, we refer to three different sources of this ambivalence. First, we look at the recent political-institutional events at the EU level: while some of these events have helped to prioritise ET (namely the new Juncker Commission and its internal re-organisation, the launch of the investment plan for the EU), there is a risk that others (limited EU resources to invest in ET; potential conflicts in the Commission and the political weakness of the new Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Citizenship) will weaken any potential EU action on the theme. Second, we refer to the EU governance, both the coordination method on education and training and the broader European Semester. Here, as well, we see some trends indicating a strengthening of EU action in the area (e.g. stability of the coordination method in ET), together with other more problematic trends. In the last few years, the persistent call for fiscal consolidation and the economic interpretation of ET proposed by the Commission has held back investment in education and training. Third, and more crucially, we look at the recent evolution of ET policies in Member States. The overall trend in many countries has been cost-containment, with little evidence in national budgets of a new approach to investment.

These three sets of evidence confirm the pro-ET rhetoric: the focus on education is increasingly at the core of the EU's policy agenda, while Member States are not far from reaching most of the targets set in the Europe 2020 Strategy. Yet, we will argue, the EU framework on ET is ambivalent and partly contradictory.

The chapter is organised as follows. Section 1 starts by shedding light on the key political events that have marked the year 2014 and how these have been reflected in education and training policies. Sections 2 and 3 provide a quick overview of the trends in EU governance in the field. We discuss the EU's Education & Training 2020 (ET 2020) strategy as well as significant developments in the European Semester, with a focus on the key facts of 2014. Sections 4 and 5 focus on national trends in spending and the overall performance of education and training systems, through the analysis of national trends compared to the Europe 2020 targets. Section 6 concludes.

1. The new Commission, its strategic plan and re-organisation: good news for education and training?

Last year saw important innovations due to the new political context ushered in by the European elections of May 2014. Among these key steps, we focus in particular on the new Commission, its priorities and its structure. This information will show that while education and training are a priority of the new Commission, the division of tasks between the Directorates General (DGs), and the political conflicts surrounding the election of the new Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Citizenship, are a source of potential weakness of EU action in the field.

1.1 The new political guidelines of the Juncker Commission

On 15 July 2014, the candidate for the European Commission Presidency presented to the European Parliament the ‘Political Guidelines for the Next European Commission’ (Juncker 2014a). In this document, Jean Claude Juncker presented his ‘agenda for jobs, growth, fairness and democratic change’ (see the introduction to the volume). This agenda is focused on ten policy priorities for areas where, in Juncker’s vision, the EU is able to make a difference. Four of them are clearly connected to education and training (Juncker 2014b).

The first priority – *A new boost for jobs, growth and investment* – regards the reinforcement of European competitiveness and the stimulation of investments able to promote job creation. On this point, Juncker highlighted that it is possible to make better use of the common EU budget and the lending potential of EU financial instruments (i.e. the European Investment Bank). This effort should mobilise up to €315 billion in additional public and private investments over the next three years. These investments should be focused on certain strategic sectors, education and training among them. This investment is then expected to be clearly focused on helping to get the younger generation

into work, adding to the set of measures that started with the Youth Guarantee².

The second priority – *A connected digital single market* – is also related to education and training. By creating a connected digital single market, the EU could be expected to generate about €250 billion of additional growth in Europe, hundreds of thousands of new jobs in the next five years. The Commission, in the words of Juncker, should thus take every initiative to promote digital skills and learning, and innovative start-ups (ibid.).

The third priority with a link to education and training is *A deeper and fairer internal market with a strengthened industrial base*. Its aim is to contribute to the industrial base of the EU economy and ensure that Europe maintains global leadership in strategic sectors with high-value jobs. To do that, there should be a coherent strategy for investment in new technologies, improvement of the business environment, and, among other things, efforts to ensure that workers will be better skilled for industry.

The fourth priority linked to ET is *A deeper and fairer Economic and Monetary Union*. This priority refers to activation of the full potential of the EMU with the aim of improving the convergence of Member States' economic and labour market policies. It also includes the revision, after its mid-term review, of Europe 2020 (including ET 2020, the OMC on education and training; see section below). The modernisation of education systems is a key part of the structural reform strategy and is thus at the core of the renewed EMU.

Juncker's political priorities were followed, in November 2014, by the Communication on 'An Investment Plan for Europe' (European Commission 2014a). The plan confirms the Commission's ambition to mobilise about €315 billion. The proposed action is to be financed within the current Multi-Annual Financial Framework for the EU budget 2014-2020. The basic idea is to provide greater risk-bearing capacity

2. Moreover, the mid-term review of the 'Multiannual Financial Framework' (end of 2016) should be used to gear EU budgets more effectively towards jobs, growth and competitiveness. In that respect, boosting innovation is stressed as a priority.

using public money to encourage project promoters and attract private finance to viable investment projects. On one hand, at the EU level, this action should be supported by the establishment of a European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI) to provide risk support for long-term investments and ensure increased access to risk-financing for small and medium-sized enterprises and mid-cap companies. On the other hand, at the national level, it is important to make more strategic use of the European Structural Funds and Investment Funds. The fund supports strategic investments in infrastructure as well as strategic sectors such as education (Juncker 2014b: 4).

At first glance, EFSI is a key step towards a true growth strategy based, among other things, on education. Yet a more in-depth analysis reveals its weakness (see Myant in this volume). As far as education, training and research are concerned, the main constraint is the scarcity of resources. Much of the financing has in fact come from a shift of resources from other EU programmes. EFSI will be financed by €2.7 billion from the Europe research programme Horizon 2020. This shift has led to some criticism from stakeholders. The *League of European Research Universities* (LERU) regrets 'that money from Horizon 2020 (...) will be diverted to the European Fund for Strategic Investment (...), for a vague and highly uncertain project' (Fleming 2014)³.

1.2 The new structure of the Commission, political conflicts and their expected effect on ET

The establishment of the Juncker Commission has been accompanied by a re-allocation of portfolios and supporting services between the Directorates General (DGs) (European Commission 2014b). These are the main changes with an impact on education and training:

- The part of Unit COMM C2 (Citizens Programme) responsible for management of the Europe for Citizens Programme, as well as responsibility for the Preparatory Action 'New Narrative on Europe'

3. See also ETUC (2013a; 2013b).

2015, moves from DG Communication (COMM) to DG Education and Culture (EAC).

- The parts of Unit EAC A3 (Skills and Qualification Strategies; Multilingualism Policy) dealing with Skills and Qualification, and of Unit EAC B2 (Vocational Training and Adult Education; Erasmus +) dealing with Vocational Training and Adult Education policy, move from DG EAC to DG Employment (EMPL).
- Unit EAC E3 (Creative Europe Programme - MEDIA) moves from DG EAC to the DG for Communication Networks, Content and Technology (CNECT).

A further major innovation is the introduction of six Vice-Presidents. The latter are in charge of project teams, which coordinate the work of a number of Commissioners. The composition of these teams may change according to need and as new projects develop over time. The teams reflect the political guidelines mentioned above. The new structure should ensure dynamic and coherent interaction of all members of the college, and should ensure that structures are less static. The Vice-Presidents will all act as real deputies to the President (European Network of Education Councils, EUNEC 2014). Among the project teams, the team responsible for *A new boost for jobs, growth, investment and competitiveness* will play a key role in education policy. Two further project teams have education and training policy in their portfolio: one on *the Euro and social dialogue*, and the other one on *the Digital single market*. The three are expected to further emphasise ET as a key part of the EU strategy for growth.

But the new structure of the Commission also seems to be a source of risk. The obvious goals of the restructured Commission are to provide more political leadership and to work more effectively on key topics that will help to lead the Union out of the crisis. However, the new structure runs the risk of over-complexity and partial overlap of tasks and functions. This complexity affects education and training. While once these were under the almost exclusive competence of DG EAC, responsibility for ET is now distributed between different Commissioners and Vice-Presidents. This state may be a source of duplication of responsibilities, lack of transparency in the policymaking process, and

conflicts between Commissioners (De Marcilly 2014; see Barcevičius *et al.* 2014 for past experiences in the social policy domain)⁴.

Contingent political issues have also weakened the EU position in the field. For example, the election of the Commissioner for EAC was particularly complex. President-elect Juncker presented his team and the allocation of portfolios on 10 September 2014. This first step was followed by individual hearings of the Commissioners-designate before the relevant European Parliament committees. The MEPs asked the Commissioner-designate for EAC, Tibor Navracsics, former foreign minister of the Hungarian government, for information about his own work plan. After a first round of written answers, the Committee for education and culture (CULT) of the European Parliament required more information in order to complete its evaluation. The Commissioner-designate was to answer the additional questions by 5 October 2014. At the end of the process, the CULT Committee voted against this portfolio being attributed to the designated Commissioner, while accepting him as a potential Commissioner. MEPs doubted his commitment to civil society in the light of the Hungarian government's attitude to citizens' rights and NGOs. This partial rejection led to a new round of discussions between the EP and the Commission and to a final compromise: the EP eventually accepted the candidate Commissioner but with a more limited set of responsibilities (EUCIS-LLL 2014a). While the new Commissioner survived the criticism from the Parliament, his political status has suffered and this may lead to a lower profile of ET in the future.

All in all, the evidence we have given in this section demonstrates the ambivalence of last year's developments in this field: some of them may help to prioritise ET, while others may do the opposite. The new organisation of the Commission and the proposed Juncker Plan have helped to prioritise education and training as part of the strategy for investment and growth. However, there is a risk that the limited resources of the EFSI, the potential conflicts between Commissioners

4. At the meeting of the Directors General for Vocational Training in Rome, 13-14 October 2014, the ETUC put forward concerns about coordination between education and training sectors; while the Belgian Delegation was worried about the transfer of European Qualifications Framework (EQF) to DG EMPL (European Commission 2014c).

with some responsibility for ET, and the weakness of the new Commissioner for EAC could weaken the emphasis on ET.

2. The evolution of EU governance in the field of education and training

A second source of ambivalence is the recent steps in the coordination of education and training through the ad hoc coordination method (Education & Training 2020 – ET 2020) and the broader European Semester. As we see below, there has been progress, but also obstacles.

2.1 ET 2020, the origin of the process and its stabilisation

The political and institutional events mentioned in Section 1 have set the scene for further developments in the well-established EU governance on education and training. As stressed elsewhere (Agostini and Capano 2013), the EU role in education goes a long way back. In many respects, education and training is one of the pillars of the integration process, as part of the EU's endeavours to promote mobility of its citizens and to forge a common educational background and cultural references for European citizens. More recently, in the 1990s and then again with the launch of the Lisbon Strategy in 2000, education has gained new momentum. The first renewed impetus for a more active role of supranational organisations and a more intense cooperation between European governments was the Bologna process on higher education at the end of the 1990s, as well as the Copenhagen process on vocational education and training (VET). Under the umbrella of the Lisbon Strategy, the 'Education & Training 2010' (ET 2010) work programme established the first framework for European cooperation and introduced the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) into this field (Capano and Piattoni 2011).

The 'Education & Training 2020' (ET 2020) work programme was launched in 2009. This programme, which replaces the previous ET 2010, fixes strategic objectives for EU policy and benchmarks at the national level to evaluate national performances (Council of the EU 2009). Through the implementation of ET 2020, the EU provides advice and support for policy reforms as well as a forum for the exchange of best

practices, and the gathering and dissemination of information and statistics. Through the strategic framework of ET 2020, Member States share four common objectives to pursue in the period up to 2020:

- Making lifelong learning and mobility a reality;
- Improving the quality and efficiency of education and training;
- Promoting equity, social cohesion, and active citizenship;
- Enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training.

The progress of Member States is measured by the following EU benchmarks for 2020⁵:

- At least 95% of children (from 4 to compulsory school age) should participate in early childhood education;
- fewer than 15% of 15-year-olds should be under-skilled in reading, mathematics and science;
- fewer than 10% of young people should drop out of education and training;
- at least 40% of people aged 30-34 should have completed some form of higher education; at least 15% of adults should participate in lifelong learning;
- at least 20% of higher education graduates and 6% of 18-34 year-olds with an initial vocational qualification should have spent some time studying or training abroad;
- the share of employed graduates (20-34 year-olds having successfully completed upper secondary or tertiary education) having left education 1-3 years ago should be at least 82%.

As stressed elsewhere, the coordination process in education and training has proved particularly stable over the years (Agostini and Natali 2013). Key priorities defined at the outset of the strategy have been maintained while the indicators and benchmarks have remained unchanged and largely accepted by all stakeholders.

5. In particular, the EU carries out a yearly country analysis of these benchmarks.

While the coordination process has been set up and then reinforced through the definition of targets and common indicators, its implementation also relies on the establishment of specific ‘Thematic Working Groups’ (TWGs) made up of experts and stakeholders.

These groups are set up by the Commission and/or its departments and aim at promoting the exchange of good practices and mutual learning. They provide advice and expertise for the preparation of legislative proposals and policy initiatives; the preparation of delegated acts; and the implementation of existing EU legislation, programmes and policies, including coordination and cooperation with member countries and stakeholders. TWGs are a forum for discussions, providing high-level input in the form of opinions, recommendations and reports (European Commission 2010a; 2014d). Between 2011 and 2013, eleven thematic working groups have been established. These groups concerned: 1) primary and secondary education; 2) higher education; 3) adult learning; 4) vocational education and training; 5) transversal key competencies. In January 2014, a new generation of working groups was launched, working on six topics: 1) school policy; 2) modernization of higher education; 3) adult learning; 4) vocational education training; 5) transversal skills; 6) digital and on-line learning. These new TWGs have replaced the eleven groups mentioned above. The composition of the new TWGs varies: they are open to social partners, third countries and international organisations like the OECD.

The rationalisation of thematic working groups is a further sign of the strengthening of the institutions responsible for coordination, with room for a more systematic interaction between the actors involved in the process (e.g. social partners, civil society organisations, international organisations, etc.). Yet, as demonstrated below, the debate between EU institutions and stakeholders reveals some weakness, and therefore ambiguity, in the coordination of ET.

2.2 The Mid-term stocktaking of ET 2020

ET 2020 is based on two main documents. Each year, the Commission publishes the *Education and Training Monitor*, which gives information on developments in Member States compared to the ET 2020 European benchmarks. Every three years, the Commission and the Council

publish the *Joint Report on Education and Training*, to assess the previous 3-year cycle of activity and prepare for the next one.

In 2014, the third edition of the *Education and Training Monitor* had a particular role. It was a key component of the overall mid-term stocktaking of ET 2020. One goal of the review was to make ET 2020 a more focused contributor to Europe 2020 through the preparation of the 2015 *Joint Report*⁶. Europe 2020 is currently subject to a review process itself, with the Spring European Council meetings of 2014 and 2015 as likely milestones. An alignment of the Europe 2020 and ET 2020 review processes was thus a key goal (European Commission 2014e).

Throughout the year, all stakeholders were involved in a broad reflection about the state of the coordination process in the fifth year of its implementation. This reflection was based on:

- Member States' National Reports (via a standard questionnaire);
- the consultation with Member States in the High Level Group on Education and Training, the meetings of Directors General for school policy, for vocational education and training and for higher education, the Advisory Committee for Vocational Training, and the Education Committee (Council Working Party);
- consultation of the European social partners;
- the input provided by the stakeholders (including civil society) at the Education, Training and Youth Forum preceded by a stakeholders' survey (see sub-section below);
- an independent external mid-term evaluation of ET 2020 conducted by Ecorys. The final report was submitted on 3 November 2014;
- a specific analysis of progress in the area of VET for the period 2011-2014 carried out by Cedefop (the European Training Foundation, ETF, in the case of candidate countries). The report was published in March/April 2015 (ibid., 2; Eurydice 2013).

6. Europe 2020 fixed two headline targets on education: reducing school drop-out rates below 10 per cent; and at least 40% of 30-34 years old completing third level education.

We refer here to the independent external mid-term evaluation of ET 2020, to shed light on the state of the coordination method in the field and its weaknesses⁷. The evaluation provided insights as to the progress made and the persistent shortcomings of the coordination started in 2009. As far as progress is concerned, ET 2020 was defined as an ‘accelerator’ of learning able to connect Member States and provide room for dialogue on reforms in education and training. It was also recognised as an important connection between ET 2020 and the broader EU strategy for economic and social policies via Europe 2020 and the European Semester. Yet some shortcomings were stressed. Firstly, the process has too many objectives. A streamlined set of priorities was judged necessary to make the whole process more effective. The limited use of benchmarks and indicators was also emphasised. More importantly here, the process has limited transparency and visibility, which in turn leads to limited participation, and undermines the effectiveness of processes and outputs. ET 2020 also lacks adequate levels of visibility and, apart from those directly involved, public awareness is low. The poor levels of involvement of Member States and their low take up of the priorities of ET 2020 was seen as a key problem limiting the outcome of EU coordination in the area (European Commission 2015).

2.3 Education and Training 2020: European Commission and stakeholders’ views

The consultation of European stakeholders was a milestone in the mid-term stocktaking exercise. This sub-section refers to the feedback from some leading stakeholders and their own evaluation of ET 2020. This feedback provides further evidence of the ambivalence of the process, with its strengths and weaknesses.

7. The evaluation was conducted by Ecorys, an international company providing research, consultancy and management services. The methodology used for the evaluation involved desk research, stakeholder consultations and interviews, an online e-survey, and country-level research and consultations: 151 stakeholders were consulted and a further 420 people responded to the e-survey. The evaluation was submitted on 3 November 2014 and includes 23 concrete recommendations that form an input into the Joint Report (European Commission 2015).

Stakeholders were involved in the review process through different instruments. The third 'European Education, Training and Youth Forum' was one of these. It took place in Brussels in October 2014 at the end of the second cycle of implementation of Education and Training (ET) 2020. The Forum was focused on the 'Future priorities of the ET 2020 strategic framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training and Synergies with Youth Policy'. So the aim of the meeting (which brought together more than 350 participants representing stakeholders and organisations active in education, training and youth) was to provide a review of the implementation of the OMC in the field and discuss key priority areas for the next work cycle of the ET 2020 strategic framework (European Commission 2014f).

Well before the forum, the Commission launched an on-line survey, to collect stakeholders' views on the achievements of ET 2020 and on the outstanding challenges. The survey highlighted the positive practical impact of EU activities in the area, such as the development of new projects, initiatives and tools at the national level; the greater visibility of the ET 2020 topics; and the increasing collaboration between stakeholders regarding both policy initiatives and funding programmes. The areas most frequently cited are: 'lifelong learning', 'quality and efficiency in education and training', and 'mobility'.

Regarding the challenges, stakeholders highlighted different topics, among them the limited focus on the social dimension of education and training and the level of and access to financial resources (*ibid.*).

The ETUC (European Trade Union Confederation) and ETUCE (European Trade Union Committee on Education) provided a joint critical reflection on the first years of implementation of the coordination process in a joint document (ETUC and ETUCE 2014). The two organisations stressed some major shortcomings in three main areas. The first point concerned the need to fully consider the impact of the economic crisis. The new cycle of ET 2020 should update and revise the overall objectives of the process, bearing in mind the changed economic context, and make the objectives more consistent with the broader targets set by Europe 2020. The second line of criticism had to do with the limited involvement of stakeholders in the process, and the need for a revision of the goals and benchmarks in line with a more social view of education and training policies. This statement was in line with the

conclusions of the informal High Level meeting on 16 October 2013, where the then European Commissioner Androulla Vassiliou, the leaders of the European cross-industry organisations, and the leaders of the social partners of the European Sectoral Social Dialogue for Education agreed to cooperate more closely on EU education and training policies. ETUC and ETUCE stressed that stakeholder involvement should have been increased in the different fields and activities (setting/implementation/monitoring) and at all levels (European Commission 2013c). The third main area of criticism concerned the need for a more in-depth description of the four key objectives of the process through the definition of more specific sub-goals and the addition of new benchmarks.

The European Civil Society Platform⁸ on Lifelong Learning (EUCIS-LLL), in its position paper on Europe 2020 and the ET 2020 mid-term review, clarified its critical reading of the way ET was framed by the EU: ‘Today it seems that the more the EU gains influence in the sector, the more balance is lost among expected benefits of the modernisation of education and training systems. (...) Only comprehensive strategies can bring results in terms of employment, social inclusion and civic participation including important dimensions such as tolerance and intercultural dialogue’ (EUCIS-LLL 2014b: 1).

At the occasion of the Education, Training and Youth (ETY) forum, the Commission provided its first feedback and some proposals for the third work cycle. It proposed a focus on the following priorities:

- a holistic approach linking education, training, youth work and employment, and increasing cross-sector cooperation between stakeholders;
- the social dimension of education and training by delivering on the strategic objective ‘Promote equity, social cohesion and active citizenship’ of ET 2020;
- additional support, especially from national authorities, to ensure the professionalization of teachers (e.g. pedagogical and digital skills);

8. The European Civil Society Platform on Lifelong Learning (EUCIS-LLL) is an umbrella association that brings together 36 European organisations active in the field of education and training.

- the transnational mobility of learners and education;
- entrepreneurship education at all levels (starting at primary school level);
- learning outcomes relative to resources used (efficiency) (European Commission 2014f: 4).

3. The European Semester: largely failing to reconcile social and economic ambitions

As explained in the chapter by Zeitlin and Vanhercke (this volume), a 'European Semester' of policy coordination was established in 2010, through which the Commission, the Council, and the European Council set priorities for the Union in the Annual Growth Survey (AGS), review National Reform Programmes (NRPs), and issue Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs) to Member States, backed up in some cases by the possibility of financial sanctions. The European Semester is an important instrument for pursuing the modernisation of education and training systems and for contributing to the key goals of ET 2020. As we show below, the parallel focus on fiscal consolidation and investment in ET is a further - and to some extent more crucial - source of ambivalence in the field.

3.1 The Annual Growth Survey (AGS)

Since 2010, the Commission has published each year the Annual Growth Survey (AGS). Every year, education has been described as strategic for growth and employment, while playing a key role in several other priority areas. The main focus of the first AGS (2011) was the need for fiscal consolidation and sound public finances (see the chapter by Zeitlin and Vanhercke in this volume). In this context, education was considered as one of the 'growth friendly expenditure areas' to be prioritised. This concept was re-proposed in the following AGSs and became central for EU coordination of education. In the AGS for 2012, 2013 and 2014, there were five priorities: 1) pursuing differentiated growth-friendly fiscal consolidation; 2) restoring normal lending to the economy; 3) promoting growth and competitiveness for today and tomorrow; 4) tackling unemployment and the social consequences of

the crisis; 5) modernising public administration (European Commission 2010b; 2011; 2012a; 2013a).

Under Priority 1, the AGSs emphasized the need to prioritise ‘growth-friendly’ expenditure. This phrase means that Member States should keep public expenditure growth below the projected medium-term GDP growth rate while prioritising expenditure in sectors such as education, research, innovation, and energy. Furthermore, in the framework of Priority 1, the AGSs emphasise the need to reinforce or maintain services and active labour market policies, such as training for the unemployed and (since the 2014 AGS) Youth Guarantee schemes. This is a crucial source of ambiguity and weakness for the entire ET area.

Education policy also underlies Priority 4, in which the Commission emphasises the need to promote youth employment. For the Commission, particular attention should be given to supporting actions for young people who are not in employment, education, or training; adapting education and training systems in order to reflect labour market conditions and skill demands; and ensuring the quality of university programmes and considering measures to support higher education (i.e. introduction of tuition fees for tertiary education, accompanied by student loan and scholarship schemes, or other sources of funding, such as using public funds in order to leverage private investments). In more general terms, the AGS for 2014 highlights the need for pursuing the modernisation of education and training systems, including lifelong learning, vocational training and dual learning schemes.

If the first four AGSs looked similar in content and structure, the AGS for 2015 (European Commission 2014g), published on November 2014, was radically different. The 2015 AGS reflects the contents of the agenda for ‘Jobs, Growth, Fairness and Democratic Change’ proposed by the new European Commission through specific ‘Political Guidelines’ (Junker 2014b). The AGS recommends three main pillars for the EU’s economic and social policy for 2015:

- a coordinated boost to investment, related to the ‘Investment Plan for Europe’;
- a renewed commitment to structural reforms;
- pursuing fiscal responsibility.

The AGS for 2015 refers to education as a key component of the three pillars mentioned above. First of all, regarding the 'Investment Plan for Europe', the document refers to education as one of the areas which should receive resources. Under the second pillar, 'a renewed commitment to structural reforms', education plays a key role in improving the dynamics of the labour market and in tackling the high level of unemployment. Education can ensure the responsiveness of skills to labour market signals. In particular, vocational training systems should be modernised to provide young people with the necessary skill sets. Lifelong learning should become central and the systems should be able to ensure access at all ages and for those most in need, through the mobilisation of both public and private actors. Moreover, the 2015 AGS highlights the need to promote a better assessment of skills at the regional and sectoral levels. Finally, under the third pillar, the Commission draws attention to the importance of prioritising productive public investment and more growth-friendly items and, from that point of view, the Investment Plan for Europe will help to support these priorities. Education is a typical example of such growth-friendly items (European Commission 2014g).

To sum up, despite the progressive shift of the AGS towards a more growth-friendly approach, the parallel references to investment in ET and fiscal consolidation result in ambiguity and contradictory guidelines to Member States.

The Country-Specific Recommendations

If we look at the Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs) that Member States have received in relation to education since the launch of the European Semester, we see increasing attention being given to this area. Since 2011, the number of countries receiving CSRs on education and training increased from sixteen in 2011 to eighteen in 2012, twenty-two in 2013, and twenty-five in 2014 (European Commission 2011; 2012b; 2013b; 2014h). If we exclude those countries committed to the EU/IMF financial assistance programmes and thus not covered by the recommendations, all Member States - with the exception of the Netherlands - received CSRs on education in 2013 and 2014 (Table 1).

Table 1 EU Member States receiving CSRs on education and training

Country	2011	2012	2013	2014
Netherlands	X	–	–	–
Croatia	–	–	–	X
Lithuania			X	X
Sweden			X	X
Belgium		X	X	X
Finland		X	X	X
Italy	–	X	X	X
Slovenia	–	X	X	X
France	X		X	X
Austria	X	X	X	X
Bulgaria	X	X	X	X
Czech Republic	X	X	X	X
Denmark	X	X	X	X
Estonia	X	X	X	X
Germany	X	X	X	X
Hungary	X	X	X	X
Luxembourg	X	X	X	X
Malta	X	X	X	X
Poland	X	X	X	X
Slovakia	X	X	X	X
Spain	X	X	X	X
United Kingdom	X	X	X	X
Latvia	*	X	X	X
Romania	*	*	X	X
Ireland	*	*	*	X
Portugal	*	*	*	X
Cyprus	X	–	*	*
Greece	*	*	*	*

* Countries under a memorandum of understanding and/or other forms of conditionality

Source: European Commission (2011; 2012b; 2013b; 2014h).

The 2014 CSRs contain two types of recommendations. The first type relates to the influence of education and training on other policies: namely, the labour market and social inclusion. The second type of recommendation is focused on education and training *per se*, looking at total spending, and/or more specific issues (such as reforms on quality assurance, qualifications, etc.).

With regard to the first type, some CSRs call for a strengthening of the link between the labour market and education and training systems. This means that education systems should become more sensitive to the demands of the labour market (i.e. Estonia and Malta), more able to reduce skill mismatches (i.e. Belgium and Portugal) and should promote employability (i.e. Latvia and Lithuania). Recommendations on the influence of education and training on social inclusion see the former policies as crucial to avoid any form of discrimination and social exclusion and to provide opportunities for all learners. On this point, ten countries received CSRs on disadvantaged learners. In particular, these CSRs called for an improvement in the services for disadvantaged young people, such as those with a migrant background (i.e. Denmark) and those belonging to a marginalised community including Roma (i.e. Slovakia) to ensure inclusive access to early childhood education.

In the case of CSRs focused on education and training *per se*, Member States were first asked to ensure efficient public expenditure on education and training (i.e. Portugal) or increase their investments in order to improve specific aspects of the education system, such as higher education and research (i.e. the Czech Republic and Italy). Among the recommendations on more specific issues, Bulgaria, received a recommendation about the need to adopt the 'School Education Act' and pursue reforms of VET and higher education. Similarly, Croatia was encouraged to modernise its qualification systems and put in place quality assurance mechanisms, and (together with the Czech Republic and Italy) to implement a comprehensive evaluation framework.

4. National education systems in times of austerity: expenditure trends

The third source of ambivalence in ET consists of the recent trends in Member States. In the present section we trace the trends in expenditure on education policy between 2009 and 2012. In Section 5 we will look at the evolution of Member States' performances in ET, in terms of: tertiary education attainment, early school leavers, and the capacity of education systems to provide high-quality skills⁹.

The education expenditure per GDP ratio shows that Member States have different levels of public spending¹⁰. In 2012, twelve Member States show figures of around the EU average of 5.3% of GDP. In seven countries (BG, DE, EL, ES, IT, RO and SK), education expenditure is much lower (around 4%), whereas in nine Member States (BE, DK, EE, FR, CY, SI, FI, SE, UK) it is 6% or more (European Commission 2014i: 16).

As for trends, at an aggregate level, education expenditure declined between 2009 and 2012, from 5.5% to 5.3% of GDP. In 2012, government expenditure remained at the same level as the previous year, 5.3% of GDP, in a year when GDP itself fell by 0.4%. Trends confirm the lack of convergence between EU countries (Table 2).

Table 2 Trends in total spending on education and training, % GDP, 2009-2012

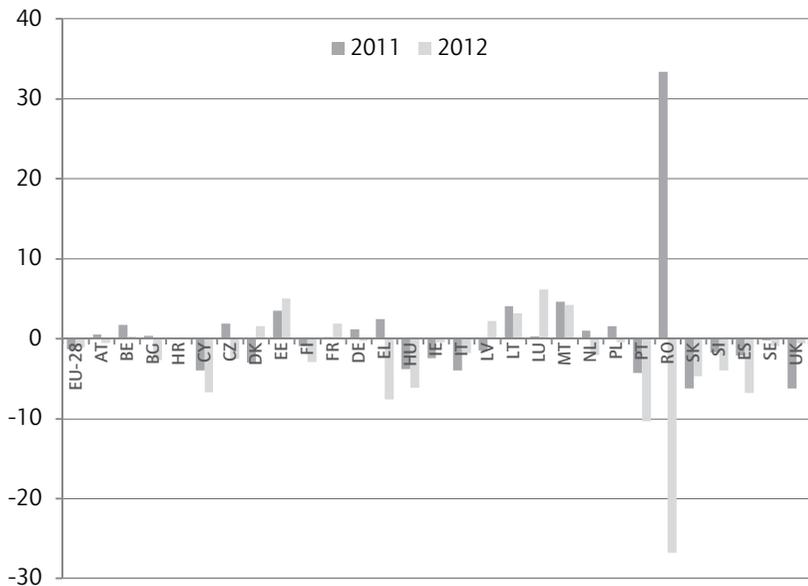
	Total spending education and training % GDP (2009-12)
Overall increase	Belgium, Luxembourg, Malta
Overall decline	Bulgaria, Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Ireland, Greece, Spain, France, Italy, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Austria, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Finland, Sweden, UK
Overall stability	Czech Rep.

Source: own table from European Commission (2014i).

9. Indicators on Member States' performance in ET refer to the period 2010-2013.
 10. For 2012, the big spender was Denmark (8.8%) followed by the Netherlands (8%) and Cyprus (7.9%). On the contrary, Romania (3.1%) and Bulgaria (3.8%) had the lowest level (European Commission 2014i).

Finally, to evaluate trends in the wake of the economic and financial crisis, we consider the changes year by year (from 2009 to 2012) at constant prices. While the AGSs have called on Member States to pursue structural reforms and, at the same time, protect investments in growth-friendly policies such as education, many Member States cut public spending on education between 2009 and 2012¹¹. Recent data reveal a decrease in 2011 and in 2012 in real terms, both of the EU average and in the majority of Member States. In 2012, government expenditure on education dropped by 1.1% (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Public spending on education year by year (2011-2012)



Source: own table from European Commission (2014i).

11. This is confirmed by the European Parliament's (2015) recent publication on the impact of austerity on the fundamental rights of citizens in the EU.

2012 was the second consecutive year of decline, as expenditure had already fallen in 2011 by 1.3%. In 2012, nineteen Member States recorded a cut in real terms; in six of them (EL, ES, CY, HU, PL, RO), it was of more than 5%. It was the fourth consecutive year of decline in Italy and Slovenia, the third in Spain and the second consecutive year in IE, CY, HU, PL, SK, FI, SE and the UK (European Commission 2014i).

Evidence thus shows that there has been no overall increase in spending in education and training. The investment advocated by the Commission in line with its emphasis on growth-oriented spending has not been carried out in the majority of EU countries. The crisis has further aggravated spending trends. We see here the evidence of the ambivalence of the EU discourse: despite the emphasis on ET, the EU – as stressed in section 2 – did not set any financial benchmark which could, to a limited extent, have encouraged convergence between the Member States¹².

This conclusion is confirmed by recent analysis of the social investment strategies implemented by EU countries in the wake of the Social Investment Package (SIP)¹³ set up in 2013. As stressed by Bouget *et al.* (2015), cost containment has hugely limited the prospects of real investment. Fiscal consolidation has led to cuts in public and social expenditure, including some existing investments in building human and social capital, resulting in reductions in availability and/or quality of programmes concerning active labour market policies and education, among others.

12. We thank Denis Bouget who proposed in his comments this critical reading of EU coordination in the field.

13. SIP was adopted by the Commission on 20th February 2013; plans for its implementation were discussed at a SIP conference in Leuven on 2/3 May 2013.

5. The performance of national education systems

The further source of ambivalence we consider is the performance of national education systems. This section refers to both EU and OECD indicators.

In the framework of the European Semester, the EU Commission prepares thematic summaries useful to compare Member State performance (European Commission 2014j; 2014k; 2014l). For education and training, the Commission prepares three summaries: two of these relate to the two headline targets of Europe 2020 (tertiary education attainment and early school leavers from education and training), the other concerns the capacity of national education systems to provide high-quality skills, which we discuss in turn.

In line with the Europe 2020 target on 'tertiary education attainment', the share of 30-34 year olds with tertiary educational attainment should be at least 40% by 2020. For 2013, the average rate of tertiary education attainment in the EU was 36.9%. Since 2010, this percentage has increased by 3.3 percentage points. If this trend continues, the EU target will be achieved by 2020¹⁴. In 2013, sixteen Member States (BE, CY, DK, EE, FI, FR, IE, LV, LT, LU, NL, PL, SI, ES, SE UK) reached the headline target (Table 3 below).

In thirteen cases, Member States show a level of tertiary education attainment that was above the target even before the launch of Europe 2020. Only in Latvia, Poland, and Slovenia was the target achieved between 2010 and 2013. Furthermore, twenty-six countries improved their rates between 2010 and 2013. But many of the laggards did not show significant improvement and are still far from the EU target (European Commission 2014h).

14. Between 2002 and 2013, the percentage of tertiary education attainment increased according to a linear long-term trend, from 23.6% in 2002 to 36.9 in 2013, i.e. an average of 1.2 percentage points per year. This means that the European target is rather modest. In line with that trend the target will be reached in 2016 (40.5%).

Table 3 Tertiary education attainment in the EU

	Tertiary education attainment (Europe 2020 target, 40%)		Early school leavers (Europe 2020 target, 10%)	
	2010	2013	2010	2013
Target not achieved	AT; BG; HR; CZ; DE; EL; HU; IT; LV; MT; PL; PT; RO; SK; SI	AT; BG; HR; CZ; DE; EL; HU; IT; MT; PT; RO; SK	BE; BG; CY; DK; EE; FI; FR; DE; EL; HU; IE; IT; LV; MT; NL; PT; RO; ES; UK	BE; BG; EL; HU; IT; MT; PT; RO; ES; UK
Target achieved	BE; CY; DK; EE; FI; FR; IE; LT; LU; NL; ES; SE; UK	BE; CY; DK; EE; FI; FR; IE; LV; LT; LU; NL; PL; SI; ES; SE; UK	AT; HR; CZ; LT; LU; PL; SK; SI; SE	AT; HR; CY; CZ; DK; EE; FI; FR; DE; IE; LV; LT; LU; NL; PL; SK; SI; SE

Source: own table from European Commission figures (2014j; 2014k).

Regarding the number of ‘early school leavers’, the target is to have fewer than 10% of early leavers from education and training aged 18-24 by 2020. In 2013, the EU average rate was 12%, and it has been reduced by 1.9 percentage points since 2010.

If this downward trend continues, this target will also be achieved by 2020. In 2013, eighteen countries (AT; HR; CY; CZ; DK; EE; FI; FR; DE; IE; LV; LT; LU; NL; PL; SK; SL; SE) reached the headline target¹⁵ (Table 3 above).

Half of these Member States had fewer than 10% of early school leavers in 2010, the other half had more than 10% in the same year. Some of the countries that did not achieve the target in 2013 show a significant improvement, such as Portugal (with a decline in early school leavers of 9.4 percentage points), Greece (-3.4 percentage points), Spain (-4.6 percentage points) and Malta (-3 percentage points) (European Commission 2014k). Despite this improvement, some countries will

15. Between 2002 and 2013, the percentage of early school leavers decreased according to a linear long-term trend, from 17% in 2002 to 12% in 2013, i.e. an average of 0,45 percentage points per year. This means that the European target is rather modest. In line with that trend the target will be reached by 2018, mainly because we note an accelerating process since 2011 (more than 0,5 percentage point per year).

have difficulties in reaching the 2020 target for two reasons: they are still far away from the target; and these countries are subject to heavy budgetary pressure so there will be little room to improve investment in the area.

The third dimension to analyse is the capacity of education systems to provide high-quality skills. The Commission assesses the Member States' performance in the field by considering three indicators: 1) the share of pupils who are low-achieving in basic skills; 2) adult participation in lifelong learning; 3) the share of those who recently completed formal education and training who are in employment (European Commission 2014l). Data are provided by Eurostat (European Commission, 2014f) and OECD PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) on adult competencies (OECD 2014a). Moreover, evidence about the current skill levels of the working age population is provided by the OECD Survey of Adult Skills (Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, PIAAC), which covers 17 Member States and a total of 83% of European working age population (OECD 2014b).

Starting with the first indicator, there are very high levels of 'low achievers' in basic skills in many Member States. In 2012, only the Netherlands, Estonia, Poland and Finland achieved the ET benchmark of reducing the share of school children with low achievements in mathematics below 15% by 2020¹⁶.

As for the 'employability' indicator, the EU target is that at least 82% of recent graduates (aged 20-34; graduated from at least upper secondary education in the last three years) should be in employment by 2020. In 2013, only 7 countries were above or in line with the target (MT, AT, DE, NL, SE, UK, DK). In Greece, Italy, Croatia, Spain, Cyprus, Romania, Bulgaria and Portugal, fewer than 70% of these workers were employed (European Commission 2014l).

16. Many national education systems are far from promoting social equality. Socio-economic background remains a strong determinant of skills obtained in schools, which means that the skill gap between those with the highest and lowest socio-economic status continues to be very high, and persists among people within the same countries and across different countries (European Commission 2014l).

Concerning adult participation in lifelong learning, in 2013 six Member States (BG, RO, HR, EL, SK and HU) showed a level of participation below 4% (compared to the benchmark set at 15%). Poland, Lithuania, Italy, Latvia, Belgium, Cyprus, Ireland, Malta, Germany, Czech Republic and Portugal were also below the EU average. Only 6 countries (DK, SE, FI, FR, NL, UK) reached the EU target¹⁷ (ibid.: 3).

All in all, the indicators on education and training performances in the EU show mixed results. There are positive trends in the level of early school leavers and tertiary education attainment. Europe 2020 targets will probably be achieved. However, some observers have stressed that this likelihood is partly related to the low level of ambition of the targets set by the EU. In many countries, indicators showed higher performances even before the start of the strategy (Agostini and Capano 2013). Indicators on the Member States' capacity to provide high skills give less encouraging results, with few Member States above the EU targets.

Conclusions: the EU janus face on education and training

The above evidence allows us to revisit the research question proposed in the introduction: has this emphasis on education and training led to consistent effort and investment in ET at both the EU and national levels?

This chapter argues that Europe's approach to investment in education and training is ambivalent. In the sections above, we have provided an overview of three main sources of such ambivalence. The first relates to the recent political and institutional events of 2014. While the new Juncker Commission has emphasised the contribution that modernised education systems and skills formation may make to the European economy, there is a risk that the recent reorganisation of the Commission may result in more complex and differentiated policymaking. This complexity has affected education and training policies, which are now spread across different DGs, with the risk of an unclear division of tasks.

17. The OECD PIAAC Survey confirms that many European adults have adequate or good skills, but few have very high skills (OECD 2014a; 2014b).

A second source of ambiguity concerns recent developments in relation to ET 2020 and the European Semester. The stability of ET 2020 guidelines and indicators and the reorganisation of the Commission's expert groups have helped to reinforce the process. Yet, as stressed by many stakeholders, the process has suffered from some shortcomings: in particular, the aim of contributing to equity, social cohesion and active citizenship seems underdeveloped. This limited interpretation tends to contribute to a purely economic perspective. What is more, the parallel focus of the European Semester on fiscal consolidation and investment in ET has been contradictory. This seems to be the major problem of EU action in the field.

The third source of ambivalence concerns national trends in ET. The targets set by Europe 2020 and pursued by the European Semester will probably be achieved before the end of the decade. By contrast, in the wake of the economic crisis, and in line with the fiscal consolidation promoted by the EU, many countries have seen a decline in investment in education, and gloomy prospects, therefore, for their future economic and social conditions. This is the negative outlook for countries more affected by the economic recession, and where there are therefore risks of increased divergence in education and training performances in the future.

EU action in the area has shown that ET has not been prioritised, while austerity has continued to be the driving force in the EU context in the wake of the crisis. Much has to be done to move to a more effective and balanced approach to education and training and to make the latter a key axis of the European economic and social model.

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