



# A history of vocational education and training in Europe – from divergence to convergence

The idea of mounting a research project on 'the history of vocational education and training in Europe' was launched at the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) in January 2000. The main aim of this project is to reach a better understanding of the current structure of the various vocational education and training systems in Europe by showing how this has developed historically at national and international level, and by revealing how vocational education and training and European integration have influenced each other. The project starts from the principle that a sound knowledge of historical developments is an indispensable prerequisite for fully appreciating and interpreting contemporary processes and events (1).

Under the aegis of the project, the first international conference on *The history of vocational education and training in Europe in a comparative perspective*, organised by the University of Florence and the European University Institute, was held in Florence on 11 and 12 October 2002.

No fewer than 18 papers were presented over the two days. The first day looked at the development of vocational education and training systems in one or more European countries. The second day considered the role of vocational education and training in the social policy of the European Community, and then of the European Union. The proceedings of this conference are being published in two volumes entitled *A history of vocational education and training in Europe*, the first edited by Georg Hanf, of the Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung (BIBB) and by Wolf-Dietrich Greinert of the Technical University of Berlin, and the second by Professor Antonio Varsori of the University of Padua.

The wealth of materials presented and the scale of the intended aims of both the 'History' project and the Florence Conference led Cedefop to take two further steps to expand the scope and dissemination of the results of the conference: first, a travelling exhibition, and then a special issue of the European Journal 'Vocational Training'.

The idea of a travelling exhibition on the history of vocational education and training in Europe came from the Cedefop expert Norbert Wollschläger, who oversaw the initial presentation at the Cedefop gallery in Thessaloniki. The exhibition itself was designed by Helga Reuter-Kumpmann, an exhibitions consultant, and was mounted in association with the German exhibition on health and safety at work (Deutsche Arbeitsschutzausstellung (2) - DASA). The first presentation of the exhibition attracted more than 2000 visitors in Thessaloniki. The exhibition guide is reprinted below in this issue of the European Journal.

The editorial committee of the European Journal agreed on a special issue because its members were unanimously convinced that the future of vocational education and training in Europe could only be constructed successfully if there were a sound knowledge of its historical antecedents. The future builds on the past. Moreover, one of the aims of the European Journal is to encourage research on vocational education and training in Europe. However, the Journal receives very few proposals for articles on the history of vocational education and training. We hope that this special issue will inspire further contributions on the history of vocational education and training in Europe, in a comparative perspective as far as possible, this being one of the selection criteria of the Journal.



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(1) Cf. the website at: <http://history.cedefop.eu.int/>

(2) Cf. the DASA website at: <http://www.baua.de/dasa/index.htm>



The theme of this special issue follows quite closely that which emerged spontaneously at the Florence Conference and was taken up in the sub-title of the travelling exhibition, A history of vocational education and training in Europe: from divergence to convergence.

While it is true that vocational education and training followed in the distant past the same pattern of apprenticeship everywhere in Europe through trade guilds, it is equally true that with the Industrial Revolution and the abandonment of the apprenticeship system national systems of vocational education and training came to differ widely in accordance with the societal characteristics of each nation. It might therefore be said, without risk of contradiction, that each country has its own vocational education and training system, but it has to be admitted that such a conclusion does not tell us much and serves little practical purpose. It is possible, however, to make this spectrum of different training systems more comprehensible by using historical analysis. This is what Professor Wolf-Dietrich Greinert does in his article entitled *European vocational training systems: some thoughts on the theoretical context of their historical development*, which provides a model that can be used to classify the different European systems roughly into three broad categories. Although this is only a model, with the usual simplified hypotheses that are open to criticism, it is a suggestive and stimulating one.

It would therefore seem possible and worthwhile to arrive at a scientific classification of the different models of vocational education and training. It is far more difficult, however, to explain why two countries with very similar historical profiles of economic and social development should finish up adopting two systems of vocational education and training that unquestionably belong to two totally different categories. This is very clearly the question raised in the article by Holger Reinisch and Dietmar Frommberger entitled *Between school and company - features of the historical development of vocational education and training in the Netherlands and Germany in a comparative perspective*. Their article is in fact more a programme for research than an answer to the question posed, which they do not in any case claim to have resolved. We hope that this paper will encourage others and that explanations, which might also refer to

other societal contexts, will be put forward in articles submitted to the Journal.

A partial answer is already proposed by Anja Heikkinen in her paper *Models, paradigms or cultures of vocational education*. She shows clearly, from the example of the development of continuing vocational education and training in Northern Europe and Germany, that the emergence and transformation of national systems may be the result of competition between the different 'cultural conceptions' of vocational education and training borne by individuals and collective bodies from a subnational, national or supranational standpoint. The cultural approach adopted by Anja Heikkinen sees education as co-constitutive both of culture and of projects and programmes at the individual, collective and societal level. And in reality, the subject of her article goes well beyond simple comparative analysis of how continuing vocational education and training developed in Northern Europe. What she attempts to show is the role of historians and the practical consequences of their work. She argues that by recognising and making visible certain key phenomena, changes and/or continuities in the field of vocational education and training, historians and researchers in general have in the final analysis the role of jointly defining work and education at the subnational, national and supranational level.

Given this diversity of vocational education and training systems in Europe, European integration is bound to encourage the search for certain forms of convergence. The various European institutions have seen their areas of responsibility grow, particularly with the Single European Act, the Maastricht Treaty, the birth of the European Union and the introduction of the euro. However, as Francesco Petrini tells us in his article *Common vocational training policy in the EEC from 1961 to 1972*, while Article 128 of the Treaty of Rome could hardly be clearer on the goal of developing a common policy on vocational education and training, this common policy has yet to see the light of day. This is explained particularly by the reluctance of Germany and France, which already had well-developed vocational education and training systems and were little inclined to cover the cost of retraining the labour force in the south of Italy. The failure can also be explained by the conflict between the centralising force of European



development and the reactive force of governments seeking to restrain the ambitions of the Commission and to defend their sovereignty. As Petrini says, it took the change in the social and political climate and the beginnings of the crisis in the mid-1970s to force states to think in terms of new forms of cooperation, and this also laid the foundations for the idea of establishing a European centre for the development of vocational training.

As Eleonora Guasconi shows in her paper on *The unions and the relaunching of European social policy*, the European trade unions regarded the creation of this agency as an opportunity to ensure that vocational training would really benefit workers, enabling them to cope with the upheavals of the 1960s and the crisis of the 1970s. In pushing for the establishment of Cedefop, and succeeding in that aim in 1975, the trade unions had the goal of gaining greater representation within the European Community and of developing a common European social policy in the field of employment and vocational education and training.

The establishment of Cedefop, as Professor Antonio Varsori shows in his paper entitled *Vocational education and training in European social policy from its origins to Cedefop*, was a step forward in the sense of greater convergence in vocational education and training in Europe, as well as a way of meeting the need to encourage research in vocational education and training and to expand exchanges in this field between the Member States of the European Community, and an experimental prototype that would lead to the creation of a whole series of specialist agencies.

However, convergence between vocational education and training systems in Europe remains slow and problematic since the nation-states cling to their national prerogatives and the principle of subsidiarity in the field of education. As Georges Saunier shows

in his article *The place of vocational training in François Mitterrand's idea of a European social space (1981-1984)*, in vocational education and training as in other fields, the ability of Europe to integrate lies above all in reacting to the economic and social conditions of the moment. 'While this might be thought an insuperable obstacle, European diversity is fading away - although not disappearing entirely - in the face of necessity. In this field as in others, the integrative capacity of Europe resides above all in the definition of common interests. Convergence, and in particular convergence of education systems, is merely a consequence.'

Since the mid-1980s, the trend towards convergence in vocational education and training in Europe seems to have speeded up in line with this principle. Common interests are identified within the Union, medium and long-term objectives are set, allowing individual interests to be safeguarded, and on this basis integration takes place, indirectly and 'voluntarily'. It was at the Lisbon Council that the heads of state and government addressed questions relating to education policy for the first time. Then in Bruges in 2001, the Directors General of vocational education and training in the countries of Europe adopted an initiative, confirmed by the Declaration of 31 Ministers of Education in Copenhagen in 2002, by which the states of Europe committed themselves to a process of greater cooperation in vocational education and training, as a somewhat veiled way of encouraging convergence through objectives such as transparency, quality of training, mutual recognition of skills and qualifications, expanded mobility and access to training throughout life. These are all topics treated very regularly in the pages of the various issues of this Journal.

All of the articles brought together in this issue point to the need for historical reflection in order to cope better with the present, over and above its importance for building the future.