



SKILLS FOR PROGRESS: LEARNING THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS

ETF, April 2006

Introduction

Skills for Progress aims to reflect on and draw conclusions from experience and developments since the last Advisory Forum plenary meeting in 2003 and to identify the implications of the EU's new external assistance instruments for partner countries with partner country representatives, international colleagues and experts.

The concept of Skills for Progress has two main dimensions. Firstly, that skills formation through human resource development needs to be strongly represented in action plans and partner agreements in the new Instrument for Pre-accession, the European Neighbourhood Policy Instrument and the Development Co-operation and Economic Co-operation instrument; that education and training needs to be considered broadly as it affects many different policies, and that education and training needs to be included in poverty reduction strategies developed by partner countries together with international donors and agencies.

The second dimension of Skills for Progress relates to the further elaboration of policy learning based on developments and experience in partner countries over the past three years and seeks to identify how the approach could be taken forward in an operational sense for the future.

The 2006 Advisory Forum will examine the implications of these developments and will suggest that in the future, modernisation processes need to increasingly link different interests and stakeholders together in order to make the best use of the resources available.

Modernising education and training: contributing to economic and social objectives

Education and training systems play a major role in national debates covering both economic and social objectives, finding common boundaries in a range of policy areas. Education and training contribute directly to productivity and competitiveness, while at the same time supporting social participation and development as well enhancing health, democracy and general quality of life.

Strategies for the reform of education and training are becoming increasingly integrated to take account of a multiplicity of interests from diverse areas. An evolving policy approach incorporating employability, adaptability and continuous learning over the past decade has extended education and training beyond its historical institutional boundaries of school, apprenticeship, training, adult education and higher education to create new relationships between these traditional forms of learning. Employment strategies place greater emphasis on the deepening of the skills of the labour market and include education and training as a key element to achieve social cohesion through the development of employment pathways for disadvantaged groups. Similarly, enterprise development is perceived as relying on the ability of firms to combine knowledge and insights from the education sector with their practical needs to enhance competitiveness. Education and training contributes to the development of human resources and adds value across a broadening range of economic and social policy areas.

The multiple contributions of education and training present policy makers with both opportunities and challenges. The opportunities arise from the potential of education and training to serve a range of interrelated policy goals and economic and social purposes; the challenges relate to the coordination and governance implications of this multiple contribution and the capacities necessary for its realisation.

An approach to the preparation of policy strategies which relies mainly on technical and specialist expertise seems insufficient. Experience suggests that effective reform is as much a social process as a technical one and that it is not possible without building partnerships and collaboration between different parts of the system.

Effective inter-ministerial cooperation between HRD policies, strong social dialogue and the awareness and active involvement of key actors all contribute to functioning links as regards policy goals and necessary reforms.

In policy making, working collaboratively through partnerships can facilitate the identification of problems to be addressed, the respective roles that various actors can play, the concrete steps that can be taken, and the timetables for their achievement. In policy implementation, an emphasis on partnership and

collaboration will enable the distribution and sharing of information, coordination of policy in the context of processes that are instrumental to its achievement, the interpretation of results and decision-making on progress.

In the context of partner countries, where there are multiple policy challenges and limited resources, developing approaches that realise and support the potential that human resource development can bring, requires effective governance and cooperation between different stakeholders. Knowledge of how an initiative is likely to meet the requirements of the policy challenges of a particular context will tend to be held by those who are expected to work with it. Drawing on practical knowledge and experience in the design of specific strategies may anticipate some difficulties and lessons that subsequently emerge from evaluation, thereby saving time and resources and accelerating the modernisation process.

An additional feature of modernisation strategies for education and training in Europe has been increasing cooperation and learning between Member States. International initiatives include: HRD policy development in the European Employment Strategy, the elaboration of the Bologna process and its framework for a European Area of Higher Education and the creation of the Education and Training 2010 agenda (or more familiarly, the Copenhagen process) with proposals for key competencies, a common quality assurance framework for VET and a blueprint for a European Qualifications Framework. These initiatives are intended to support the contribution of education and training to the improvement of Europe's competitiveness as a region and as a centre in the international economy.

The initiatives have provided a strong basis for policy learning and reflect political agreements between Member States that support common objectives while recognising the specificity of national interests and traditions in education and training.

The process between EU Member States is supported by the Open Method of Co-ordination¹ (OMC) as an approach based on so called 'soft law mechanisms' that encourage EU Member States to exchange practices and increase policy learning in areas which remain a primary responsibility of national governments but are of concern to many countries as a whole, such as long-term unemployment, and education and training.

Over time, the approach will encourage a greater convergence of national policies. The OMC includes a range of processes: guidelines and indicators, benchmarking and sharing of best practices, multilateral reviewing. Compliance is voluntary and there are no sanctions. The effectiveness of the approach results from multilateral monitoring and peer pressure between the EU Member States.

By committing the EU Member States to share information, compare themselves to one another and reassess policies against relative performance, the process is emerging as a valuable tool for promoting deliberative problem solving and cross national learning and collaboration.

The ETF has strongly cooperated with the Education and Training 2010 agenda and key elements of it are being used as background in its work with partner countries. These cooperative approaches have in some cases provided a valuable reference point for partner countries seeking information on policy approaches in Member States. The further development of these approaches between Member States is likely to have a growing influence in the external relations context, both as possible sources of content and as elements that may need to be taken into account in related policy areas, e.g. migration policies and the recognition of skills between partner countries and the EU. In addition, there appear to be lessons that can be drawn from the process itself as a means of sharing knowledge and experience between states.

In the initial period of the ETF's operation much of the focus of education and training reform was mainly on making changes through instrumental reform measures, such as the renovation of curricula, teacher training, text books, or the adoption of specific forms of standards. With greater insight obtained from experience in the late 1990s and early 2000s, it was seen that specific approaches were insufficient and that reform processes also needed to address the organisation of education and training within a systems perspective and that the development of appropriate policies to address reforms was a learning process for each country in its own context and was unlikely to be advanced by the simple adoption of measures being pursued in other countries.

¹ The Open Method of Coordination (OMC) is becoming increasingly important as a new mode of governance in the European Union. It was formally introduced by the Lisbon European Council of March 2000 although policy processes embodying several features of the OMC had already been in operation throughout the preceding decade

During the three years since 2003, policy orientations have emphasised greater integration of education and training with employment strategies combined with a stronger focus on lifelong learning. Vocational education and training policies have changed to encompass not only the improvement of relevance, but also that education and training provide pathways and opportunities that enable individuals to continue learning throughout their lives. The experience of the last three years suggests that successful policy learning in this new context requires maximising the flow of information, knowledge and experience between different levels and parts of education and training and employment systems. It also indicates that this can be achieved through building greater collaboration and partnerships between the different stakeholders and actors in the system.

New directions for external assistance

In 2007, the European Commission will introduce a series of new instruments to support external assistance programmes for partner countries. Over the past decade or more, external assistance has been supported through a number of regional programmes: Phare for accession countries, MEDA for the countries of the Mediterranean, Tacis for the states of the former Soviet Union and CARDS for South Eastern Europe. From 2007, these programmes will be replaced by a new suite of instruments designed to create greater coherence in the area of external assistance. There will be three new programmes:

- The Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA);
- The European Neighbourhood Partnership Instrument (ENPI); and
- The Development Co-operation and Economic Co-operation Instrument (DCEC).

The IPA and ENPI instruments are intended to support activities that promote closer integration with the European Union and contribute to stability while facilitating economic growth. For countries considered in the pre-accession instrument, the relationship may lead to accession – with varying and long timescales². For Eastern European countries and countries of the Mediterranean region, the relationship is defined as participation in a neighbourhood. Central Asian Republics currently covered by Tacis will in the future be covered by the DCEC instrument³.

The Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA⁴) which will provide support to Turkey and the existing candidate countries of South Eastern Europe, as well as the remaining countries of that region.

The Neighbourhood Instrument⁵ integrates two regions associated with the ETF's work previously covered by the MEDA and Tacis Programmes – the Mediterranean region and the region of Eastern Europe covering Moldova, Ukraine, Russia, and the Southern Caucasus⁶. Russia will operate within the scope of the policy but will participate within a specific framework of four common spaces⁷ with the EU. The largest area participating in the policy comprises the countries of the MEDA region which currently operate within the Barcelona Agreement. The ENP goes beyond this to offer economic integration and inclusion in networks. It is therefore complementary to the Barcelona Process as it allows each country to develop closer links with the EU, based on its particular needs and capacities⁸.

² Seven ETF countries and territories are included in the Pre-Accession Instrument: Serbia and Montenegro; Kosovo; Albania, former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; Bosnia and Herzegovina; Croatia; and Turkey; Mediterranean countries included in the ENPI are Tunisia, Israel, West Bank and Gaza Strip; Egypt; Morocco; Algeria; Syria; Lebanon; Jordan; Libya may also eventually participate

³ Brussels, 29.9.2004 com(2004) 629 final 2004/0220 (cod) proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a financing instrument for development cooperation and economic cooperation - http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/lex/LexUriServ/site/en/com/2004/com2004_0629en01.pdf

⁴ IPA: http://europa.eu.int/comm/enlargement/docs/pdf/com2004_0627en01.pdf

⁵ ENPI: http://europa.eu.int/comm/world/enp/pdf/getdoc_en.pdf

⁶ Belarus may participate following settlement of their relations with the EU

⁷ Four common spaces for Russia: freedom, security and justice, external security, and research and education

⁸ http://europa.eu.int/comm/world/enp/faq_en.htm#1.6

Neighbourhood assistance has the objective of encouraging development towards achieving a) stakes in the EU's internal markets and institutions⁹, b) closer integration with the EU's internal market, and c) progressive participation in EU policies and programmes¹⁰, e.g., the European Commission has proposed participation in Tempus Plus.

Overtime, the Neighbourhood Instrument will provide partner countries with a pathway to a level of engagement with the EU that includes everything but the institutions of Parliament, the Ministerial Council and the Commission..... 'If a country has reached this level, it has come as close to the Union as it can be without being a member¹¹.'

The new instruments are intended to bring greater coherence to external assistance. In doing so, the new instruments contain significant commonalities of approach, including,

- a human resource development perspective;
- the use of sector wide approaches to mitigate fragmentation of assistance and promote greater local ownership and management; and
- closer co-operation with the EU and across partner countries.

Neighbourhood objectives are distinguished from the goals of previous programmes by promoting mutual commitments¹² – financial and policy related – to be achieved by completion of periodic action plans¹³. Each action plan will address specific country circumstances and themes identified within the Neighbourhood Policy¹⁴. Progress in achieving the plans is to be periodically monitored jointly by the EU and the partner country. The action plans reflect mutual conditionality in the instrument in the sense that there is shared ownership in the progress of the plans.

The anticipated programme¹⁵ for Development Co-operation and Economic Co-operation adds a third dimension to changes in external assistance. The proposal covers the full range of countries incorporated in OECD's DAC list¹⁶ and differs from the IPA and ENPI in that its principal approaches are shaped by the EU's development policy and the Millennium Development Goals rather than the possibility of closer integration with the EU.

The strategic aims of ENPI and IPA for partner countries and the EU place a stronger requirement for considering the application of internal EU approaches in the context of partner countries, i.e. the promotion of the 'external projection of internal policies'¹⁷.

For education and training this suggests bringing recent EU internal developments closer to partner countries, e.g. promoting awareness and innovations in areas associated with the Education and Training 2010 agenda, the Bologna process and the use of common principles as part of greater European cooperation. The availability of these approaches provides partner countries with examples of how education and training can be used to contribute socio-economic development and objectives¹⁸.

For the Mediterranean group of countries covered by the ENPI, priorities for inclusion in the action plans in the area of education and training are guided by the Barcelona Agreement and the prospective work

⁹ Giving partner countries a "stake in the internal market" is a long-term objective. The process will be gradual. 'It is not possible, at present, to define exactly what a "stake in the internal market" will mean as this will depend on each country – on what the country decides is a priority area for greater economic integration with the EU and on whether it then implements the necessary (EU-compatible) reforms to enable it to participate in that EC programme or policy area. It is clear, however, that free movement of persons is not on the agenda for the foreseeable future', http://europa.eu.int/comm/world/enp/faq_en.htm#3.14

¹⁰ ENP Strategy paper 12-05-04: added value, p8: http://europa.eu.int/comm/world/enp/pdf/strategy/Strategy_Paper_EN.pdf

¹¹ Romano Prodi, former President of the European Commission

¹² Communication from the Commission to the Council on the Commission proposals for action plans under the European Neighbourhood Policy, 2004

¹³ Action plans: http://europa.eu.int/comm/world/enp/pdf/action_plans/Communication_Commission_ENP_Action_Plans.pdf

¹⁴ ENPI, article 2, scope of assistance

¹⁵ Proposed joint statement to be by the Council, the European Parliament, and the Commission 13-7-05

¹⁶ OECD Development Assistance and Corporation Directorate's list of countries receiving public aid: www.oecd.org/dac/stats/daclist

¹⁷ Brussels, 29.9.2004: COM(2004) 626 final; Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament On the instruments for external assistance under the future financial perspective 2007-2013

¹⁸ Europass is designed to encourage mobility and make qualifications and skills easily understood throughout Europe by 2010: http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/europass/index_en.html

programme 2005-2010 for the Euro-Mediterranean partnership¹⁹. The action plans developed for the Mediterranean countries incorporate higher or vocational education reform in line with EU developments²⁰. Of the remaining countries in the neighbourhood group, the action plans of Ukraine and Moldova also include measures related to reforming and upgrading education and training systems towards convergence with EU standards and practices, including Bologna²¹. Action plans are under preparation for the Caucasus.

In addition to highlighting education and training as potential source of assistance, the ENPI includes the possibility of actions related to poverty reduction²² which plays a strong role within the DCEC instrument.

The instruments are to be interpreted broadly and enable many policy issues to be addressed²³. A key challenge identified in the instruments is the need to ensure coherence between the internal policy themes of the EU and the assistance needs of partner countries as defined in country reports, strategy reports and action plans.

Policy progress

More than half of the partner countries pursuing vocational education reform are doing so in the context of a national strategy for education related to a specific timescale. These vary with some placed within a short cycle, e.g. 3-5 year plans, and others with a longer term perspective, e.g. 2020. The pattern reflects an approach that places vocational education in the context of national economic development in which improvements in the supply of labour quality is a high priority. Few countries appear to be targeting specific sectors as primary agents of reform although many countries, either as a result of international assistance or domestic priority setting, are using specific sectors to pilot or test innovations prior to the generalisation of a programme or approach through the system.

Although most countries have developed or are at advanced stages of the preparation of national strategies, all are experiencing difficulties translating their ambitions into practice. This emerges from problems related to resources or to policy and education management capacities.

Governance issues remain important with most countries following a twin track approach that combines decentralisation or more discretionary coordination and management and the closer involvement of social partners through either consultation, sharing of training delivery, or direct representation on key advisory or development committees or agencies. As with strategy development, the implementation process has difficulties. In some cases, social partners do not exist or are insufficiently engaged to provide support and in other cases the decentralisation has been promoted without a commensurate increase in resources for the regional level. Major changes are underway in the Mediterranean region with significant initiatives occurring in Morocco and Egypt, where a new form of delegated responsibility is being introduced.

Financing patterns vary greatly and access to investment continues as a constraint. Innovations appear to be most strongly underway in the Mediterranean region where several training funds based on some form of business levy or tax are being established in Algeria, Morocco, Egypt and Jordan. Although still being implemented, these funds are intended to provide a source of revenue to support the expansion of continuing training allowing direct budget support to vocational education to concentrate on initial VET. In the majority of countries in the other regions of South Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe, funding has been stable with few examples of strong increases. The most common source of funding is direct budget support to delivery through vocational schools with limited expansion of resources to support growth.

Quality assurance represents a major reform element in all countries. Quality improvements are being addressed through a mixture of input and output measures, e.g. improved teacher training, new curricula, or the adoption of new assessment arrangements based on outcomes. In countries that have

¹⁹ http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/euomed/news/ip05_419.htm

²⁰ Israel Action Plan p 20, para 2.6 dialogue with EU on education and training ; Jordan Action Plan, p24, para 64; Morocco Action Plan 2004, p33, para 78; Tunisia Action Plan 2004, p31, para 71; Palestinian Authority includes general statements on upgrading

²¹ Ukraine Action plan 2004 p26, paras 66 and 67 ; Moldova action plan 2004, p 29, paras 75-76

²² ENPI, article 2, (f)

²³ See Instruments future financial perspectives, p10

yet to create strong links between their VET systems and the labour market, progress in quality assurance reform appears to be the slowest. School retention is problematic in most countries and is affected by a lack of curriculum relevance in VET and the availability of qualification pathways that could serve as alternatives to the school leaving qualification that normally leads to university. Innovations being followed in the area of quality assurance are generally moving towards institutional accreditation following the trend towards decentralisation and stakeholder management. This is expected to increase following the broader dissemination of the Common Quality Assurance Framework, developed at the European level, and the Bologna guidelines on quality assurance in higher education.

Policy challenges

Despite the progress achieved across partner countries, the range of challenges in modernising education and training systems are considerable and cover both the extent of the problems to be addressed and the capacities to address them

Labour market strategies are only weakly elaborated in most countries. Although collection initiatives are underway, data on different groups is uneven across the regions and the capacities of countries to gather data and translate it into strategies are limited in many cases. Institutional cooperation between employment and education ministries appears insufficiently coherent to provide support to an overall policy framework for the labour market that integrates education with employability. However, the use of active labour market programmes involving training is widespread and generally a consistent option to address unemployment. The value or effectiveness of this training is largely unmeasured and unclear. Support to the improvement of this capability is underway in most countries either through EU projects, the World Bank or through bilateral assistance from EU Member States or the United States. The area remains problematic for most countries with large differences frequently evident between rural and urban areas and between males and females. Data on employment rates from the Enlargement and South Eastern European region – where data is most elaborated – show strong diversities in employment and participation rates. In Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey, where the Joint Assessment Process of the European Employment Strategy has operated, policy is most advanced.

Movements towards greater provision of continuing vocational training (CVT) are limited. Whereas there is evidence that lifelong learning as a policy idea is understood and supported by partner country governments, concrete actions have been limited. It may be that initiatives such as national qualification frameworks create an institutional background that supports the development of new 'middle level' qualifications for adult workers; however, where data is available specific results are hard to find.

In a series of analyses of the needs and circumstances of partner countries that could be supported by the ENPI and the IPA instruments, the ETF has identified a broad series of policy issues requiring attention. These include:

- lack of quality in education and training services;
- lack of relevance to the labour market in curricula and in teaching methods;
- low level of private sector involvement in education and training;
- under financing;
- limited opportunity for skills upgrading, including a lack of adult education programmes;
- high unemployment rates for new entrants to the labour market;
- mismatch between the supply of and demand for skilled workers in certain occupations;
- scarcity of skilled jobs;
- labour market rigidities associated with employment;
- the persistence of supply-driven logic in agencies responsible for education and training and isolation from prevailing labour market needs;

- poverty;
- the existence of significant gender differences and a need to address women, early school leavers from the education system;
- the extent of participation in the informal economy;
- social exclusion issues linked to minorities, disadvantaged, and underdeveloped regions.

In some countries, the impact of the transition process on enterprise-based training has been negative, there has been a decrease in public funding of education, training methods and technical equipment were shown to be obsolete and there was a shift in education choices in favour of general and academic education. In these situations the absence of an integrated education and training policy was leading to the inability to attract young people into VET, as well as a failure to respond to the growing population of young people and to existing or foreseen qualification demand.

Similarly, in many situations, the absence of a comprehensive and well-integrated employment strategy meant that when there were relatively high unemployment levels and structural imbalances in the labour market, governments were unable to intervene in a coordinated manner that used available training and development resources to minimise the impact on the population.

The analyses also identified that the solutions lay not only at the national level, but that policy also needs to allow and provide incentives at the local level in order for it to be active in pursuing initiatives that support the growth of education and training, e.g. notwithstanding trends towards decentralisation, there is a relatively greater need for more school autonomy to enable schools to use their resources to respond to local demand for training opportunities from industry. The enabling of such collaboration would build mutually supportive partnerships whereby the schools acquired greater knowledge of industry skill needs while enterprises accessed the training they required.

Local partnerships and training networks were considered as necessary to target skills development geared towards poverty alleviation, aiming also at skills for the informal economy, and at a level of skills and competence that would also make it possible for people to move out of the low skill informal sector where most of the poor seek their livelihoods. A significant problem was that schools did not interact sufficiently with their environment to work jointly with partners on the issues of employment and social inclusion.

There were also problems of weak cooperation between governmental bodies, poor communication with other partners and, in some cases, high turnover among policy makers and key officials.

As an analysis of one country found: 'New ideas in the programme appear to be sometimes only declared, without proper contextualisation and defining indicators of achievement of change, which results in not very realistic action planning within short timeframes.'²⁴

The comment reflected experience in many other countries. Many of the challenges of modernisation related to resource problems, but the availability of resources may not be the only solution. Additional resources may also encounter difficulties of absorption, leading to delays in implementation.

In some cases, the preparatory phase of the reform, in which dialogue among the stakeholders should have taken place, seems to have been too short. As a result, reform strategies frequently experienced a lack of real integration and cooperation leading to duplicated efforts and missed opportunities. It may be that cooperation and consensus on actions and priorities under the broad concept of reform instinctively takes place between teachers, local communities, national and regional stakeholders and government departments, whose legislative and administrative influences shape reforms. However, in the complex and multiple interconnections and pressures for reform, the active pursuit of cooperation and consensus is likely to enhance the effective use of resources.

The difficulties associated with implementing a reform programme within a short period under a broadly estimated timetable should not necessarily be surprising since all governments across the world face similar problems, e.g. local level officials and agencies are often too busy coping with everyday problems to address the policy issues they are expected to appreciate and respond to.

²⁴ ETF analyses of partner countries for ENPI, ETF publication series, 2006

The challenges in addressing the complexity of human resource development are compounded by the need to coordinate the assistance provided to countries through external donors, e.g. education and training is frequently raised in discussions in the development of strategies for poverty reduction, however, until recently the value of education and training beyond primary education has not been recognised in the poverty reduction strategies developed between partner countries and international donors. Beyond this there are continuing difficulties associated with the fragmentation of assistance and the differences of approach and priorities and funding schedules associated with donor assistance.

The range of challenges reveals problems in the modernisation process at both the macro level and at the ground level. There is a relationship between initial policy development and implementation. The challenges identified in the progress of reform may be ameliorated by taking into account, during the policy process itself, the length, unpredictability and range of actions that might be necessary to carry out the policy in the local context, i.e. by bringing the design and implementation process closer together through the sharing of knowledge between the parties to the reform. In this perspective, strategies and policies are not only the product of technical processes created by experts, but actively produced in the context of stakeholders working together in practice.

Learning through partnerships

The use of collaborative partnerships between stakeholders in the modernisation process will increase opportunities to connect the various elements of the process together.

In all regions, there are examples of where the development of partnerships has contributed to the reform process, for example:

- In Russia, in the Volgograd Oblast where school and enterprise collaborations have improved the relevance of curricula to the labour market;
- In Romania, where cooperation between social partners at regional level has led to a range of projects under ESF support
- In Syria where dialogue between government and employers has contributed to the reform of the apprenticeship system; and
- In Kosovo where different stakeholders are discussing the development of a new qualification framework.

Collaboration breaks down barriers to problem solving and enables experience and information to be shared. Working in partnership draws more people into the process and increases the range of opinions, problems, and experiences that can be used as inputs to addressing the challenge of modernisation. Similarly, the ability to connect different groups and interests together increases the possibility that difficulties and bottlenecks between different elements of the education and training system, e.g. administration, quality, resourcing and delivery, can be identified and incorporated in the implementation process. Working in partnership also means that learning has a greater possibility of being distributed throughout the system more fully.

Partnerships and collaborative approaches have been identified by the ETF in its analyses of the challenges facing partner countries as being able to provide leverage in the facilitation of reforms and modernisation in all regions.

Collaborations establish patterns of institutional behaviour that build ownership over policy options and promote capacity building in the country in policy development. Such interactions can lead to learning partnerships between the stakeholders where there is a growing experience of knowledge sharing about reform options.

As time progresses such partnerships enable stakeholders to develop new knowledge about what options work best in their local environment. The collaborative process produces two forms of learning amongst stakeholders. Firstly, learning about the tasks that have to be jointly undertaken and how best to perform them together in the context of options available in the circumstances; secondly, learning about the options available in the context and how to change or adapt them to undertake new tasks.

This takes place through dialogue where interested groups learn about the issues and how to take processes forward.

Broadening the circle of participation represents a significant governance difficulty in many systems where ministry programmes were originally developed to support education and training services in different economic systems or are only beginning to address the major issues associated with their reform strategies. In many countries the systems of governance are centralised, limited in their resources and lacking established routines for engaging stakeholders and incorporating advice and interests.

The challenge of collaborative processes will in some circumstances be a complicating process for some countries, but, when it is finished, it could move the modernisation process very much further forward.

Examples of partnerships and collaborations that support modernisation processes include:

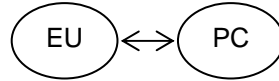
- Integrating agency partnerships between different ministries, e.g., ministries of labour, education or economic affairs, in the preparation of a national strategy or in the formalisation of a national authority on education and training;
- Multi-stakeholder partnerships between different ministries, levels of government, and social partners, for the design and implementation of policy frameworks, including the participation of the social partners in the formation of labour market and employment strategies and improving institutional capacities to design and implement systemic reforms, e.g. the training of teachers and upgrading of adults.
- Sector based partnerships between sectoral or social partner interests in industry groups that hope to address problems related to the quality and relevance of education and training and the mismatch between the output of VET provision and the skill needs of industries and services, including the needs of small business. Updating outdated curricula and bringing expertise into the implementation process by engaging teachers and trainers.
- Regional and local partnerships and policy networks between regional authorities and institutions and business interests within a geographic area to facilitate policy formulation and implementation;
- Local institution-enterprise partnerships and relationships designed to share information and experience across business and education and ensure that school curricula outcomes are related to local needs;
- Government-donor partnerships that aim to ensure the coordination of external assistance through the development of sector wide strategies that connect priorities and projects into an integrated programme thereby supporting budgetary design to focus investment on key issues in HRD financing and improve the ability of partner countries to absorb assistance.
- International framework agreements such as the Bologna agreement in which different countries agree to work towards common approaches in aspects of higher education and the modernisation of course management in higher education.

Partnerships appear to operate within the context of different levels or areas:

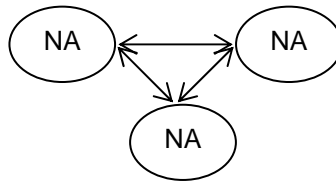
- Between the EU and partner countries
- Between national authorities in partner countries
- Between national authorities and stakeholder groups in partner countries; and
- Between local and national groups

Collaborative partnerships for learning

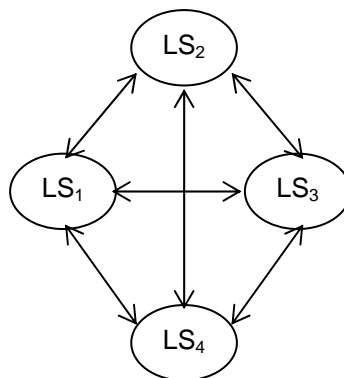
Partnerships between the EU and partner countries



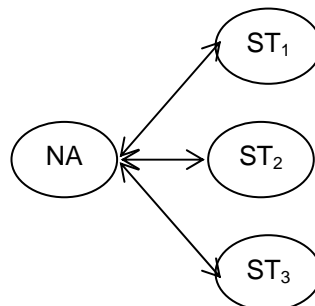
Partnerships between national authorities



Partnerships between local stakeholders



Partnerships between national authorities and stakeholders



There is no formal definition of partnerships that is suited to all circumstances. The key feature of partnerships is that those engaged in the process aim to achieve something that they could not do alone. Some partnership processes could be formal and highly structured, such as an inter-ministerial council or an established dialogue process between donors, or informal such as local education and

training reference group that meets regularly to discuss and share information on how ensure graduates have the skills required by the local community.

The capacities and skills necessary to produce collaboration are neither technical nor bureaucratic, but rather the competencies to promote dialogue and discussion and to share information between policy actors. This contributes to ensuring local decision making during the policy cycle is informed on priorities and directions that are necessary and effective for the operation of the system. The competencies require more knowledge and experience on how various actors work together and the constraints and possibilities they confront.

In this broader perspective, the aim is to promote policy making and implementation through strategies based on collaborative dialogue that aim to accelerate:

- learning and exploration of policy options available internationally;
- interaction and cooperation during the process of change and adaptation; and
- relevance and ownership in the process.

Collaborative partnership building is designed to address these issues through a series of principles and concepts

- a systems approach in which the sectors undergoing reform are understood holistically, rather than as loosely related components;
- an adaptive approach based on experiential learning by local stakeholders and policy makers in their own contexts;
- collaborative content development – what stakeholders learn by working together constitutes new knowledge that contributes to the design and implementation of appropriate strategies.

Participatory engagement in which the people who directly experience the difficulties of implementation are experts in the topic and should be directly involved in the formulation of solutions and that all ideas and opinions need to be considered and given equal weight, not only those of experts.

Decisions that are reached collaboratively can result in high-quality outcomes that are easier to implement, receive fewer administrative challenges, make better use of available resources, and more directly address the constraints faced by users. Simply, better policy can be made when decision-makers have deeper understanding of the interests and experiences of all those involved.

Supporting policy learning through partnerships

The support to overcoming challenges in the operation of education and training systems remains a strong feature of the EU's external assistance programmes. The new instruments are intended to facilitate EU-partner country relationships through the preparation and monitoring of an action plan or similar agreement such as the accession partnership or within the DCEC instrument. These could include specific European cooperative approaches²⁵ which would assist with the creation of the possibilities of greater links.

However, a continuing lesson from the past three years is that the added value of international assistance is restricted by difficulties in integrating project outputs into policy programming or to progress their implementation in the partner country contexts. The existence of constraints between the different levels of education and training systems and which inhibit implementation, suggests that reform processes need to consider the impact of institutional frameworks, i.e. policy and strategy development will need to consider the impact and leverages that could apply at different levels of the HRD system including organisations as well as people. Institutional adaptation completes the learning cycle between individuals and institutions. It involves reconfiguring existing priorities, procedures and resource allocations to produce actions that sustain the goals of the reform strategy. The suitability of the

²⁵ For example, the use of qualification frameworks as was suggested by the ETF for several countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia and South Eastern Europe.

priorities, resource allocations, and procedures to the local context depends on communication and feedback between the users of the reform strategy and its initiators. As the feedback and communication between stakeholders matures, it generates new practices and a shared knowledge about what works in the partner country. It is achieved in the partner country by local policy makers and stakeholders.

By involving stakeholders closely throughout the various phases of the project cycle derived from action plans, the objective of ensuring that projects correspond to the needs of the partner country is more likely to be met. Such an approach may also increase community willingness to pay, as well as building long-term interest and involvement in the operation and maintenance of assets. The pooling of knowledge and skills also enables partners to develop gradually more sensitive methods of project evaluation that can reduce the likelihood and costs of ex post default or project failure.

At the local and regional levels, partnerships are likely to promote learning by acting as networks or communities of practice in which the participants representing different interests collaborate to overcome their difficulties. Working through a community of practice, e.g. a collaboration between a series of vocational schools and a group of employers, not only leads to sharing of information on possible content and, but also the creation of structures that can assist with the direction of external assistance²⁶.

The issue of collaboration will also have an impact on the nature of assistance. The role of experts will change in a policy learning orientated environment which aims to encourage greater ownership of solutions in partner countries. In this respect a key role of the ETF could be to ensure that 'technical expert' focus of assistance more fully evolves into a design and facilitation focus with content anchored in the context of partner countries.

In external assistance context, developing a broader and more systemic approach to the sharing of transnational experiences in implementation and policy development would strengthen the learning that is achieved in the process of reform.

The range of policy learning instruments available to partner countries to support regional cooperation is more fragmented than those available to Member States. ETF projects such as peer learning, Copenhagen dissemination and development projects although containing significant regional elements and useful as a source of experimentation or innovation are much more limited in scale and unlikely to progress reform across partner countries at a similar rate.

This could include options that extended peer learning and review activities, and the voluntary development of regional or shared benchmarks on education and training variables such as expenditure and participation, i.e. a learning mechanism that was similar to or based on the Open Method of Coordination functioning amongst EU Member States. The development of such a mechanism would need coordinated discussion and action plans supported by participating partner countries.

The development of such collaborations could contribute to the returns to both the partner country and the EU to the instruments by identifying the priorities that are important for the specific country contexts, e.g. to date, some of the inclusions in the Neighbourhood action plans are generalised statements indicating broadly achieving EU norms in education²⁷ and training. Such collaborations could also identify the possible complementarities between education and employment policies to provide an overall perspective on HRD strategies for the countries.

The overall impact of these mechanisms would be to support policies that were viable at different levels of the system in terms of policy objectives, the needs of users, the timescales for achievement, the relevance of the problems being addressed in the partner country context, and the suitability of the means used to overcome them. Putting these into practice through partnerships between collaborating interests and stakeholders provides a basis for policy learning that is more likely fitted to the reform context.

²⁶ There are many examples of such collaborations between enterprises and schools in partner countries.

²⁷ Michael Emerson and Gergana Noutcheva, *From Barcelona Process to Neighbourhood Policy Assessments and Open Issues*, Centre for European Policy Studies CEPS Working Document No. 220/March 2005'