

## The rise and change of the competence strategy: reflections on twenty-five years of skills policies in the EU

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## *The rise and change of the competence strategy: reflections on twenty-five years of skills policies in the EU*

### 1. *Introduction.*

Recent initiatives at European Union (EU) level have served to remind us that attempts to introduce a competence-based approach to learning have a long history within the European educational field (Mulder, 2014). Competences have been among the most debated concepts in both education and social policy for the better part of the last three decades. Strategic frameworks and agendas have emphasized their importance to stimulate growth and increase productivity (Council of the European Union, 2000; 2004; European Commission, 2001; 2012), as well as for coping with changing economic structures and building resilience to labour market shocks (European Commission, 2016, 2017). Meanwhile, within education, the debate on competence has functioned as a staging ground for reform programs focused on ideas of integrated curricula and student-centred teaching and learning, in both vocational and academic tracks (Cedefop, 2009a, 2009b; Gordon et al. 2012).

Since the early 1990s, growing inter-linkages between European economies, combined with technological advances, mutability of policy boundaries, and, crucially, the progressive elimination of internal border controls have laid the foundations for unprecedented interconnectedness: a complex network of institutions, ideas, interests and mobility flows that has since come to characterize the continental scene. This scenario, in turn, has seen the emergence of a new need for a common European educational framework, a trans-national discourse on modern learning and development ‘targeting a consensus in terms of goals, teacher accreditation and comparable learning outcomes’ (Gordon et al. 2012: 13).

The emergence of a *competence strategy* should be counted among the most significant developments to date, with respect to the consolidation of a European educational discourse (Nõvoa and Lawn, 2002). In today’s EU, the phrase ‘competence strategy’ functions as a catch-all term for a mixed set of policy initiatives and programs, broadly sharing the aim to open up Member States’ education systems to the use of the concept of competence, with the view of realigning the outcomes of school-based learning processes with the new social, economic and cultural environment. Mainstays of the competence strategy, in this respect, are the *definition of a European baseline of key competences*, deemed essential for modern citizenship and to thrive in a ‘global knowledge economy’ (European Parliament and Council of the EU 2006), and the diffusion of *frameworks for competence assessment* across the EU, aimed to harmonize qualification levels, increase transnational mobility and ultimately provide transparency in terms of educational achievements (Council of the European Union 2008). A further objective has been that of engaging a transformation in curriculum design thinking in Europe, away from models based on traditional disciplinary knowledge to ones prioritizing *learning outcomes*, defined by Cedefop (2009) as ‘statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do after completion of learning’.

The notion of competence is clearly connected to, while noticeably distinct from, that of skills. The history of skills policy is a much longer one, generally connected more to the field of training than that of general education, in which skills are understood as those technical abilities required to carry out a particular function. The move to a competence framework is a broadening out of the educational policy to include skills, traditionally associated with training, alongside knowledge, behaviours, attitudes and character traits. A competence cannot merely be defined as a demonstrable set of skills: such skills must be accompanied by a broader, and perhaps less tangible, psychological constitution.

While the concept of competence-based education remains rooted in long-standing theories of *learning transfer* – the twofold capacity to apply knowledge and abilities to multiple contexts, and to adapt previous knowledge in order to more easily acquire new information – the notion has undergone constant revision and significant changes since its first introduction in EU policy-making in 1996, at the Bern (Switzerland) symposium on Key Competences in Europe (Dobrowski 2011). Despite the notion's somewhat nebulous and intangible qualities, and a degree of conceptual confusion that persists about its specific meaning and implications, however, competence has been and remains a core aspect of the EU's increasingly interconnected educational, economic and social policy.

The purpose of this article, then, is to provide a reflection on the history of the concept as it has been understood and developed in EU policy over the last four decades. Documents consulted include green and white papers, communications and reflection papers from the European Commission, reports and resolutions of the Council of the European Union, and documents from key EU agencies such as the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) and the Eurydice Network, supplemented by discussion of influential academic and non-government organisation publications. Because Member States in principle retain autonomy on matters of educational organisation and teaching content, as set out in Article 126 of the Maastricht Treaty (1992), much of the relevant EU policy does not take the form of hard legal governance. Rather the documents we analyse propose, recommend and guide: practices in line with the EU's more recently developed open method of co-ordination (OMC) stressing voluntary co-operation over legal authority. To say that the documents do not take the form of hard governance, however, is not to say that they do not have a significant effect on the behaviour of Member States.

In exploring the evolution of competences throughout recent EU history, the article distinguishes three separate stages in which the idea has been differently implemented.

The first stage, *pre-institutional* or *foundational* (Walkenhorst 2008), covered the years between the early 1970s and late 1990s, a period during which the notion of competence enjoyed a burst of popularity across Europe, fuelled by two important developments. In the private sector, a radical shift took place at the level of hiring procedures and human resource assessment, particularly in relation to employment performance requirements, paving the way to a greater involvement of behavioural and cognitive scientists. In parallel, a growing dissatisfaction emerged within the education sector with the results of curriculum reform efforts, regarded as having failed to address the challenge represented by the rapid obsolescence of disciplinary knowledge (CDCC, 1996).

The second phase opened with the Lisbon Council Conclusions of March 2000, which famously committed the EU to become 'the most dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world' (Council of the European Union 2000). This period recorded a shift in EU policymaking towards the paradigm of social investment, and a consequent rise in the strategic standing of the educational sector (Esping-Andersen, 2002; Ferrera, 2000). As the aims of the Lisbon Agenda reflected the increased economic salience of education, competence-based learning enjoyed a significant lift in status and profile, moving from the margins to the centre of the EU education policy debate (Cedefop, 2009).

The third phase began in the aftermath of the Great Recession of the late 2000s and early 2010s, as challenges of stagnation, worsening inequality and widespread hostility to migration flows (in particular extra-European) have rekindled debates over the future of the EU (Ferrera, 2013; Saraceno, 2013). In this environment, the competence strategy has undergone important

transformations, led by an expansion of its targets and functional scope. Ideas of fostering cohesion and intra-European solidarity through the development of intercultural competences and social skills are undergoing resurgence in popularity, after been cast aside for over a decade in favour of rather rigid human capital perspectives on the education sector.

This article aims to tell one version of a history of the rise, adaptation and consolidation of the competence strategy in the EU. Competence policies have often been the focus of thematic reports and special studies (Gordon et al. 2009, 2012; Crick, 2008; Halasz and Michel, 2011; Dąbrowski and Wiśniewski, 2011; Pepper, 2011, 2012), and their salience to the emergence and definition of a European educational discourse has been emphasized by most historical accounts of EU activities in the field of education and training (Lawn, 2001; Nóvoa, 2007; Grek and Lawn, 2009; Pépin, 2006, 2007, 2011; Agostini and Natali, 2015). However, we believe that this article is the first attempt to document systematically the EU policy history with respect to the narrower notion of competence, in its entirety.

The immediately following section briefly highlights the conceptual confusion surrounding the idea of competence itself. As we will see, while competence has been increasingly foregrounded in skills policy during this period, and repeated attempts have been made to elucidate the term's meaning, it remains a nebulous concept. Indeed, attempts to clarify the concept often in fact unintentionally emphasise the very intangibility of the term. EU Parliament 2006's Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2006), one of the most sustained attempts to pin down the meaning of competence specifically as an educational strategy, defines a competence as consisting of knowledge, skills and attitudes. It goes on to elucidate the requisite knowledge, skills and attitudes attributable to each of eight key competences. Yet in the very process of specifying and concretising competence, it becomes increasingly clear the extent to which the concept resists reification. How, for example, to identify (still less measure) the attitudes associated with 'learning to learn' (European Commission, 2012)? The recent update to the 2006 Recommendation makes clear the difficulties member states have experienced in attempting to support the development of the less tangible competences (European Commission, 2018).

Sections three and four of the article recount the development of the competence strategy as increasingly central to EU educational policy. Although our story proper begins in 1992, we trace the strategy's emergence to the steady blurring of a sharp distinction between vocational training and general education, beginning as early as the 1970s. Through these two historical sections, we trace training and education's gradual convergence, connecting this to a broader enfolding of the economic, the social and the personal within the policy moves of the social investment paradigm. That is, the move to competence is situated within attempts to free general education from its circumscribed role as an institution and ask it to provide the solutions to a wealth of economic, social and personal ills. This may account for the concept of competence's simultaneous comprehensiveness and intangibility. In the final section we project some possibilities for where the strategy may lead in the years to come. Firstly, however, we examine the concept of competence itself.

## **2. The notion of competence. Conceptual confusion. A multiplicity of traditions.**

Despite its recurrence in EU official documents and programmes, the notion of competence continues to suffer from substantial *conceptual confusion* (Westera, 2001; Mulder, 2014).

Salling Olesen (2013) traced the origins of the term back to the psychological phraseology of 1960s human resource management, from which it was imported to the field of education. The wide usage of the notion, particularly in behavioural psychology-related research, contributed to stretching its meaning beyond the limits of any single conceptual paradigm. In historical terms we can distinguish four “analytic traditions” that have underpinned the international debate on competence and competence measurement during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The suggestion we put forward is that all four approaches have contributed significantly to shaping the meaning of competence in the EU, today.

The first tradition, so-called ‘*cognitive*’, rests on a firm distinction between *competence*, defined by Messick (1984) as ‘*what a person can do under ideal circumstances*’, and *performance*, defined as ‘*what is being done in existing circumstances*’ (Norris, 1991). From a cognitivist perspective, then, performance and competence are to be distinguished on the basis of their general object and functional logic. Individual performance concerns the sphere of actual (or ‘situated’) behaviour, and thus appertains to a *logic of accountability*, while individual competence relates to the sphere of *potential*, bearing on a *logic of possibility*.

The second tradition, known as ‘*generic*’, has pooled researchers focused on capturing the ‘common abilities that explain variations in performance’ (Mulder et al, 2007). The idea of competence, from this perspective, has typically come to be understood and defined as that set of (general) traits that, in any given professional context, marks a distinction between proficient and average performers. Along this analytical line, the generic approach construes a *logic of universality* around the notion of competence, broadly rejecting the idea that competent status can be reduced to the successful execution of specific tasks.

The third tradition, commonly labelled ‘*behaviorist*’, stands in clear contrast to the generic approach by creating a necessary dependency relation between the notion of competence and that of observable/measurable performance. Based on this understanding, competence is defined in terms of pre-defined behavioural objectives, that is: *what a person needs to (be able to) do in a specific context (ibid.)*. As opposed to the cognitive approach, the focus is clearly on observable outcomes rather than a concept of potential.

The fourth tradition may be broadly indicated as the ‘*constructive*’, or ‘*socio-constructive*’, approach. Constructivist scholars, over the decades, have taken issue with the technical-rational input/output conceptualisation of competence of the behaviourist and cognitive approaches, arguing that (i) performance measurement is a quintessentially value-laden practice, and (ii) professional performance ‘on the job’ can hardly be judged independently of training ‘off the job’ (Hodkinson and Issitt, 1995). The socio-constructive tradition calls for a holistic approach to competence measurement, one capable of accounting for the totality of values, skills, and degrees of complexity intrinsic to different decision-making contexts.

In significant ways, the four traditions share some fundamental assumptions. In particular, one core understanding on which all seem to converge is in defining *competence* as both (i) the outcome of a formation process – be it a formal learning module, an extended working period, or even a barely structured sequence of informal experiences – and as (ii) an individual attribute, or characteristic, that is revealed in the context of an effective ‘act of performance’ (Weinert, 1999; Schneckenberg, 2008).

The notion of competence, in this perspective, captures an ideal of *applied individual proficiency*, or *proficiency in action*, the capability to mobilize acquired knowledge

(information, experiences, attitudes, behaviours and skills) in order to accomplish specific activities. Similarly, *competent status* is understood as a wider condition of proficiency at performing the different tasks of which a profession, occupation, or even simply a complex job is composed. It is not surprising that such a performance-oriented conceptual framework would lend itself to being applied in any occupational context capable to arrive at a typification of its ideal employee, or practitioner.

Since the 1960s, occupational ideal-types developed in this spirit, have been commonly constructed around three components:

- a breakdown of professional roles, that is the fundamental tasks, routines and activities that distinguish each type of employment (*what are the tasks and practices that express the nature of a profession?*),
- a characterization of the core functional knowledge (skills, behaviours, attitudes, abilities) specific to each type of employment (*what are the skills and knowledge necessary to perform the profession's tasks?*), and, lastly,
- the identification of the competences required to achieve competent status in each employment (*what are the capabilities, that is the forms and ways in which to apply skills and knowledge, required to perform the profession effectively?*).

The conceptual triangle between professional practice, functions, and proficiency is at the centre of another classification of competence constructions, recently developed by Mulder (2014, 2015), in which different approaches to competence are grouped into a 'trichotomy' of behaviouristic functionalism, integrated occupationalism and situated professionalism.

Approaches classified as behaviouristic functionalism share roots in behavioural psychology and functional education theories, that is educational approaches theorizing the preparation of students to perform specific acts (functions). As Mulder puts it, the original drive behind most studies in this conceptual "family" was the need to fragment complex professional practices into smaller, separate actions, and concentrate training on mastering of specific skills.

Integrated occupationalism, to the contrary, refers to approaches based on a generic, integrated understanding of competence, reliant on the assumption that complex professional practices are better understood if regarded as a combination of fundamental roles, situations, and dispositions rather than just the sum of specific, functional tasks. The core thesis of integrated occupationalism holds that the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to perform professional tasks at high level are often transversal in nature, that is they are applicable to different occupations.

Situated professionalism, finally, groups approaches to competence development that recognize the importance of contextualizing professional practice in space and time, as well as the constructed nature of value and excellence. Being competent in a specific domain of practice – let us say: working in a team – implies something radically different for a primary school teacher than for a fire fighter or a paramedic. In the case of teaching, for instance, effective team-working competences can refer to the smooth implementation of cooperative learning activities within the classroom, or to the systematic use of co-teaching methods as a meaningful form of inclusive pedagogy. In the context of emergency medical services, that cooperative effort that underpins the concept of teamwork may instead assume a rather narrower meaning, defining a rigid set of technical guidelines and specific behaviours that counter-factual observational studies have linked to improved clinical performance. Traditional performance measures, however, are not always dependable to capture the

changes brought by competent practices. Professional teachers, for instance, may firmly believe that the cooperative activities they enact daily in the classroom bring added value to the education of their students, and yet be thoroughly incapable of offering any hard evidence in support of their convictions. Whereas, in emergency care, the contribution of teamwork may be somewhat easily modelled and quantified (e.g. time savings on standardized rescue procedures), building a baseline of indicators for evaluating teaching improvement can be considerably more problematic. In this regard, it has been argued that the idea of competence finds its legitimation in the personal epistemologies of its practitioners.

Inarguably, one of the most significant educational trends of the last two decades has consisted in combined transnational efforts to ‘create clarity and consistency in the definition of key competences’ (Salling Olesen 2013: 158). Throughout this period, researchers in different countries have attempted to elaborate generic frameworks of core competences, relevant to the broadest possible range of occupations (Bartram, 2005; Mulder, 2015). International organisations such as the OECD and the EU have been involved first hand in the process, undertaking a variety of programmes aimed at identifying a minimum set of key transversal competences, to ‘provide the basis for establishing indicators of competence developments, comparable across different countries’ (Salling Olesen, 2013: 158).

In the early 2000s, Franz Weinert, one of the main experts involved in the OECD *Development and Selection of Competencies* (DeSeCo) project, noted poignantly that ‘neither literature reviews nor analyses of existing theoretical and conceptual approaches to competence allow for a univocal *theoretically grounded definition, or classification* of the term’ (Weinert, 2001: 46). DeSeCo, in attempting to fill that gap, embraced a rather broad approach to the concept, famously describing it as ‘more than just knowledge and skills’ (OECD 2005). In the minds of researchers from the OECD, the notion of competence conjured a wide array of capabilities, among which that to ‘meet complex demands, by drawing on and mobilising psycho-social resources in a particular context’ (OECD, 2005).

A similarly comprehensive approach has been that embraced by EU institutions. As noted by Gordon in the European Key Competence Network’s (KeyCoNet) 2012 report *Key competence development in school education in Europe*, the idea of competence developed by EU institutions since the early 1990s has stretched beyond the acquisition of specific skills and mastery of cognitive processes, involving a wider spectrum of character traits, attitudes and behaviour. This multi-dimensional representation has been reiterated in a variety of official EU publication.

As early as 1995, the *White paper on teaching and learning: towards the learning society* advised, in this regard, against too narrow a construction of the skill-set necessary for developing employability, suggesting that contemporary knowledge should be defined as a combination of: -

- *basic or foundational* skills, essential for individual learners to acquire information autonomously;
- *technical* knowledge, that allows individuals to perform and become identified with an occupation;
- *social attitudes or inter-personal skills*, referring to a complex variety of behaviours, including sense of responsibility and the capacity to effectively communicate and cooperate with others.

The 2001 EC Communication on *Making a European area of lifelong learning a reality*, all but confirmed the generic thrust at the heart of the EU’s approach, underlining its contour as

‘the capacity to use effectively experience, knowledge and qualifications [in view of] personal fulfilment, active citizenship, social inclusion, employability and adaptability’ (European Commission, 2001: 3). Five years later, the European Parliament adopted an almost identical formula to describe key competences in the context of the 2006 European Framework.

Transparency and measurability represent two other key features of the competence strategy. The European Qualification Framework (EQF), adopted in 2008 by the Council and Parliament, represents in this regard the most important attempt to establish a European harmonisation of competence measures. Beyond fostering harmonisation, the Framework was designed with four broad objectives:

- to apply to all types and all levels of education and training;
- to encourage the recognition of informal and non-formal learning as an extension of formal educational activities;
- to facilitate Member States in their move away from input-based, subject-discipline assessment cultures toward student-centred models rooted in integrated learning;
- to provide a reference model for competence-based assessment guidelines elaboration by national ministries, as well as by regional and local educational offices.

Along this line, we regard universality as the last key feature of the EU competence strategy. From a universalist perspective, competence-based education is framed as a lever in the implementation of a renewal of education in the direction of integrated learning. Competence education, in fact, aims to penetrate ‘all subjects and all activities in a school’, is expected to be endorsed by the entire ‘school staff, and to represent goals common to the whole curriculum’ (Gordon et al., 2009: 12).

In this regard, it should be specified that the type of integrated education that is often mentioned in EU documents as well as by general advocates of the competence strategy is one based on complementary learning outcomes, that favours a shift from subject-centred curricula (and teacher centred instruction) to a wider use of student-centred cross-curricula. The implementation of cross-curricular learning outcomes, in turn, demands an alignment of teaching and assessment practices with new ideas and methods. For instance, that all school staff should co-share in the monitoring and evaluation of students’ competence acquisition, and that integrated learning assessment should focus on students’ performances across different learning modules and multiple activities, as opposed to formal examinations or subject-specific tests with a defined body of content.

In the remainder of the paper, we develop a history of and explanation for the emergence of and consolidation of the EU’s competence strategy: in its foundational period of 1992-2000 and the institutionalisation period of 2000-2013, and finally thinking about the strategy from 2013 and into its future.

### **3. The competence strategy in the EU: the foundational period, 1992-2000**

By the beginning of this period, EU concerns with developing common standards of education in Member States were already well-established. These can be traced to 1976, when the Resolution on an Education Action Programme (Council of the European Union, 1976) took as its rationale the rights of migrant children to an education wherever in the EU they lived. In a precursor to the later, formally established open method of co-ordination, the resolution alluded to the general sorts of education necessary for migrant children (for instance, the introduction to the culture of the host country) whilst insisting that the particular



form – in pedagogical methods and forms of assessment, for example – must remain a matter for the Member States.

It is possible to understand the emergence of the competence strategy partially through the lens of the gradual convergence of education and training. As we will see in the following section, EU talk of competence now characterises a competence as comprising three elements: skills, attitudes and knowledge. Competence, then, cannot observe any neat distinction between practical mastery, knowhow or *skill*, traditionally associated with vocational training, and intellectual ‘knowthat’ or *knowledge*, previously associated with general education.

As far back as the Treaty of Rome in 1957, training for European youth was considered part of the European Economic Community’s remit, and this precisely because of training’s link with the economy. If European convergence was implemented in order to assure a common economic future, then some responsibility for vocational training could be one important arm of that responsibility. Education and training were conceived of as separate entities – as evidenced, for example, by the fact that they were housed within different Directorates General (education in Research, training in Social Affairs).

Gradually, education became a greater concern for the EU. The European Court of Justice ruling in the Gravier case set a precedent for understanding *higher* education as a part of vocational training and therefore under the legal gaze of the EU (clearing the path for initiatives such as the Erasmus exchange programme). And in 1981 education and training were united under a newly reimagined Directorate General for Social Affairs. Interestingly, while this led to greater EU involvement in education it coincided with training being more closely linked to subsidiarity and the autonomy of Member States. That is to say, rather than education merely getting closer to training, the two met in the middle (Pépin, 2007).

In the run-up to 1992’s Maastricht Treaty and its inauguration of the internal market, an understanding of future workers as human capital (that is, as resources for the economy) was hoped ‘to provide... an essential bridge between economic and social policies’ (European Commission, 1989: 1). Increasingly education, no longer firmly divided from vocational training, was seen as the key to ensuring both economic and social success for the European project.

This is the dawn of a conception of education as panacea for a wealth of social and economic ills. For example, while in earlier periods attaining work for unemployed *youth* provided a specific and circumscribed rationale for the improvement of national vocational training, by 1993:

In their efforts to devise and implement education and training measures which are able to stimulate growth and employment, the community and the Member States must also take account of the fact that 80% of the European labour force of the year 2000 is already on the labour market. (European Commission, 1993b: 120)

That is, training is no longer the remit of educational establishments associated with a limited period of life; rather it must become a concern throughout life. Education, then, becomes unmoored from its position as an institution – an apparatus by which a set of norms are instilled, with a specified remit – and becomes instead a near all-encompassing expression of society’s problems and hopes for solutions. Education’s role is no longer to inculcate the young into society’s norms, be they the norms of a religion, a political ideology or a nation state. Rather, education is taken to have the *potential* (always at some distance from the reality) to solve all of society’s and each individual’s ills, whether economic, social or

personal, and at whatever age ('life-long learning') and in whichever sphere of life ('life-wide learning' – see OECD, 2007) they occur.

Niklas Luhmann (1990) characterises the panacea-like qualities attributed to previously more circumscribed social institutions as a feature of late modernity. It appears paradoxical that the more we concern ourselves with the effectiveness of education the less certain we feel about its very effectiveness. Yet such paradoxes are highly characteristic of late modernity (Moeller, 2017).

In earlier periods the education system could rely upon conditional programmes focusing on educational inputs (if the child is this age they must go to school; if we determine this is important content then the teacher must teach it). Such programmes are fundamentally oriented toward the past and the present (if *this* happened then *this* must happen) and aim to create closure and certainty (although in fact they are constantly confronted with the problem of the future's unknowability).

In late modernity more purposive or future-oriented programmes are introduced to try to manage some of the problems of unpredictability and openness associated with conditional programmes. These focus on end results such as learning outcomes, and represent a shift away from a focus on the relationship between teachers and students toward the centrality of the student as an individual. The move to competence can be understood as connected to this shift.

It should be noted that purposive programmes do not supersede conditional ones, but rather run alongside them as an attempt to ameliorate the uncertainties they produce (Sivesind, Afsar and Bachmann, 2016). However any future-oriented programme of course produces further risks and uncertainties, as the future remains unknowable; indeed comes to feel more unknowable. Assessments of assessments and international comparisons of education systems seek to create certainty yet contribute to the very uncertainty they seek to address (Luhmann, 2002).

As societies no longer provide sets of norms (organised religions, nationalisms and other ideologies) which provide a specific function for institutions such as the education system, those systems' remits become at once bigger and smaller. Bigger because without an extrinsic reference set of norms with which to ground itself the system reaches ever outward on a global scale. And smaller as it becomes increasingly technicist: concerning itself with observation, measurement and comparison without any external reference point to anchor or make meaning from what is compared.

For Luhmann, perhaps, the competence strategy, with its folding in of the economic, the personal and the social, its conflation of education and training, and its reluctance to divide skills, knowledge and attitudes, might be understood as symptomatic of late modernity. It is the obligation of education to solve a range of problems, not merely to submit a heritage. In such a context, competence education is both couched as the solution to a plethora of problems and deeply anxiety-inducing, in as much as it cannot in fact solve such problems (Mangez, 2017).

In the move toward identifying education as the solution to a raft of both social and economic problems (and the understanding of such problems as intimately connected together), two other syntheses are made. Firstly and as we have already seen, education and training, in earlier periods considered separate, begin to be understood together. Secondly, and connected to this, knowledge and skills can no longer unproblematically be kept apart. Competence is to be understood as a marriage between attitudes, skills and knowledge, so that the knowing-

how associated with vocational training and the knowing-that associated with education in its traditional sense are folded in to one thing: competence.

The amalgamation of education and training characteristic of this period was not without its doubters. While article 126 of Maastricht was at particular pains to stress the rights of individual Member States to take responsibility for ‘the content of teaching and the organization of education systems’ (*Treaty on European Union*, 1992: 23), by 1995 the Commission was clear that greater levels of co-ordination between Member States were imperative if the impending skills crisis was to be allayed (European Commission, 1995). And while this partial renege on article 126 stressed a close link between the economic, the social and the personal, the Council response to the Commission’s white paper struck a note of caution. The white paper was accused of foregrounding the economic *in its very stress of the inextricable link between the economic and the social* (Council of the European Union, 1996). That is, by claiming such an interlinking, the economic is allowed to infiltrate every aspect of life inextricably: ‘in modern Europe the three essential requirements of social integration, the enhancement of employability and personal fulfilment, are not incompatible. They should not be brought into conflict, but should on the contrary be closely linked’ (European Commission, 1995: 4).

By insisting that there is no conflict between social, personal and economic concerns, the white paper allows the economic to assert centrality in every sphere of life. As the Council’s decidedly lukewarm conclusions to their discussion of the white paper suggest, this conflation is not the putting in its place of the economic, but quite the opposite: its instatement at the heart of educational, social and personal life.

#### **4. The competence strategy in the EU: the institutionalisation period, 2000-2013**

As indicated in the previous section, by 2000 the link between the economic, the social and the personal was, if hardly uncontroversial, central to the way in which education policy was being discussed. It was in that period that competence was developed as an explicit marriage between skills (traditionally associated with vocational training), knowledge (traditionally associated with general education) and attitudes.

The social investment welfare model, of which the competence strategy forms a central part, was being increasingly predicated upon the principle that economic, social and personal concerns could no longer be separated out. Originating in the period after Maastricht’s commitment to closer cultural and social as well as economic union, the social investment paradigm was indeed more clearly formalised and consolidated after the formulation of the Lisbon strategy in the year 2000, in a series of key publications. Crucially, Gøsta Esping-Anderson and colleagues’ *Why We Need a New Welfare State* (2002) crystallised a sense of urgency regarding the need to overhaul radically welfare provision in the Member States. Given the changes in economic and social structures witnessed since the 1980s – for instance in terms of women’s working patterns, home ownership and family formation – the claim was made that a radically different approach to welfare was urgently needed.

Such an approach begins from a consideration of the three ‘pillars’ of welfare provision: the family, the state and the market. A strong reliance on the provisions of the family, associated with continental and especially southern Europe, was increasingly failing to function given the tendency of late-to-marry and late-to-own younger generations to live alone. The Scandinavian model of reliance on the state, while highly functional for a limited time, contained its own problems of scalability. And the market-heavy approach of the UK, in

particular that associated with the Third Way, had tended to overstate the extent to which private finance could be relied upon to provide the ‘softer’ elements of welfare provision fairly, and indeed always to provide relative efficiencies.

Rather than relying upon any one of these traditional pillars of family, market and state, the architects of the social investment paradigm argued that all three must be allowed to take some weight in a balanced welfare system. While on the one hand designed, in part, to distinguish a softer, pan-European welfarism from an encroaching and rather hard-nosed Anglophone Third Way, on the other hand this ‘rationalisation’ of the welfare state focuses on entwining the economic, the social and the personal. That is, it is not merely the softening of the economic and the market via the insertion of social considerations, but rather the refusal to see the economic and the social as in any meaningful way severable. Precisely, this is not the imposition of the economic into the social or vice versa. Rather, it is their co-mingling.

In a significant 2006 Recommendation eight key competences were identified. These were: communication in the mother tongue; communication in foreign languages; mathematical competence and basic competence in science and technology; digital competence; learning to learn; social and civic competences; sense of initiative and entrepreneurship; and cultural awareness and expression (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2006).

The elucidation of the eight key competences is replete with the marriage of the economic to the social and the personal. Command of the mother tongue, as an example, is an essential competence ‘in education and training, work, home and leisure’ (*ibid.*: 14). Apparently, social competences such as ‘social and civic competences’ are couched also in terms of the needs of employment: ‘For successful interpersonal and social participation it is essential to understand the codes of conduct and manners generally accepted in different societies and environments (e.g. at work)’ (*ibid.*: 17). Meanwhile those more immediately economic competences, such as initiative and entrepreneurship, stress the competence’s value in personal life: ‘An entrepreneurial attitude is characterised by initiative, pro-activity, independence and innovation, in personal and social life, as much as at work’ (*ibid.*: 18).

The adoption of, for example, initiative and entrepreneurship as one of the eight key competences for lifelong learning should be understood in the context of the insistence on work as a highly personal ethical project. The ethical imperative to instil work with personal meaning and to refuse any ‘simplistic’ separation of the social from the personal and the economic might well be understood as part of late capitalism’s ‘new spirit’, harnessing the aims of personal liberation and spiritual fulfilment emerging from the twentieth century’s social movements to economic imperatives (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999). Again, this should not be understood as a conspiracy. It is the movement toward the disappearance of the distinction between the social and the economic rather than the imposition of the economic upon the social sphere.

While each of the eight key competences is subsequently divided into its requisite skills, knowledge and attitudes, some competences are more obviously attached to knowledge and skills than they are the rather more nebulous ‘attitudes’. While mathematical competence, for instance, corresponds to knowledge and skills that are relatively easy to *observe* (and so *measure*), a competence such as ‘learning to learn’ is easier to understand as an attitude. When we try to identify clear knowledge or skills attached to such a competence we may struggle to do so – and therefore measuring it will prove even more difficult (European Commission, 2012).

The elucidation of the eight competences required a shift in thought from measuring inputs (the teaching that is provided for or ‘happens’ to students) to measuring outputs (the *learning*

that can be observed to have happened). That is, the shift is from a focus on the teacher-student *relationship* to one in which the student is central. Such a shift is indicative of a broader move toward *activation* policies, as central to the social investment turn. Activation entails a focus on the responsibilities of individuals and a turning away from a notion of service provision as a top-down, distributive structure. Individuals are not merely left with their responsibility, however; rather, policies are in place to ‘activate’ the individual, or encourage them to conceptualise themselves as responsible actors with the capacity to change their own lives. In the social investment paradigm, welfare service provision is not a cost but rather an investment in a future workforce that is resilient, flexible and self-motivated (Vandenbrouke *et al.*, 2011). The competence strategy clearly feeds off just such an understanding of education as an investment in a (largely unknowable) future: individuals need not merely knowledge but the crucial life-long and life-wide attitudes of curiosity, adaptability and ‘learning to learn.’

The move to activation policies has not been without its critics, however. The formulation of very complex notions such as responsibility, motivation and choice within activation policies is considered too simple by some. Cantillon and Van Lancker (2013) illustrate this through a discussion of activation policies which withhold welfare benefits from parents of truanting children. While the thinking behind such policy is that parents will thereby be incentivised to send their children to school, poverty is in fact likely to be a prime contributor to both the parents’ and the child’s non-engagement with the school. Withholding money on the basis of a straightforward rational-action expectation of motivation ignores the complexity of poverty: in particular, how its immediate alleviation through teenagers’ piecemeal paid work will often trump a more complex notion of deferred gratification through benefits or even further deferred (and speculative) job security.

The activation approach, then, can be understood as a part of the trend discussed above: toward hopes for a complete solution to a raft of personal, social and economic ills through a conception of education so vast it encompasses all ages and all spheres of life. In the next section we will explore how this increasingly comprehensive conception of education, and the role of competence within it, has played out in the last five years, and how it might develop further in the years to come.

## **5. The competence strategy in the EU: Transformations in course and future scenarios**

As mentioned in previous sections, the challenges brought by globalisation in the late 1980s and early 1990s – namely the apparent inability of European economies to weather the effects of increased international competition and recover from recession – formed part of the background for a momentous change in the educational field, in terms of an expanded mandate for education and training systems to directly contribute to economic and social development.

Financial instability and unemployment concerns, while relevant, should hardly be considered as the sole cause for the process of redefinition undergone by educational institutions under social investment ideas. Indeed, the emergence of the competence strategy should be regarded as emblematic of a rather more profound functional recalibration of the field of education towards a *wider pedagogy of all-encompassing personal fulfilment*, based upon the identification and dissemination of a set of ‘transferable, multifunctional [composites] of knowledge, skill or attitude’ (European Commission, 2004). In this new guise, education has seen its social function being expanded well beyond the traditional

bounds of instilling social values, identity, or even job-oriented skills. It has become the site where an astonishingly complex and ambitious form of individual empowerment is to be provided, one supposed to endow human beings with the capacity to thrive across a limitless range of contexts and domains.

Unsurprisingly, the educational systems that have emerged from the competence discourse show some significant departures from those of the past.

The first notable transformation is the ‘normative weakening’ of national education systems, brought about by the progressive decoupling of schooling institutions from their traditional functional roles, and their opening up to incorporate new values, objectives and contents originating from other fields. The realm of education has lost much of its autonomy in determining short-term actions and longer-term strategies to a distinct sphere of labour economists, corporate researchers and social statisticians. From the perspective of professionals in the sector, this opening up of the educational domain entails facing up to an organizational culture transformation that is likely to take a great institutional effort and might not be completed for many years. Recognizing the magnitude of the challenge ahead, the 2018 *Commission proposal for a recommendation on key competences* notes how ‘moving from a rather static conception of curricular content to a dynamic definition of the knowledge, skills and attitudes a learner needs to develop (...) requires a paradigm shift in education’ likely to affect the whole way in which learning is currently ‘organised and assessed’ (European Commission, 2018a). General education programs of the post-war decades were purposefully designed to meet the needs of industrialized, bureaucratized societies, and it was precisely from this alignment between capabilities and requirements, both qualitative and quantitative, that the institution derived its normative force. Today, in a context of post-industrial change marked by unstable employment relations and fluctuating economic cycles, educational sites must regain their once established normative authority.

In relation to the competence strategy, the move to reclaim this authority will most likely occur on three separate dimensions. On the one hand, the educational sector in its entirety may begin to demonstrate a willingness to endorse a wide set of tools, values, contents and instruments of assessment often conceived by specialists in different fields, overcoming, in this respect, the very real temptation to disavow those individuals and institutions perceived as outsiders. Secondly, the sector will have to show a readiness to spread the new norms and standards – for instance, the evaluation of students’ knowledge in terms of learning outcomes – as if they represented the actual substance of formal education. Internalizing contents and values originated outside of traditional structures, on the one hand, and contributing to their dissemination as genuine educational outputs, on the other, might represent the baseline condition before education systems can begin to re-assert exclusive normative claims about schooling and learning. Conversely, the cost of not conforming to the new standards – for example, a widespread refusal by teaching staff to integrate competence measurement into their established assessment practices – could be the increased marginalization of education professionals in relation to defining the goals of the field, with the implication of hardening lines of difference between insiders and outsiders in a continuous attempt of mutual delegitimation. As Gordon (2009) suggests, endorsing the competence approach would necessarily require a ‘change of paradigm from teacher-centred to student-centred learning’ and thus a radical ‘revision of traditional methodologies and roles of teachers’.

The third dimension that will likely affect the chances of educational systems regaining their normative force is less related to the sphere of organizational culture than to the degree of

effectiveness and efficiency with which the sector will respond to its new ambitious mandate for all-encompassing social and economic amelioration. The demonstrated ability of education professionals to deliver on the empowerment outcomes to which social investment advocates aspire will, in other words, go a long way into consolidating their control over a radically transformed field. Failure to comply with the mandate, in turn, might result in added pressures toward opening-up schooling and learning practices to exogenous methods, values and ideas.

Another area of change concerns the idea that traditional pedagogies and qualifications do not correlate well with either the development or the assessment of key competences for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and therefore must be reviewed. This understanding has informed the competence strategy since at least the mid-1990s, and has progressively become embedded in EU education policy. The 1995 White Paper *Teaching and learning: towards the learning society* provided a serious indictment of what it labelled the traditional route to paper qualifications:

In most European systems, paper qualifications are designed with a view to filtering out at the top the elite which will lead administration and companies, researchers and teaching staff. In certain countries, they are even the quasi-absolute reference points for assessing competence (...) Moreover, a worker's occupational status is in many countries defined by the diploma held. This link between paper qualification and status, however logical it may be, accentuates the internal lack of flexibility of the labour market. (European Commission, 1995: 14)

Traditional education methods, it is argued, 'lock out unconventional talent, producing an elite which is not truly representative of the available human resource potential' (*ibid.*: 14). Since then, the need to expand the educational offer beyond its traditional boundaries has been frequently echoed by European institutions, both in terms of shifting the emphasis from *passive* pedagogies (focused on the internalization of subject-contents), to *active* learning methods (centred on the achievement of competency outcomes), and in terms of opening up to digital technologies, validation of informal learning, as well as to new methods and models of student evaluation. The 2001 European Commission Communication *Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality* insisted that educational systems be transformed in the direction of making them 'much more open and flexible, so that learners can have individual learning pathways, suitable to their needs and interests' (European Commission, 2001: 7). The call was reiterated by the 2004 Joint Council/Commission report on the Education and Training 2010 work programme, which stressed how EU institutions believed that 'the pace of reforms of education and training systems should be accelerated' (Council of the European Union, 2004: 6), and such reforms should concentrate on strategic areas such as 'individuals' personal development and fulfillment, their social and professional integration and any subsequent learning is largely dependent on the acquisition of a package of key competences by the end of obligatory schooling' (*ibid.*: 25). In recent years, EU institutions have committed to issue more appeals to Member States to expand their education systems towards more personalized modes of learning. The 2008 Commission Communication on *Improving competences for the 21st century: an agenda for European cooperation on schools* clearly specified how in light of the peculiar needs that characterize every learner, not to mention the unique environment that every classroom represents, 'improving competences means teaching learners in a personalized way' (European Commission, 2008: 6). Rather similar views were expressed by the 2012 Communication on *Rethinking education*, which made an explicit case for digital technology as offering 'unprecedented opportunities to improve



quality and access (...), [opening the way for] individuals to learn anywhere, at any time, following flexible and individualized pathways' (European Commission, 2012).

Over the last decade, a trans-European consensus seems to have formed around these assumptions, as competence-based learning is progressively consolidating across different EU countries. A number of similarities in the reform pattern across different Member States can be singled out. As pointed out by Salatin (2009), the typical policy sequence starts from (i) the emergence of debates on the integration of transversal learning outcomes/competence targets in the national curriculum, to be followed by (ii) the definition of autonomous transversal educational goals, conceptually detached from the learning goals of the different disciplines, and by (iii) the incorporation of the term 'competence' in official ministerial documents and guidelines, including the achievement goals of national education systems, and lastly, although this has not yet been implemented in most EU countries, by (iv) the introduction of full-fledged competency-equivalence frameworks, side by side to traditional disciplinary curricula.

With respect to future developments in this area, the 2016 Communication on a *New skills agenda for Europe* announced that the European Commission would intensify its efforts to promote a 'shared understanding of key competences' across the Union, in particular by providing Member States with new sets of reference frameworks and assessment tools (European Commission, 2016). Following the Communication, reference frameworks for entrepreneurship and digital competences have been published.

A third radical transformation touches upon the ways in which a new understanding of what constitutes public and individual accountability has been deployed in the European educational discourse. The social investment narrative posits *individual empowerment through human capital accumulation* as the most effective constraint on the disruptive power of market forces. From an individual capacity perspective, this narrative points to the existence of a linear relationship between knowledge/competence endowment and economic performance, that is between individuals' welfare and their capacity to adapt to the reality of the post-industrial economic system – with its demand for a highly flexible and increasingly *competent* workforce. Thus, in its purported capacity to simultaneously meet (a) collective goals of economic productivity, efficiency and social inclusion, along with (b) individual needs of personal freedom and empowerment, the education space that has emerged under the banner of the competence strategy is one where private citizens and public institutions co-share in the responsibility for the upkeep of high-quality human capital supply. In this light, public institutions retain ultimate responsibility and authority for the organisation and supervision of competence-boosting services, while individuals are considered accountable for their own up-skilling performance, to take up the opportunities provided whenever available to them.

The *Jobs, Jobs, Jobs* report of November 2003 by the European Employment taskforce, also known as the Kok Report, provided a major impetus for EU economic and political interests to frame competences in terms of a lever to employability, and learning as a shared responsibility between institutions and individual citizens:

Lifelong learning means that individuals will need to update their competences beyond initial education to maintain their employability and enhance their career prospects throughout a more diversified working life. The level of initial education and the degree of participation in continuing training are clearly correlated to future career



prospects in terms of employment and pay. Individuals should therefore be encouraged to take more responsibility and participate financially in the development of their own human capital (...) Investment in human capital rewards the individuals, the enterprises they work for and society as a whole; therefore, it is appropriate that each party should share responsibility for financing part of this investment. (European Commission, 2003: 51)

In terms of future scenarios, we might imagine an increased tendency of policy evaluation reports to concentrate on factors such as the amount, quality and appropriateness of empowerment opportunities available to citizens. Comparative assessments, likewise, might increasingly focus on measuring diversity of empowerment opportunities between states, regions and socio-economic groups. For instance, the number of schools offering competence-based learning modules to their students, the quality of in-service training programs for staff focusing on competence education, or even the degree to which schools integrate core learning outcomes as part of their mandated student assessment plans. On the side of individual accountability, one likely effect of the consolidation of the competence strategy will be to create added pressure on citizens to (demonstrate their continuous commitment to) acquire ever more detailed skills and competency profiles, as demanded by specific economic sectors.

We should expect, in this sense, an increasing number of citizens deciding to take up certified adult learning and training courses, as well as a growing tendency by mature students to enter (or re-enter) higher education later in life. As suggested by the 2015 Eurydice report *Adult education and training in Europe*, one major challenge that EU countries will have to address in relation to promoting lifelong learning is the current participation gap between citizens with high and low educational attainment. Data from the EU Labour Force Survey point to an existing 39% participation gap in adult learning, at the European level, between individuals having completed tertiary education and citizens holding a lower secondary degree. Similarly, Europeans employed in high-skill jobs show a much stronger inclination to take up additional competence-building opportunities than the unemployed and those in so-called 'lower skills occupations' (Eurydice, 2015). Outreach strategies will have to be developed for making the *adult mode of learning* attractive to those that for different reasons, not least negative experiences earlier in life, may show a strong ambivalence about re-entering the educational sector and refuse to engage in further learning. In this regard, national architects of the competence strategy will find that they must resist the temptation to implement lifelong learning programmes in a "one-size-fits-all" fashion, and rather mould them in accordance to the culture and habitus of different sectors of the population.

## **Conclusion**

This article has not been an attempt to clarify the fundamental meaning of competence in EU strategy. That meaning changes depending on context, purpose and speaker, and this is precisely because of the ubiquity of educational solutions to social problems. Rather, the article's tracing of the history of the competence strategy in the EU serves to demonstrate the term's complexity, as well as the reasons for its increasing centrality in EU policy, in

particular its link to the social investment paradigm. It also seeks to demonstrate that such policy moves are not neutral, but rather imply a set of political and moral values. The focus on competences such as autonomy, entrepreneurship and curiosity relies upon a set of assumptions about ideal subjecthood which cannot be divorced from broader historical shifts and economic objectives (Laalo and Heinonen, 2016; Tsatsaroni and Sarakinioti, 2017).

In particular, competences are a specific issue within the European project because of the longstanding connection made between education and intra-European mobility. Standardisation (or Europeanisation) has long been regarded as crucial lubrication for the flow of economic migrants between Member States, and while this is perhaps clearer to see in the case of shared qualifications frameworks and standardised educational cycles, the adoption of key competences for lifelong learning should also be seen in this context. In an increasingly economically divided Europe, youth mobility from the south to the north rests upon employers' perceptions of international competences, such as language competence outside the mother tongue and cultural awareness (Carmona et al., 2018). For this reason, the development of the competence strategy in Europe takes a specific form and should be further studied in the particular European context.

In all, the conceptualisation of competence can be said to hinge upon a series of key convergences: between vocational training and general education and, connected to this, between knowledge and skills. In this paper we have tried to connect these gradually intensifying convergences to the panacea-like qualities attributed to education in late modernity, and to its central role in the social investment paradigm's ever-closer intermingling of the social, the personal and the economic. Changes in EU educational policy cannot be understood, nor its possible future imagined, without an understanding of such broader historical change.

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