Chapter 15

Reforming VET for social cohesion

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Introduction: the current trend

So far the European Union has shown an unambiguous preference in drawing Vocational Education and Training (VET) policies that intend to harness, so to speak, private and public investment in human capital for combating social exclusion. Undoubtedly education in general, but VET in particular, is considered today as an integral part of the lifelong learning ideal that plays a key role in human capital accumulation for the achievement of the European Union’s social and economic objectives. True as it might be that social exclusion inhibits both social cohesion and economic growth, we should all bear in mind – as active EU citizens – that VET cannot and therefore must not be considered as the solution to combating all problems of social exclusion or as the way through to social cohesion, unless we add to it.

Nonetheless, most European policies that target social cohesion advocate a distinct social role for VET. Some EU members have already launched many initiatives that ease the access of various socially vulnerable groups (unemployed, people with physical or mental disabilities, migrants) or people that are considered to be on the fringes of our society, to better and more appropriate education that subsequently is expected to lead to a more secure employment, and in the long run to a stable social situation. Improving access to education for all is a guiding principle highlighted in national laws and strategic documents in many EU countries following the Lisbon and Copenhagen agendas. The idea is simple and straightforward. By raising the knowledge, skills and competences of EU citizens, VET contributes to the core elements of the EU strategy: sustainable growth, competitiveness, innovation and social inclusion. The overall aim should be to raise the employment rate to as close as possible to 70 per cent by 2010 and to increase the number of women in employment to more than 60 per cent by 2010. This vision is reflected in the period 2007–13, during which cohesion policy focuses investment on research and development, innovation, infrastructure, industrial competitiveness, training, renewable energy sources and energy efficiency (European Commission, 2007a, p. iv).

Simple as it is in its conception, one can easily draw the conclusion that
VET can only fulfil its role as an agent for strengthening or increasing social cohesion (defined in policy terms) if sufficient resources – human, social and monetary – are allocated. This does not necessarily mean generating new financial resources, but certainly re-allocating existing ones to new types of VET programmes that are more attractive or perhaps more flexible in terms of their purpose and aims. Although this is reflected in the Helsinki Communiqué (European Commission, 2006) – which, among other relevant points, highlights the importance of investment in human capital1 and calls for improving public and private investment in VET through the development of balanced and shared funding and investment mechanisms – little has been done so far to achieve social cohesion both within and among regions, and among member states.

The working purpose of this EU-ordered reform is to assist the Commission’s argument that investment in VET, both initial and continuing, can support social cohesion. Allocation of more funds in VET may increase therefore learning outcomes in all areas that relate to VET, namely improving quality of provision, quality of qualifications achieved both by trainees, their teachers and trainers, quality of assessment and validation, professional guidance, organizing more attractive curricula, and aligning to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF; see Figure 15.1).

![Figure 15.1 A common European framework for VET policies](source-and-adaptation-cedefop-2008-2)

Source and adaptation: CEDEFOP, 2008, p. 2
The shift to emphasizing the outcomes of learning is currently influencing the development of policies and practices in VET. The EU targets are to strengthen social cohesion and combat social exclusion, with the adoption of common VET policies on tools and principles that are considered vital for achieving the Lisbon set of goals. But are these policies enough? Even more so, are they pointing in the right direction?

As countries face difficulties in securing the necessary public resources, particularly after 2005 and the current economic downturn, greater emphasis is being placed on improving 'efficiency' in redistributing existing resources by encouraging additional funds from the private sector. These investments in vocational education and training are indeed needed so that Europeans may acquire skills and competences relevant to the labour market, for employability and lifelong learning. Furthermore, investments are also necessary to improve the skills of those in working life. Shrinking as well as ageing workforces require measures to retain older workers and integrate inactive citizens into the labour force. This raises some principal questions: what kind of social benefits and for which social groups are more likely to be generated by VET in the EU, and furthermore through which mechanisms – funding, operational, policy, and so on? Even more so, can these benefits guarantee social cohesion in the long run, and what sort of measures can be taken to sustain these benefits through VET?

In 2008 one in six Europeans left school with a low educational attainment level. Almost 80 million people of working age in Europe are low qualified and need retraining, according to the European Commission (2009, p. 93). Although educational attainment levels continue to improve, 15 per cent of 18–24-year-olds in the EU are not in education or training, even though they have not completed a qualification beyond lower secondary schooling. Malta, Portugal and Spain have the highest proportion with 30 per cent or more of low-qualified young people who are no longer in the education or training system. Overall in the EU, young women (18–24) are less likely than young men to be among the low qualified, with an average of 13 per cent, compared to an average of 17 per cent of low-qualified young men in the EU. Designing effective and efficient VET policy interventions definitely cannot be the point of departure. These cannot be effective unless they guarantee secured employment, otherwise they might as well lead to the same result as no VET at all. Therefore a deeper analysis of the benefits of investment in VET for individuals and society is needed in order to better understand the relation between VET and social cohesion or VET as an agent for social change.

In the light of the above, and bearing in mind that social change is certainly not something that can be altogether prescribed and applied through policy measures, this chapter focuses on the contribution of VET to social cohesion, keeping in view that there are no perfect causal relations in real life; rather, many correlations. In order to correctly frame the subject of the analysis, I
initially try to define social cohesion as an evolving social process more than a policy target, as the European Commission does, in order to highlight the contribution of VET. Then I question the benefits generated through investment in VET, especially in terms of promoting ‘flexicurity’ through policy measures in the member states. I emphasize the potential means through which different VET orientations may generate social cohesion, especially in terms of reforming curricula in order to make VET more attractive, or not. Finally, I provide some references for VET orientation towards a broadened European learning exchange area that may operate as a comfort zone in a period of economic instability.

Defining social cohesion: the contribution of VET

If one considers social cohesion as a definitive concept that reflects the need of the old nation state to create a strong national identity to attain and retain social discipline and order, as well as to fortify the sense of social and cultural belonging through mechanisms that underline the differences with other nations, other societies, and other cultures, one would not be far from the truth. But social cohesion in today’s globalized economies and supra-national formations such as the EU is that, and more. According to Green et al. (2003, p. 456), social cohesion is indeed:

a fuzzy and politically freighted concept. It is widely used in both policy and scientific literature, but it has no clearly defined or common meanings. In different contexts its use may emphasize: (i) shared norms and values; (ii) a sense of shared identity or belonging to a common community; (iii) a sense of continuity and stability; (iv) a society with institutions for sharing risks and providing collective welfare; (v) equitable distribution of rights, opportunities, wealth and income; and (vi) a strong civil society and active citizenship.

These are only some aspects of social cohesion and not necessarily definitions. Equally important to the aspects described by Green et al. is to emphasize full and active participation, especially in economic life. This perspective, which is thoroughly analysed by the Council of Europe (2008), highlights the role of the market and the significance of economic inclusion (Council of Europe, 2008, p. 8). The political project that derives from this approach sees social cohesion as necessitating on the one hand redistribution towards those who are least advantaged and, on the other, the creation of institutions and processes that challenge the existing structures of power and distribution and mediate between sectors of the population with different interests and ambitions.
A further analysis on the above approach could also place emphasis on cultural factors. Especially in the context of multicultural societies and multinational formations like the EU, social cohesion is seen to require tolerance and cultivation of diversity and respect for different cultures. Identity is central again here, as is recognition – people want to have their own beliefs and culture valorized, especially if these are different from those of the majority or the dominant culture. This view sees cohesion as being at risk if claims around different identities are not managed in a way that recognizes and accommodates diversity.

We could conclude that social cohesion comprises a sense of belonging – to a family, a social group, a neighbourhood, a workplace, a country or – why not? – to Europe. Yet this sense of belonging must not be exclusive; instead, multiple identities and multiple belonging must be encouraged. Social cohesion also implies the well-being of individuals and that of the community, founded on tenets such as the quality, health and permanence of society. In addition to social ties, cohesion must be built upon social justice. Social cohesion also constitutes a process of membership of and contribution to a blueprint for society. As active citizens, individuals must be able to feel responsible and to prosper both in terms of personal development and their income and living standards.

Considering the above general interpretation, when do we know that social cohesion has been achieved in a society? Even more so, how do we avoid the danger of looking at it in terms of an achieved level of homogenization, whether of cultures, of attitudes, of social and monetary policies, and so on? Is social cohesion a new approach to accommodate social and cultural diversity or is it just another ‘model concept’ in the European policy agenda? And in this indeed fuzzy context what is, or what could be, the contribution of VET?

Currently EU and member states’ policies seem to focus largely on three interlocking areas as far as the contribution of VET in social cohesion is concerned: (i) investment in human capital; (ii) curricular reforms to make VET attractive; and (iii) direct links to the labour market. However, none of these areas has been thoroughly researched to the extent that a clear picture is formed in terms of what VET can offer European societies to accomplish and sustain social cohesion, as described above. What has been done, however, is to provide a generic yet useful description of quantified results based on a large variety of indicators such as levels of participation, levels of attainment, levels of income or levels of employability, that manifest only a fraction of the characteristics of social cohesion. The least contemplated area – as the other two relate more to the input and output of VET in contemporary European societies, namely financial investment and trained (as employable) human power – is raising attractiveness of VET, especially for those social groups to which VET, especially CVET, is less attractive: the unemployed, the low skilled and older workers.
One could easily argue that the contribution of VET largely depends on how the EU measures social cohesion, even more than the attributes to which it constantly relates. One of these attributes is certainly financial investment in VET; the EU needs to know how much is invested on VET and how much of this investment enters the labour market in the form of highly trained human resource. This is definitely and unarguably justifiable, but what seems to be missing here is the answer to a set of persistent questions, such as: how many well-trained Europeans are there for how many, and what kind of jobs – part-time, full-time, permanent or temporary? Who can provide these jobs? Do we have a clear picture of how the EU labour market operates? As a process, is VET capable of affecting the orientation and structure of this market, or is it the labour market that has the first and last word in this? Are there discrepancies in terms of labour input–output within and between member states? How do these discrepancies affect our social lives and the way we see each other? Will investment in attractive forms of VET lead to attractive jobs? Are the people who have been in VET and later been employed satisfied with their current employment? Can ‘being satisfied with one’s job’ be an indicator of social cohesion if we consider that satisfaction with one’s job affects performance, and therefore quality of provision to European society and economy?

The questions can go on and on for researchers and policymakers, and of course they cannot only relate to the role of VET in providing the labour market with highly trained workers. So what we need to consider at this stage is that investment in VET must not only be seen as an investment for what the EU calls ‘flexicured’ employment. It must also be seen as an investment for attractive employment. Not necessarily one that pays, but one from which both the individual worker and society will equally be benefited and supported. This demands a different orientation for VET that essentially considers the needs and demands of the learners, and this could be the contribution of VET to social cohesion.

**Investments and recipients in VET: how much, for how long?**

According to the European Commission (2007c, p. 3), investment in VET has high returns. In addition, the social partners, individual employers and local communities have been involved both in actively assisting the social integration of disadvantaged groups and in providing appropriate support services. A high percentage of beneficiaries either (re)enter into employment after training or report better employment conditions and higher income. An understanding of the importance of human capital has led to the allocation of substantial amounts to increase the quality and availability of VET. An important role of cohesion policy is to support the adaptation of training and education systems to the new requirements of the labour market.
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and to the needs of the knowledge-based society. As noted in the Bordeaux Communiqué (European Commission, 2008a, pp. 5–6), VET constitutes an investment that should:

- take into account the objectives of social cohesion, equity and active citizenship;
- promote competitiveness and innovation; and
- make the concept of lifelong learning and mobility a reality.

Investment in VET has triggered the reform of education and training systems such as by adjusting curricula to labour market needs or improving the training of teachers in a number of member states; assisting in the development of new forms of training; and providing support for lifelong learning. It has also increased the access of individuals to education and training and supported counselling and career guidance activities. There remain, however, substantial disparities in the educational attainment levels of the workforce across the EU. Furthermore, according to CEDEFOP (2009, pp. 55–6) companies’ expenditure on Continuing Vocational Training (CVT) courses as a percentage of the total labour costs decreased from 2.3 per cent in 1999 to 1.6 per cent in 2005 on an EU average (Table 15.1).

Table 15.1 Expenditure on CVT 1993–2005 in selected member states (% of labour costs)

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<td>1999</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005</td>
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Source: CEDEFOP, 2009, p. 56

Eventually this decrease in investments in VET (particularly from SMEs) was followed by a further decrease in public investments. Investments in VET indeed paid off for a short period after 1999, but immediately after the Copenhagen Declaration (see European Commission, 2002) and its revised version with the Maastricht Communiqué, the whole idea of ‘investing’, in terms of financing VET for achieving the Lisbon goals, was largely replaced by the idea of ‘flexicurity’. This is a Danish model that, according to some policymakers, in many ways meets the challenges of combining labour market needs with personal protection. However, a study from CASA (2002) shows that parallel to a reduction in unemployment levels in the last half of the 1990s there has been a noticeable exclusion from the labour market that this particular ‘Scandinavian welfare model’ has not been able to solve. Allegedly it became the means to reinforce the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy, create more and better jobs, modernize labour markets, and promote good
work ‘through new forms of flexibility and security to increase adaptability, employment and social cohesion’ (European Commission, 2009, p. 102). It seems as if this significant period in terms of policy development between 1999 and 2005 witnessed some sort of a ‘silent’ economic downfall or crisis. This crisis that still continues has considerably changed the orientation of the EU policy agenda as well as the orientation of VET from investing in developing skills for job security to developing new skills for ‘flexicurity’.

From 2005 onwards EU expenditures for VET have weakened. While the economic downturn put increasing pressure on public and private expenditure, the focus was turned on generating new skills in order to respond to the nature of the new ‘flexicured’ jobs expected to be created, as well as to improve the adaptability and employability of adults already in the labour force, i.e. part-time, low-paid temporary employment, high degree of job mobility, a generous system of unemployment benefits and active labour market programmes, which also include job placement and on-the-job training schemes. Why this happened and what the consequences of ‘flexicurity’ will be for achieving social cohesion, are questions that remain to be answered.

Making VET more attractive: curricular reforms for individual and social change?

As ‘flexicurity’ was taken on board by European policies for VET, a new trend made an appearance. If financial investments in VET are not enough to achieve the Lisbon goals, the next best thing would be to raise the quality and attractiveness of VET by reforming its curricular base to more flexible modes of participating, learning and teaching. Perhaps it is to be expected that improving the quality of VET on offer or by improving its transparency and accessibility will raise its attractiveness, as Leney (2004, p. 65) notes. But is this the case?

For EU policymakers, the concept of attractiveness implies that occasionally conflicting opinions and priorities of various stakeholders have been heard and adopted in VET policy and programme planning. Essentially, attractiveness should bridge the gap between learners’ interests and those of society, including the crude interests of labour market players as Nieuwenhuis et al. (2004) put it. Attractiveness should therefore become visible in enrolment figures, in benchmarks and indicators and in opinion polls, but also in growing numbers of stakeholders involved in actual decision-making at system and programme level. The Helsinki Communiqué (2006) called for more attention to be given to the image, status and attractiveness of VET (Lasonen and Gordon, 2008), which was further emphasized by the Bordeaux Communiqué (2008). According to the Bordeaux Communiqué, attractiveness, accessibility and quality should allow VET to play a major role in lifelong...
learning strategies, with a twofold objective: (a) simultaneously promoting equity, business performance, competitiveness and innovation; and (b) enabling citizens to acquire the skills they need for career development, to take up training, be an active citizen and achieve personal fulfilment. VET should promote excellence and at the same time guarantee equal opportunities. The EU policy of VET attractiveness was therefore decided to be based on four pillars:

- **Individualization of VET pathways**; and delivery to consider the various capacities and interests of individuals. Individualization of VET implies differentiation and flexibility. Internal differentiation relates to the teaching and learning process, whereas external differentiation refers to creation of new programmes/settings better to accommodate the needs and preferences of students. Flexibility induces possibilities for individuals and for the system itself to react rapidly in case of unforeseen developments or changes.

- **Increasing attractiveness by providing people with a growing range of opportunities** at the end of VET pathways. These opportunities can be of an educational nature (workplace learning or access to higher education), or related to employment (job opportunities, career development, opportunities resulting from policies of gender equality).

- **Increasing the attractiveness of VET through modernizing its governance.** The EU approach is based on the idea that modern governance implies streamlining and clarifying the educational offer, which may smooth and stimulate use of VET, thus favouring cumulative attractiveness. This view also recalls that modern governance means improving partnerships especially at local level to enhance the steering and development of the VET system.

- **Action on image and status of VET includes promoting its parity of esteem** with general and higher education, and encouraging excellence in skills, for example by applying world-class standards or through skills competitions.

Based on these four principles, most EU members introduced a series of measures to increase the attractiveness of VET for young people and adults. A rather popular measure aimed at young people was to make higher education more accessible for students on VET programmes, together with the creation of *occupational-oriented programmes at higher education level*. Even in those member states with a high participation rate in initial VET (i.e. Germany and UK), increasing the access to tertiary education attracts policy attention. Also popular are *pedagogical reforms* in members such as Austria, Cyprus and Finland; *diversification* of routes and programmes in VET in countries like Bulgaria, France and Poland; the establishment of guidance and counselling systems; the integration of vocational subjects into general programmes and
vice versa; or launching promotion campaigns (Leney, 2004, p. 77).

Besides these measures, however, there is still mixed evidence that the attractiveness of VET systems is growing. Limitations in data supply suggest that enrolment in VET programmes at upper secondary level is increasing in older member states, while participation in most new member states is declining. A wide range of countries report that VET is still regarded as second rate compared to general education pathways at upper secondary level. Data further shows that CVT participation is rising very slowly (Figure 15.2) and is biased by the high participation of higher skilled people, an outcome that challenges the effectiveness of some policy measures taken to date.7

According to 2005 data only 33 per cent of all employees participated in CVT courses organized by enterprises, measured by the number of participants in CVT courses as a percentage of all employees in all enterprises. Figure 15.2 shows that there is a large variation across the EU with respect to participation in training courses, ranging from almost 60 per cent in the Czech Republic to 14 per cent in Greece. Men are slightly more likely to participate, with 34 per cent compared to 31 per cent of women, a trend that is evident in 17 of the 27 countries for which data are available. The highest variation exists in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, where men are significantly more likely to follow training courses than women – 11 percentage points higher. By contrast, in Denmark and Slovenia significantly more women follow CVT courses than men. The comparison of participation in CVT courses in 2005 and 1999 reveals that newer member states are catching up, some by investing more in human resources. For example, in Slovenia and the Czech Republic participation rates in CVT courses have increased by

![Figure 15.2](image-url)  
**Figure 15.2** Employees (in all enterprises) participating in CVT courses by gender (% of all employees, 2005)  
Source: CEDEFOP, 2009, p. 65
36 per cent and 28 per cent respectively. In the majority of newer member states, despite a significant increase, participation in CVT is still far below the EU average. However, participation rates decreased in some countries with a traditionally high participation of employees in continuing training such as Sweden, Finland and the UK. Despite this downward trend, these countries still belong to the best performing countries in this area.

The reasons for these variations of CVT participation need to be further analysed. Furthermore, the introduction of special – sometimes obligatory – programmes and facilities are popular policy measures in most EU member states in keeping those not otherwise in employment or training within the system. The introduction of such programmes is reported in 21 out of the 27 member states. In the majority of the cases, however, the strategy is not so much focused on making learning in VET more attractive, as on discouraging – or blocking, as Leney (2004) suggests – other pathways.

Overall, for strengthening links to the labour market, policymakers at large see flexibility of training institutions and systems as one of the priority issues in making VET more attractive. But what does flexibility mean in this context? In most member states in which such policy initiatives were introduced, ‘flexible’ directly relates to modular and active VET curricula. That means curricula that essentially appeal to the intrinsic motivation of people to learn; support individual learning paths and differentiation in modes of delivery; introduce guidance and counselling, credit accumulation and transfer; and validation of non-formal or even informal learning. These are considered to be key elements in realizing flexibility in VET. Although this gives a first indication of what flexibility might be, it also indicates that flexibility is a somewhat ambiguous concept. Leney (2004, p. 79) uses the word ‘fluffy’. This means that within the context of ‘flexicurity’, policy measures in most member states see flexibility as part of, or at least a precondition for, attractiveness of VET. But this should not be the case at all; flexibility and attractiveness are two essentially distinct concepts. That is to say, VET systems may be attractive in terms of the number of students they draw, or in terms of the status awarded to VET, without necessarily being flexible; whereas flexible VET systems and institutions may still be confronted with a lack of parity of esteem.

Epilogue: can VET be the answer for achieving social cohesion in a time of economic doubt?

VET policies should address all sections of the population, offering appealing and challenging pathways for those with high potential, while at the same time addressing those at risk of educational disadvantages and labour market exclusion. In short, VET should be equitable and efficient. To increase the attractiveness of VET, most EU countries – especially after 2005 – have put
considerable emphasis and resources on: organizing new vocational training and retraining courses; developing national qualification frameworks, some in line with the European Qualification Framework (EQF); establishing well-equipped training centres, validation centres or external examination boards; introducing higher educational and post-secondary programmes to reduce dead-ends and increasing the level of qualifications; progressively developing counselling and career offices and organizing networks; training and re-training teaching and training staff; and reforming existing VET curricula, particularly in initial VET sectors. Has all this effort paid off? Has VET contributed so far to achieving social cohesion in the EU?

Policies to date seem to have put too much emphasis on drawing more resources to VET, basically investing more money and attracting stakeholders, and less emphasis on what Europeans really find inviting in VET, as a systematic evaluation of implemented attractiveness policies is lacking. This approach has essentially left out the most important factor in the equation, namely the learner-trainee.

The contribution of VET to social cohesion in Europe demands the creation of a broad learning exchange area in which all players, namely funding bodies, stakeholders and, most importantly, the learners themselves will participate, with constant networking, in order to make VET more attractive with curricula that basically respond to learners’ requirements. VET reform must fit the learners’ needs if VET is to become more appealing.

Figure 15.3 Learning exchange in a common European framework
If VET is to contribute to social cohesion, it must be attractive and accessible for all citizens, independent of age, educational attainment, employment or social status. Better coordination between different education and training sectors, institutional commitment, including sustainable models of funding, and partnership with all stakeholders, including the learners themselves, is required (European Commission, 2008b, p. 7). A consistent approach is needed since the simultaneity of initiatives taken at national or institutional levels in terms of vocationalism, academization or differentiation (Dunkel and Le Mouillour, 2008) might be counterproductive.

Having said that, there are three vital areas in which VET can contribute in order to achieve social cohesion in the EU (Figure 15.3). The first is investing in human and social capital. The second is creating links (direct and indirect) to the labour market (employers and employees), and the third and perhaps the most vital – as it has to relate more directly to the needs, whether individual, social, cultural, of the learner or trainee – is developing attractive, constantly updated curricula. Although this may not directly lead to social cohesion as a policy strategy, in practice it will initially strengthen the need for enhancing social and human capital, as well as develop different patterns of networking that in turn create a broadened, ever-growing framework for developing a European learning exchange area in which social cohesion will gradually develop.

The truth is that some work has been completed, but much remains to be done towards social cohesion, as wide-ranging measures to support investment tend to be indiscriminate and risk having significant deadweight effects. Direct support measures should be carefully targeted and subject to rigorous testing of their likely effectiveness, such as through cost-benefit analysis. ‘Soft’ measures such as the provision of services, training and mentoring, and the support to networks and clusters, can be effective as part of an overall strategy based on a clear analysis of needs and understanding of the demand. It is perhaps the right time as we go through an economic crisis to consider how to create those conditions of letting people choose in what type of training they wish to invest, instead of generating policies with diminishing returns.

Furthermore, coordination measures that are targeted, for example, at improving core skills and competencies, early school leaving and completion of upper-secondary education may help to increase access to jobs and social inclusion in some deprived European regions. Equally, EU programmes for enhancing cooperation in vocational education and training and adult education, under the so-called Copenhagen process, could contribute to strengthening regional competitiveness and increasing employment. In addition, policymakers need to consider supporting student exchange schemes, which are particularly important in disadvantaged regions, in order to increase the mobility of young people, strengthen networking and gradually reduce the disadvantage of living in regions with less well-developed educational...
facilities. Moreover, programmes encouraging transnational co-operation between universities can also contribute to reducing regional disparities in tertiary VET in terms of both teaching and research capacities. As part of the wider agenda on VET reforms under the Bologna Process, European universities must also be encouraged to play a more important role in the Lisbon strategy by mobilizing their potential for boosting job creation (European Commission, 2007c, p. 171). Last, but not least, more investment is needed in human capital, particularly in the new member states. Training is needed to reduce staff turnover and achieve the standards required to manage substantially increased amounts of funding in the forthcoming 2010–13 period. This applies to all aspects of VET programme management as well as to those preparing projects for funding and those involved in monitoring VET programmes. It is therefore the human factor that will, no doubt, remain decisive in enabling the least-developed regions of the EU to catch up and bring about social cohesion and eventually actual social change.

Notes
1 Raising the quality of human capital explains more than half of the productivity gains in the last decade. European cohesion programmes co-finance the training of some nine million people annually, with more than half of them women. A high percentage of beneficiaries either (re)enter into employment after training or report better employment conditions and higher income (European Commission, 2007a, p. viii).
2 The term used by the Commission is ‘flexicurity’. Flexicurity can be defined as an integrated strategy to enhance, at the same time, flexibility and security in the labour market. For more information on ‘flexicurity’, see European Commission (2007b, p. 10).
3 For more information see European Commission, (2007a, p. 114).
4 Among those aged 25–64, therefore, the proportion of women with tertiary education is slightly smaller than that of men in the EU as a whole (22.2 per cent as opposed to 22.6 per cent). Among those aged 55–64, however, the proportion of women with tertiary education is over 6 percentage points lower than for men. By contrast, 30 per cent of women aged 25–34 have tertiary qualifications as compared with under 25 per cent of men. The proportion of women who have completed tertiary education is, therefore, increasing at a much faster rate than for men (European Commission, 2007a, pp. 80–1).
5 For further information, see Leney (2004, p. 181).
6 According to the Helsinki Communiqué (European Commission, 2006), making VET systems more open, flexible and attractive is identified as an important part of the Copenhagen process of enhanced cooperation in VET as well as the European economic, employment and social agenda generally. The communication from the Commission Modernising Education and Training: A Vital Contribution to Prosperity and Social Cohesion in Europe (European Commission, 2005), stressed that improving the quality and attractiveness of VET continues to be a key challenge for the future.
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7 For more information, see Leney (2004, pp. 77–8).
8 Specifically after the release of the joint progress report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the ‘Education and training 2010 work programme: modernizing education and training: a vital contribution to prosperity and social cohesion in Europe’ (see European Commission, 2005).

References

CEDEFOP (2008), In the Finishing Straights: from Copenhagen to Bordeaux. Thessaloniki: CEDEFOP.


Education policy and practice has historically been developed within the national/regional context. However, globalization has prompted educationalists to review their practice in the light of international influences. World issues such as global warming, conflict and the depletion of earth resources have also contributed to an increased awareness of the role that education can play in resolving these problems.

The contributors focus on how education can bring about social change while connecting with theory at the level of cultural impact and policy implications. They investigate the potential for creating a transnational value system in education, focusing on some key human rights issues both at home and overseas.

Truly international in scope, this text lays the groundwork for future research by exposing the commonalities and differences in approaches to knowledge production and its dissemination, drawing together contributions from a variety of cross-cultural contexts.

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