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and national traditions – the view from the UK**

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**Entwicklungen und Herausforderungen zwischen supranationalen
Strategien und nationalen Traditionen.**

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Development and challenges between supranational strategies and national traditions – the view from the UK

Abstract

The United Kingdom and the European Union's relationship around education and vocational education and training has been fraught. While many activities and initiatives from the EU were considered in the UK, only a few really ever took hold such as ERASMUS. Differing philosophical viewpoints about the nature and role of the nation state and concepts such as citizenship made cooperation and arrival at a common view problematic. This article draws together policy documents and research to show how the challenges between supranational strategies and national traditions ran counter to any real development around education and vocational education policy. The UK, when confronted with EU skills policies, individual schemes and programmes with a clearly defined purpose, particularly those delivering material benefits to UK participants, were seen positively. Supranational policy formation was not given the same priority and was undermined by a variety of factors including (but not limited to) English exceptionalism, and a national press and political class that subscribed to a deep scepticism concerning increased European integration and consequent diminution of national sovereignty. Educational and vocational policy was unable to escape scepticism surrounding the EU.

Keywords: *Education policy; VET policy; skills policy; engagement; scepticism*

INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on what has been an outlier in terms of its responses to EU educational and VET policy – the United Kingdom (UK) – and is being written while the UK is withdrawing membership of the EU. It represents a very small contribution to what will be a very substantial research agenda – understanding the nature and causes of the UK's often problematic approach to being a member of the EU.

It is important to make clear at the outset that educational policy making within the UK is devolved, so that the UK government's writ only runs in England, while elsewhere control of this area of policy rests in the hands of the governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. However, responsibility for international relations, such as those with the EU, resides with the UK government. It is also important to note that there is a paucity of academic research on the topic of UK-EU relationships on skill, particularly in relation to policy, and this reflects the limited salience and visibility of the EU and European policy considerations within English educational debates (see, Alexiadou and Lange, 2013 and HM Government, 2014 for an overview of the major contributions that exist).

Fortunately for the purposes of this article, the UK government undertook a major UK/EU skills policy review exercise in 2014, as part of a much wider, cross-government review of the balance of competence between the UK government and EU. The overall aim of the review process, which produced reports on 32 different areas of policy, was to:

provide an analysis of what the UK's membership of the EU means for the UK national interest. It aims to deepen public and parliamentary understanding of the nature of our EU membership and provide a constructive and serious contribution to the national and wider European debate about modernising, reforming and improving the EU in the face of collective challenges (HM Government, 2014, p. 9).

The report on the balance of competence between the UK and the EU on education, vocational training and youth drew on evidence that had been taken from academic observers, the devolved UK nations' governments, other EU member states, members of the UK parliament, business representatives and ex-civil servants with an interest in this topic (HM Government, 2014). It provided a very clear, direct, candid and authoritative insight into UK government thinking on the topic, and will be cited extensively in what follows.

The structure of what follows

For clarity of exposition, the article divides the topic into two prime areas of UK engagement with the EU on education. The first covers practical activities, such as student exchanges, research funding and support from the European Social Fund for various training and skills programmes in the UK. The second looks at the relationship between the UK and EU around broader skills policy. The article then concludes with an overview of the nature of the UK's response to the EU's attempts to fashion a European approach to skills.

THE PRACTICAL ASPECTS

Within the approaches laid down in the Europe 2020 Strategy and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), a wide range of different activities were organised and funded in relation to education and training (broadly defined), only some of which will be explored in any detail in what follows. These activities included:

- Structured Dialogue (SD) with young people, including the Pan-EU project and its Youth Ambassadors;
- Mobility in education and the fostering of language skills through links, partnerships and different kinds of exchanges covering schools (Comenius), universities (Erasmus) and youth organisations (Youth in Action). After 2014 these activities were replaced by Erasmus+, from which the UK was expected to gain £800 million in grant funding over the programme's seven year period of operation (HM Government, 2014, p. 22). In 2011-12, the number of UK educational staff who participated in Erasmus was 2,175, and 13,663 students also benefited (HM Government, 2014, p. 37);
- A European university ranking system (U-Multirank);

- Various measures to achieve enhanced recognition of vocational qualifications and training across different EU nations via the Copenhagen Process (see below);
- The development of a European Quality Assurance for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET);
- The use of EU Structural Funds, particularly the European Social Funds, to deliver national training, skills and pre-employment programmes (see below); and
- Within higher education, the encouragement and funding of large scale international research collaborations (via the Horizon 2020 funding scheme and the European Research Council) and research student and post-doctoral researcher mobility (via the Marie Curie scheme).

Within this spectrum of activity, those aspects pertaining to higher education have generally been afforded the greatest prominence within the somewhat limited attention paid to EU policies by the UK government. The various EU funding streams, such as that for student exchanges (for example, Erasmus+ and Marie Curie), and for research collaborations and activities (the European Research Council, Horizon 2020), have assumed considerable importance, both for individual institutions, but also for overall funding policy (see Hubble, 2016). For example, between 2007 and 2013 higher education institutions across the four UK nations received 8.8 billion Euros worth of EU funding to support innovation, research and development activities (Campaign for Science and Engineering, 2015). As the Campaign for Science and Engineering note, 50 per cent of the increase in research funding in UK universities between 2007/8 and 2013/14 could be attributed to EU sources.

Moreover, insofar as there has been any concerted public debate in the UK about the educational implications of leaving the EU it has been almost wholly directed at higher education, and framed in terms of the potential loss of EU students (at undergraduate and postgraduate levels), academic staff from EU member states, and restricted access to European sources of research funding and the weakening of international research collaborations (see, for example, Campaign for Science and Engineering, 2015; Hubble, 2016; and Frenk et al, 2016). Vocational education has, as forever tends to be the case in the UK, remained in the shadow of its more prestigious neighbour – academic higher education and universities.

European Social Fund support for skills programmes

The European Social Fund (ESF) has been a major source of funding for a variety of programmes aimed at the socially disadvantaged across the UK. Between 2014 and 2020 ESF funding for England was 3,468 million Euros (ESF, 2015). Activities relating to skills covered by ESF support have included programmes for unemployed adults, skills interventions aimed at boosting the qualification levels of adults with very low or no prior achievement of qualifications, and a range of programmes aimed at supporting young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). For an overview and evaluation of ESF-funded activities in England, see ESF (2015).

As Maguire and Keep (forthcoming) record, in all four UK nations the ESF has been a significant source of financial support for NEET policies, and with the UK's exit from the EU

the nature and scale of the new UK-wide Shared Prosperity Fund, which the UK government is introducing to replace ESF funding, is a source of considerable speculation. Without major new funding, a wide range of education and training interventions for the disadvantaged risk coming to an end (ibid, forthcoming).

International Benchmarking and policy borrowing

Over many years the UK Government has consistently relied heavily on two policy technologies – international benchmarking and policy borrowing – to help it frame its policy ambitions (Keep, 2008). Since the mid-nineteenth century British commentators have expressed concern about the relative weakness of our technical and vocational education and this has driven official inquiries and benchmarking exercises (for a history of these see Keep, 2008; and Huddleston, 2020). In recent times the main lens and conduit for this activity has been supplied, not by the EU, but by comparisons constructed and facilitated by the OECD (HM Government, 2014). Thus the UK Government’s review of the balance of competences, concluded that:

Under the broad heading of ‘policy co-ordination’, most respondents to the Call for Evidence supported, in principle, the notion that the EU could facilitate international benchmarking and sharing of best practice. However, there was mixed evidence about the quality of EU work in this area and whether it is making any difference. There is clearly much to learn from other education systems both within the EU and outside. The UK actively explores opportunities to examine other countries’ policies without EU involvement. Within the multilateral system, the OECD – a renowned global centre of expertise in education – is more often the catalyst for UK action. That said, UK Ministers and a range of other actors recognise that, done well, policy and best practice exchange through the EU could be a useful addition to other approaches, and indeed could be more useful than at present (HM Government, 2014, p. 25).

It also needs to be acknowledged that although UK policy makers are often keen on using benchmarking against other developed countries via exercises such as PISA and the adult skills survey (PIAC), and in setting national targets (for example on proportions of given age cohorts that have achieved a particular level of qualification) derived from international comparisons, their understanding of other countries’ skills systems is often rudimentary and superficial (Keep, 2008; Alexiadou and Lange, 2013).

One example is the enthusiasm of the current UK Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson, for proposing that his policy reforms will create a technical education system to beat Germany’s. In a speech to the Conservative Party annual conference in 2019 he promised to, “supercharge further education over the next decade with the aim of overtaking Germany in the opportunities we offer to those studying technical routes by 2029” (*Schools Week*, 30 September, 2019). He has recently repeated this objective, which reflects a long-standing UK obsession with the German apprenticeship system. More recently, Switzerland has become another country whose apprenticeship provision has been the subject of envious glances by UK government policy makers.

Williamson's speech discussing the creation of a German style vocational system ignores the cultural and institutional gulf that separates the two nations, and the relationships built over centuries in Germany between employers, unions and educational institutions; relationships that have been eroded, or simply did not exist in the UK (see Keep, 2008 and 2019a). Moreover, the UK has not been very good at achieving basic levels of policy learning, even between the four countries that make up the UK (Keep, 2019b), often because the UK government believes its policies to be inherently superior to those of the devolved nations (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) therefore refusing to engage in meaningful interchanges from which any useful lessons could be learned.

Skills competitions

Although not policy, another aspect of activities that provide opportunities for international comparisons and benchmarking come in the form of EuroSkills and WorldSkills Competitions, both of which the UK has been heavily involved in. The first *Skill Olympics*¹ were held between Portugal and Spain in 1950. The UK, along with five other European countries, joined this competition in 1953 with these events becoming known as the WorldSkills Competition (WSC). The WSC is organised by WorldSkills International (WSI). WSI is a non-profit association that promotes Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) internationally in traditional trades and crafts as well as in multi-skilled vocations, such as Manufacturing Team Challenge, and those utilising newer technologies and innovative services. The competition brings together around 1600 contestants mostly aged 16-22² from more than 60 countries, who gather every two years to compete publicly and demonstrate excellence in 56 skill areas.³ The skill areas are grouped into six skills sectors: Construction and Building Technology; Creative Arts and Fashion; Information and Communication Technology; Manufacturing and Engineering Technology; Social and Personal Services; and Transportation and Logistics.

In 2007, EuroSkills competitions were held for the first time, organised by WorldSkills Europe (<https://worldskillseurope.org/index.php>), under the umbrella of WSI and WSC. Young people up to the age of 25 from countries across Europe compete in more than 40 different skills (grouped in the above six skill sector) at the event. The UK have been sending competitors to EuroSkills since its inception. EuroSkills follows the same international standards as WSC and so are seen as a fertile training preparation for this competition. The WorldSkills competitions provided a quality benchmark for what constitutes high performance and an objective way to assess vocational excellence (James, 2016). The level of skill required to participate in international competitions sets an international standard for achievement in TVET providing criteria for judging the competitor's performance that 'set out what a capable practitioner must know, understand and do' (WS, 2020). In EuroSkills (and the WSC), the judges apply a set of grades against specific criteria. If a competitor is awarded 500 points or more they receive a Medallion of Excellence; 500 points is considered the benchmark of excellence. The highest score receives

¹ <http://www.worldskills.org/>

² Competitors must have been at least 16 years of age on 1st September 2013 to be eligible to compete during the 2013/14 competition cycle. Some skill areas such as Manufacturing Team Challenge have an upper age limit of 25.

³ TeamUK does not compete in every skill area.

gold, and then silver and then bronze. A score of at least 500 must be achieved to be awarded gold, silver or bronze.

The WorldSkills Occupational Standards reflect the global occupations or work roles that are represented by the WorldSkills Competition. The WorldSkills Standards Specifications (WS, 2020) provide a framework that:

- Cover the specialist, technical and generic skills that comprise intermediate work roles across the world;
- Set out what a capable practitioner must know, understand, and do;
- Are prepared, with guidance, by technical and vocational WorldSkills Experts;
- Are consulted upon and updated biennially with industry and business worldwide; and
- Indicate the relative importance of each section of the standards, as advised by industry and business.

These specifications act as a reference point to ‘establish the baseline from which to grow and reward authentic vocational performance’ (WS, 2020). The key value, particularly for this article, is that the standards are providing a benchmark for national and regional standards for EuroSkills and WorldSkills Members as they develop their own qualifications and TVET curriculum. Across countries of the European Union, including the four UK nations, there is now a growing mutual understanding of the standards required for excellence in many occupations (James Relly, 2020). The standards developed in the skills competitions are beginning to provide some cohesion as they help create a common, shared understanding across nations of what occupational standards and vocational excellence look like.

EU and UK RELATIONS CONCERNING POLICY

In pan-national policy formation, ideas and policies can flow in two directions, from the nation state to the over-arching supra-national body, or from the over-arching body to the constituent nations. Put simply, the UK government had no problem with the travel of policy ideas in the first case, but experienced a considerable lack of enthusiasm for the latter. They were happy for UK ideas to inform the policies and actions of other EU member states and the EU itself, but were unenthusiastic about any expectation that they might need to adopt and incorporate European goals and policies into UK national strategies. Given space constraints, this article cannot review in any detail the adoption of UK policies within Europe, but two ought at least to be noted.

European Qualifications Framework (EQF)

The first is the contribution that the development of competence-based vocational qualifications in the UK made to the development of National Qualification Frameworks (NQFs), and ultimately to the establishment of the EQF. Competence-based vocational qualifications and subsequently NQFs were originally an attempt to create parity of esteem between academic and vocational learning (Raggatt and Williams, 1999). Parity of esteem is purely an English concept that is not prevalent in other European countries; these attempts at parity between the two routes

are a peculiarly Anglo-centric phenomenon. In neighbouring Western Europe and Nordic countries, where there are distinct education and training pathways with regulated labour markets and license to practice requirements, achieving parity is much less of an issue (OECD/ILO, 2017); there is recognition that the existing routes – the vocational and the academic – that make up the education system in these countries have different purposes, for different stakeholders, with different outcomes; they can be complementary routes but are not analogous. Education policy in the UK has diverged widely in this respect.

One avenue by which parity of esteem was to be established was through the publication of standards-based linkages, which provided official tables of equivalence between different types of vocational and academic education qualifications (Shields and Masardo, 2018). The desire for equivalency stemmed from the proliferation of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) since the 1990s – over 142 countries have now developed a framework (Allais, 2017, p. 458). In particular the English NQF was an attempt to unify vocational and academic qualifications into a single qualifications framework to consolidate the three-track system – academic A-Levels, General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) and more narrowly-focused, occupationally-specific National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) – that had developed in the early 1990's (*Education and Training for the 21st Century* (DS/ED, 1991).

NQFs were designed 'to address perceived challenges such as the lack of transparency, inflexibility and fragmentation of qualifications and qualifications systems, the irrelevance of education and training to labour-market and social needs, or the need to enhance access and progression' (Raffe, 2013, p. 143). As Allais (2014), and Brockmann, Clarke, Winch (2011) observed, the UK's competence-based model has significant weaknesses and was in tension with many of the underlying cultural and philosophical conceptions that underpin European national vocational qualification design. Subsequently, and disturbingly given its NVQ basis, the English NQF had an important effect on the development of many national qualification frameworks and in turn the development of the European Qualifications Framework, which aimed to provide transparency and mutual recognition of awards across the Union (Allais, 2010).

The second major area where the UK has given Europe a policy lead comes in relation to higher education via the Bologna process, although this was an activity that took place outside the official auspices of the EU (HM Government, 2014). The English model of the three-year undergraduate bachelor degree provided a template that many European policy makers and university leaders chose to attempt emulating. In its Review, the UK government (2014, p. 26) concluded in relation to these two areas of work that:

The evidence demonstrated broad support for EU activity to strengthen alignment and compatibility of higher and vocational education and training systems and qualification structures as a useful contribution to student and labour mobility. In this context, most respondents commented positively about the Bologna Process for universities (which exists outside the framework of the EU) and supported UK participation on the current basis of voluntary cooperation. Similarly, contributors generally welcomed developments to improve comparability and recognition of vocational training systems across the EU through the Copenhagen Process. However, some respondents expressed concern about the prospects of

increased EU level prescription and standard setting in this domain and emphasised that the EU's role should be confined to supporting Member States and facilitating co-operation. That said, whilst the evidence clearly supported these voluntary frameworks in principle, hard evidence of their positive impact on [labour] mobility is difficult to come by.

When we turn to the UK's willingness to reciprocate and to adopt and embrace EU policy goals, the story is much less positive.

UK policy framing and ambitions

EU policy in education evolved over time, and having started with the design of programmes that facilitated activity such as research collaboration, inter-cultural understanding and student exchanges, it gradually came to embrace much broader policy goals. This move from practical activities to intervention in policy was not welcomed by the UK Government.

After Lisbon Council, and the subsequent development of the Europe 2020 Strategy, education opened up as a policy field within the limits set by the principle of subsidiarity, with the adoption of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) as the preferred vehicle for engaging and steering member states in policy thought and action around a set of common goals through learning from others (Alexiadou and Lange, 2013, p. 38). This, in the view of the UK Government (2014, p. 12):

morphed into an ambitious strategy based on target-setting at EU and national levels underpinned by national reporting, Commission analysis, peer and multilateral review and Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs). In parallel the Education (and Employment) Council has also increased the use of non-binding Council Recommendations and Conclusions which attempt to summarise and distil 'best practice' in education and training policy into normative approaches to be applied in line with national circumstances and systems.

The UK's overall response to the EU's increasing interest in seeking to set a European-level education and training agenda that could guide national policy formation centred around ignoring EU policies and targets, and, where this has not proved possible, by seeking to deflect and minimise their influence on the development and trajectory of UK policy (Alexiadou and Lange, 2013). This approach was followed consistently with no detectable variation over time, despite changes in the ideological hue of the party (or parties) in government.

As a result, EU policies and targets on skills remained invisible in the UK policy discourse. It is thus noticeable that, aside from brief references to participation in EU-funded programmes such as Erasmus and the value placed by government on securing ever-greater sums of EU research funding via Horizon and the European Research Council, there has been almost no substantive mention of EU's education policy in any major UK government policy document on education and training over the last 30 years. In many government green and white papers on education it would be impossible to deduce from the text that the UK had any formal relationship with the EU, or even that the EU existed.

Experience of the policy formation process that stands behind these official pronouncements confirms a complete lack of salience for EU policies or their objectives. One of the authors of

this article has been engaged in participant observation research within the UK government's skills policy process, and wider policy formation, at a range of levels, for more than 30 years. This research has consisted of participation in successive policy reviews (usually as a member of the academic advisory panel attached to the review process), as well as offering advice to the teams of civil servants who have been tasked with drafting government consultative and white papers. Across the course of this wide range of activities a number of consistent policy themes and concerns were visible, as were a number of long-running absences or gaps. One of the major absences was Europe. The researcher cannot recall a single occasion upon which European policies or goals concerning education and training were raised as a matter worthy of consideration when framing policy, either by those running the policy process or by the wider community of those who were involved in it. This covered governments made up of the three main UK political parties (Labour, Conservatives, and Liberal Democrats) think tanks allied to them, officials from government agencies working in the field of education and skills, academics and sometimes senior practitioners from the education system. Even when out of government and power, the political parties showed no signs of wishing to engage with EU skills policies or to use them as a reference point when framing their ambitions for the UK.

In practical terms, this implicit consensus led to the invisibility of the EU as a source of policy thinking, and a strong tendency by the UK government to resist or sidestep any efforts by the EU to concert action. For example, the EU's Education and Training 2020 Strategic Framework's objectives were expressed in a series of targets or benchmarks, and in 2011 two headline targets for education were set across the entire EU (by 2020 the EU average of early school leavers should be no more than 10 per cent, and by 2020 at least 40 per cent of 30-34 year olds should have completed tertiary education). The expectation was that member states would set national targets to support the achievement of these EU goals. In the event, the UK was the only member state which refused to do so, arguing that "this was unnecessary action at EU level and that target setting per se was not in line with national policy" (HM Government, 2014, p. 20). The UK government was particularly unwilling to allow the precedence to be set whereby it was seen to accept the EU's ability to, "set and monitor targets in an area of national competence" (HM Government, 2014, p. 32). The UK also refused to sign up to the EU's Youth Guarantee, which was aimed at combating rising levels of youth unemployment in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis (see Maguire and Keep, forthcoming).

In summary, the UK government (2014, p. 6) concluded that:

.... EU work on education, training and youth policy has had little impact on the UK and, in its more prescriptive form of EU-based recommendations, risks being perceived in some quarters as having pushed the boundaries of EU competence. In the UK, much of this work is largely invisible outside the bureaucratic structures in Brussels and Whitehall. There is very little evidence, either in submissions or in literature reviewed, of influence on policy or decision making in the UK.

Later on in the review report its authors note that, "Two submissions of evidence came from former British senior civil servants. Both were of the view that EU policy coordination was neither visible to the education sector on the ground, nor influential on national policy making

and ‘unlike the work of OECD, it is almost entirely unnoticed by the world of education’ (HM Government, 2014, p. 29). Moreover, the government was content with this state of affairs:

.... the balance of evidence gathered to inform this report suggests that there is little appetite for the EU to do more than support and facilitate national policymaking through best practice exchange and non-prescriptive, supportive approaches. This is very much the position of the UK Government which has repeatedly stressed that policy and decision making on education and youth policy, and systems, should remain a matter for national governments (ibid, p. 6).

REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

As Ellison (2016, p. 5) observed, the UK government’s wider relationship with the EU was marked from the very outset by a deep-seated ambivalence about the value to the UK of any kind of ‘European project’, and the guiding policy aim tended to be an attempt to have “the best of both worlds inside and outside of Europe”. Both of the large mainstream political parties (Conservative and Labour) tended to see and to talk about Europe as a trading bloc rather than as a political or cultural project, and the language of debates about our membership of and relationship with the EU were couched in grudging and often extremely transactional terms. This meant that the UK government often adopted a model for its relationship with the EU which rejected any kind of wider ‘European project’ or any dilution in or sharing of national sovereignty over E&T decision making. As a result, policy essentially came down to achieving the most favourable trade-off between material benefits received and the political sovereignty and room for manoeuvre surrendered to achieve this.

Thus the UK government was happy to participate in selected activities that offered the promise of funding and of relationships between educational institutions and their students that might prove beneficial to the UK partners. What it was strongly disinclined to do was to subscribe in any active sense to the EU’s wider policy goals around the skills aspects of the Lisbon Treaty and the subsequently-evolving, associated policy agenda, or to accept that the European Commission had any significant legitimacy to engage in policy formation on issues and objectives concerning education and training; these the UK deemed to be an entirely national issue, beyond the competence of the EU. Thus while the political discourse around Brexit has focused on ‘taking back control’ and regaining sovereignty (Bulmer and Quaglia, 2018), in the field of education policy the UK government was always at pains to avoid ceding or sharing any control with Brussels in the first place. As Alexiadou and Lange (2013, p. 38-39) observed, the result was that “...there is limited reception of EU education policies in domestic policy-making and that UK government education policy actors seek to deflect EU initiatives. In fact, we observe an *entrenchment* of cognitive commitments to national sovereignty over education policy-making, linked also to the UK’s history of scepticism towards the political dimension of the European integration project...” (emphasis in the original).

This approach is part of a wider pattern of behaviour, whereby the UK government has demonstrated a strong disinclination to share control of the education and training policy agenda with any other actors or stakeholders. Thus, not only has it fended off attempts at incursion by the EU, it has also refused to afford any influence to local or regional government in England, or

to the social partners (Keep, 2006, 2009). Indeed, the history of English education and training policy over the last 35 years has been characterised by a process of delocalisation, centralisation and nationalisation (Bash and Coulby, 1989) that has seen power migrate from other actors and levels towards central government and ministerial control. This trend is at variance with those that have been playing out in Europe, where in some countries (for example, Italy, Sweden, Finland and the Netherlands) aspects of skills policy have been devolved to localities and to greater oversight by social partnership bodies, and countries like Germany where this has long been the case.

As a result, when confronted with EU skills policies, individual schemes and programmes with a clearly defined purpose, particularly those which the UK could see as delivering material benefits to UK participants, were seen as being acceptable. Supranational policy formation was not accorded the same priority, firstly because it appeared to lack any direct material payoffs, but secondly because the basic underlying legitimacy of the idea of pooling political will and resources around shared goals with bodies outside the control of the UK government ran counter to one of the basic tenets of national policy. Moreover, any enthusiasm for the idea of EU policy in this area was undermined by an additional variety of factors (Oliver, 2015).

These included English exceptionalism, and a national press and political class that subscribed to a deep scepticism concerning any increase in European integration and any consequent diminution of national sovereignty. Underlying this were significant philosophical divides about the nature and role of the nation state and concepts such as citizenship (for a discussion of which, see various contributors to Kuhn and Sultana, 2006). Even in the field of vocational education and training (VET) these philosophical divides were apparent and made cooperation and arrival at a common view problematic. For example, as Brockmann, Clarke and Winch (2011) demonstrated, the UK's conceptualisations of what something as basic as a vocational curriculum and assessment system should look like and encompass are very different from those prevalent across continental Europe, and these divisions reflect and are rooted in profoundly divergent concepts and definition of vocational skill. Given these differences of motivation and understanding, it is not surprising that European policy discourses around grand concepts such as the European Learning Space fell on deaf ears in UK policy circles, just as did any wider attempts at promoting European values or forms of greater integration. Educational policy was unable to escape the 'gravitational pull' of wider national norms of Euroscepticism.

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