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ARTICLE

## **Deflecting European Union Influence on National Education Policy-Making: The Case of the United Kingdom**

NAFSIKA ALEXIADOU (a) and BETTINA LANGE (b)

*(a) Department of Applied Educational Science, Umeå University, Sweden*

*(b) Centre for Socio-Legal Studies, University of Oxford, UK*

**ABSTRACT** This article examines how education policies developed in the European Union (EU) through the open method of co-ordination (OMC) are received at the member state level of the United Kingdom (UK). We argue that the UK's response to the education OMC can be understood mainly in terms of deflecting EU influence on the process and in particular content of national education policy-making. We focus on three manifestations of deflecting EU influence on national education policies. On a level of institutional structures, first, few organizational resources are made available for responding to the education OMC. Second, there is limited communication between domestic policy teams and UK civil servants involved in international work. Third, on a level of discourse UK education policy makers have retained a commitment to the continued sovereignty of the UK over education policy and its role as a potential leader of education policy agendas in the EU. Deflecting the education OMC involves here constructing images of 'fit' between UK and EU OMC education policies.

**KEY WORDS:** European Integration, education policy making, Open Method of Co-Ordination, peer learning, discursive institutionalism

### **Education Policy-Making in Europeanisation Studies**

Education policy making is an important but still neglected field in the study of policy and politics (Jakobi et al. 2010). It combines questions about the relationship between the state, institutions, and citizens, in a way that very few other fields of public policy do, given that education is central to both social and economic governance. Within the field of europeanisation studies, an analysis of education policy-making offers a very interesting example of the integration project with its dual emphasis on widening and deepening the functions of the EU.

For the first time after the 2000 Lisbon Council, education has been ‘opened’ up as a policy field for the EU to develop its activity, though within the limits of subsidiarity. Since then, we observe an ever increasing level of activity in relation to education that is qualitatively different to the pre-2000 era which focused mainly on the provision and funding of exchange and mobility programmes. This increased activity has also led to a deepening of functions of the EU that reaches well into public policy making territory, usually understood to be within the ambit of member state sovereignty. The Open Method of Coordination, which has been employed in education since 2000, is the key mechanism through which the reform of education policies in the 27 EU member states is meant to occur (Lange and Alexiadou 2007).

The OMC reflects a wider shift from government to governance, and more specifically a trend which can be observed over the last thirty years, during which education in Europe in its formal, institutional form has experienced a blurring of the boundaries between, firstly, the role of the state and the ‘market’ in terms of providing and regulating education services and ‘products’ (Jones et al. 2008); and, secondly, between international and domestic arenas of policy production (Robertson 2010). In this article we focus on the reception and mediation of EU education measures in national education policy making at the central government level in the UK.<sup>i</sup>

While there is a growing literature on the europeanisation of education policies, and in particular on the institutional means at the EU level to achieve this (DeRuiter 2010, Gornitzka 2006), there is little empirical work that tries to understand how EU education policies are being received in the member states (for exceptions see Grek et al. 2009, Lajh and Štremfel 2010, Simons 2007). But it is important to consider the domestic level of policy making because in contrast to the classic community method the education OMC does not set out legally binding objectives and does not provide for any formal sanctions in case of non-compliance with its goals. Hence, the OMC attributes a significant role to member states in the realization of its co-ordination aspirations. We focus in particular on the ‘institutionalisation’ of the education OMC in national policy-making, also because the degree of ‘institutionalisation’ is often considered as an indicator of the ‘effectiveness’ and ‘impact’ of OMCs (Kroeger 2006:4; Citi and Rhodes 2006:469). We define institutionalization as a process of establishing appropriate and legitimate rules, with capabilities and resources attached to these (Gornitzka 2006:5), but we complement this view with an emphasis on ideas and narratives.

Therefore, we draw on qualitative empirical research in order to examine attempts to institutionalise policy co-ordination through the education OMC at the UK government level. We argue that there is limited reception of EU education policies in domestic policy-making and that UK government education policy actors seek to deflect EU initiatives. In fact, we observe an *entrenchment* of cognitive commitments to national sovereignty over education policy-making, linked also to the UK’s history of scepticism towards the political dimension of the European integration project, and different from the emphasis on cognitive *shifts* as a possible impact of the OMC (Zeitlin 2005:451).

The article develops this argument in four sections. First, we outline our research framework which draws on discursive institutionalism. In the following two sections we discuss empirical

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findings generated on the basis of this research framework. These findings emerge from fieldwork at the UK national government and European Commission levels, and they focus on the institutional resources and discourses deployed in relation to attempts to institutionalise the education OMC in UK policy making. In the concluding section we outline the contribution of our findings to the literature on the implementation of the OMC and the europeanisation of education policies.

## **Discursive Institutionalism**

The OMC is a fairly new governance mechanism, having been introduced to education policy in the EU in 2000. It aims to steer education reform in domestic systems, but is also a powerful strategy of the EU for constructing a space for policy where new networks and actors exchange information and build knowledge about policy priorities (Ozga 2009). Member states are encouraged to ‘learn’ from each others’ successful policies, within a framework of setting common objectives and benchmarks in particular areas of education. These benchmarks reflect policy goals that tie education to the economic and social objectives of the post-2000 Lisbon strategy and Europe 2020 (Alexiadou et al. 2010, Dale 2009). Given this soft nature of the OMC we adopt an institutionalist approach that pays particular attention to the use of ideas and discourses, including normative ‘EU policy speak’ (Diez 1999). We draw on discursive institutionalism which considers institutional structures and discourses as mutually constitutive (Schmidt 2008). Discourses become shaped by institutional structures, but they also help to build images of what these structures are. Institutions provide specific contexts and thereby frame what is possible and what is desirable in the formulation of policy (Lowndes 2010). We examine in particular the European Commission Directorate General for Education and Culture as well as the Joint International Unit in the UK. Beyond the formal institutional structures and their historical trajectories that frame education policy-making we are dealing with individual actors who are both constrained by these structures and histories, but also have considerable ‘space’ for the construction of policy ideas and for mediating them from one context to another. Thus, building on Schmidt (2010) we consider institutions as:

‘simultaneously constraining structures and enabling constructs of meaning, which are internal to thinking and speaking agents whose “background ideational abilities” explain how they create and maintain institutions at the same time that their “foreground discursive abilities” enable them to communicate critically about those institutions, to change (or maintain) them’.  
(p.4)

In drawing on discursive institutionalism we depart from a linear conception of implementing EU policy. A key feature of the multi-level governance regime of the OMC is that policy is developed in an iterative manner. Implementation of the OMC in member states is an input into further development of the education OMC at the EU level. Hence, the reception and mediation of the education OMC in member states is not a fixed endpoint in the application of EU education measures, but can be the starting point for new or changed EU education measures. Moreover, not only the end but also the starting point of the process is not fixed. OMC education measures may not have originated at the EU level, but may be the result of OECD or other international initiatives, e.g. UNESCO or the Council of Europe, or they may be the result of national actors uploading their own national policy preferences to the EU level.

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Our approach to the mediation and reception of the OMC through the lens of discursive institutionalism leads us to map perceptions of both strong and subtle effects on national education policy (on structures and content) in response to the OMC. Subtle effects can involve changes in institutional structures, while strong effects can occur also at a level of discourse. Included in this - at the far end of a continuum of impacts of the education OMC – are domestic responses that keep the OMC well at arm’s length from national education policy-making, including deflecting, ignoring and defying EU attempts to shape national education policy making.

Our qualitative research relied on two types of data which we analyzed through thematic coding: (a) semi-structured interviews with officials in the UK<sup>ii</sup> and the European Commission (DG Education and Culture)<sup>iii</sup> to explore the discursive preferences and institutional positioning of the UK from the perspective of both sets of actors; and, (b) official documents produced by the UK civil service<sup>iv</sup>, and the biannual UK Progress Reports in Education and Training (2005, 2007, 2009)<sup>v</sup>. We do not focus on specific education policy areas<sup>vi</sup> because during fieldwork it became clear that in terms of UK institutional arrangements for dealing with the education OMC the boundary between schooling and higher education is blurred, not, however, because of any similarities in the policy fields. Hence, the civil service unit that is responsible for bridging EU and UK education measures deals with all sectors of education.

## **The UK’s response to the Education OMC: Changing the Politics of Education Policy Making?**

The first striking finding of our research is that there are very limited organizational resources for the reception of the education OMC in the UK. Applying the lens of discursive institutionalism we analyse what resources are actually available, and most importantly, how the formal definitions of duties and responsibilities associated with these organizational resources, are constructed, interpreted and thus mediated by UK civil servants. An administrative unit within the Whitehall civil service, called the Joint International Unit (JIU)<sup>vii</sup>, has responsibility for the education OMC in the UK. It consists of three divisions which serve three government departments, the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Education<sup>viii</sup> (England and Wales), and the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS), the ‘home’ for higher education (for England only). Education is covered by the ‘International Education and Skills Division’ of the JIU. This division:

‘Promotes and represents the interests of the Department for Education and BIS in the European Union and wider multilateral system. It manages a range of international education partnership programmes in support of both domestic and international priorities’ (Organisational Chart, May 2010).

Only one of the seven sub-divisions of this International Education and Skills Division, named ‘EU, Education and Youth’, deals with EU education policy<sup>ix</sup>. In March 2010 four civil servants dealt with the reception of EU education policy. This was reduced to one after the election of a new Conservative-Liberal coalition UK government in May 2010 (Email communication,

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November 2010). A similarly low number of staff deal with EU matters in BIS, a UK central government department that is also served by the JIU that has also its own staff dealing with EU matters. Out of a total 3,100 staff working in BIS, only one person is working on full time basis in the area of EU and higher education. This limited allocation of organizational resources is compounded by the fact that the JIU defines its role mainly as mediating the education OMC at the domestic level:

‘to influence EU policy and identify the impact of European regulation on Department for Work and Pensions legislation, policy and practice *to minimise the risk of ECJ challenge to and other adverse effects on domestic policies and legislation*’ (emphasis added, JIU Strategic Narrative 2010/11).

The JIU strategic narrative also suggests that:

‘our expertise and influence with the Commission *provide vital checks on inappropriate regulation* that undermines the positive economic and social benefits of free movement and reduces opportunity for UK citizens and business. We are also working with EU and Whitehall partners to tackle benefit tourism and fraud, as well as promoting efficient and responsive welfare systems, labour markets and education and training systems that promote growth and social inclusion’

‘*We will help shape the agenda* in the G20 and at EU level so that employability, education and lifelong learning drive the economic recovery’ (emphases added).

In more specific terms this ‘mediation’ of the education OMC in the UK takes the form of civil servants in the JIU scrutinising EU initiatives and publications before these are passed on to the relevant domestic actors. Monitoring and filtering are two key manifestations of the ‘mediation’ of the education OMC through ‘interactive’ discursive processes (Schmidt & Radaelli 2004:206).

### *Monitoring and Filtering EU Initiatives to Domestic Policy Teams*

The JIU receives all Commission documents, that require a response from member states and develops a view of what the UK position should be. Part of the JIU’s job is to rank Commission proposals in order of significance (UK Interview 1). It then liaises with the relevant domestic policy teams and considers the likely ‘impact’ of the proposals on domestic policy. The domestic teams are requested to ‘have a look’ at the proposal and advise on the UK position, for instance by commenting on whether ‘this fits with what we are doing in the UK, so we don’t have to worry about it’ (UK Interview 1).

The JIU then constructs a policy response. This process is complemented by the European Scrutiny Committee, a Select Committee in the Commons, the lower house of the Westminster Parliament<sup>x</sup>. After EU education initiatives have been channelled through the JIU, they arrive at the European Scrutiny Committee. The JIU provides an ‘explanatory memorandum’ that outlines the main issues around a particular Commission Communication about education, in terms of potential implications of the proposals for the UK, including the devolved education administrations. The Scrutiny Committee may then require a Ministerial response to the

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Communication, and the JIU will provide the Minister with the necessary background information to produce this. Hence, the Scrutiny Committee in interaction with the JIU further examines and thus potentially constrains the reception of the education OMC.

### *Protecting the Domestic Policy Teams from 'Inappropriate Initiatives'*

The reactive position of the domestic policy actors means that the UK civil servants who first deal with the education OMC have a fairly large scope for action, and a significant capacity for shaping the UK's response. Civil servants in the JIU and BIS consider themselves as a 'buffer' between the EU and the domestic policy teams. They receive, filter and present what the EU communicates to the domestic actors, a key concern being to safeguard against initiatives or proposals that may change the UK policy agenda.

'... in schools their bottom line would be "what are we going to get out of it?" and the probability is that they won't get anything out of it, so they're not prepared to commit the time and the expense. So the JIU takes that burden off them' (UK Interview 1).

'...the primary drivers of UK higher education policy are UK Ministers and domestic policy priorities. So, my job is largely to act as a conduit of information and policy development between the ministry and the UK sector... ... the OMC is below their (politicians') radar' (UK Interview 2).

Their ability to do so is also strengthened by their assumption that their colleagues in the domestic policy arena, but also the politicians at Ministerial level, have no knowledge of the specifics of the EU process, and certainly no knowledge of the OMC in education. This form of mediation means that civil servants effectively become policy brokers. Their significant role – even though the broad steer for policy is provided by Ministers - sheds light onto the limited institutionalisation of the OMC. In organizational terms the way UK civil servants from the JIU define their role points to a policy 'diffusion' problem (Kroeger 2006:8), where there is limited vertical integration of policies across the layers of the institution. Civil servants involved in international policy work are not engaged in day-to-day policy making that pertains to the reception of the OMC in the UK. This has been recognized by Commission policy officers who expect such functional separation of roles (EAC Interviews 5, 6, see also Radulova 2007), and it raises the issue of the significance of administrative traditions in member states in processes of europeanisation (Fink-Hafner 2007).

### *UK Influence on OMC Education Measures*

While the UK mediates OMC education measures when they are communicated from the EU to civil servants, it is important to note that iterative policy making also enables domestic policy actors to influence such measures. Our interview data suggest that UK civil servants at times seek to actively influence the form and content of EU initiatives (EAC interview 2). For instance, documents produced by the JIU advocate a proactive role for the UK in shaping the EU education policy agenda. In relation to the European Qualifications Framework and the cluster 'Recognition of Learning Outcomes' the *OMC Discussion Paper 2010* argues:

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“By taking a proactive stance in the OMC, the UK can check the influence of the Commission when it is at odds with our national interests. ... By sharing our good practice we can not only gain the good will of our neighbours but also influence other member states’ practice to coincide with our own and, in turn, influence EU thinking on educational reform” (p.2)

“... leading the way in delivering reforms, perhaps in partnership with like-minded countries, could be a way of the UK to exercise soft ‘peer pressure’ on other countries to follow suit” (p.3) (Emphasis in the original).

Our DG-EAC and UK interviews do not provide strong support for this actually happening in practice, at least as far as exercising ‘pressure’. The statements from the JIU documents may well refer primarily to intentions rather than actions. But there is evidence of attempting to apply ‘soft pressure’ by the UK on the European Commission through communication with the Commission and through building ‘alliances’ with ‘similarly minded’ member states.

### *Points of Contact with the Commission and Other Member States*

The European Commission instigates policy initiatives and stimulates ‘domestic policy reflection’ in relation to education (Armstrong 2006, 86), and in the process, it attempts to change member states’ policy preferences. While the Commission does not exercise any legislative or enforcement functions, it has put in place through the OMC important institutional structures that shape the development of education policy, and in turn, enable domestic policy makers to influence the education OMC. One of the ways of achieving this is through formal and informal communications between domestic civil servants and the Commission.

Every six months there are meetings of the High Level Group of senior officials, organised by the Presidency of the Council to discuss future policy directions. These meetings are not about the details of specific texts (as in the case of the Council Working Group meetings), rather they are an informal opportunity for the officials responsible for EU work within each member state ‘to get together with colleagues from other states and the Commission and table suggestions for the way forward’ (UK Interview 1). The Council Education Committee receives from, and negotiates with the Commission the draft of the Conclusions prepared by the Presidency. The political rules of conduct that frame the production of discourse here emphasize achieving consensus at all levels (EAC Interviews 1, 6), which is clearly one of the features of the OMC. Also the various Working Groups and clusters that the Commission has set up as part of the education OMC are a route for civil servants to shape EU education measures. For instance, the Standing Group on Indicators and Benchmarks enables member states to shape the definition of indicators and benchmarks that further define the three main objectives of EU education policy. Member state input matters because these benchmarks ‘measure’ their performance on the basis of national and Eurostat statistics. Once the Standing Group has developed a number of indicators for education, JIU officials are further involved in the process of agreeing these, through a conference and a High Level group meeting, with the view of ‘checking’ the political feasibility of the indicator for the UK. In the case of contentious issues, UK civil servants seek a more direct and less formal access route to the Commission in order to discuss the proposals before they even reach the stage of negotiation within the Council

Education Committee (EAC Interview 6). The Commission is ‘inviting’ and ‘welcoming’ this type of informal discussion:

‘So, if we think something is important to us then we will get it in early with the Commission and try and shape it up before it goes as a formal proposal to the Education Committee... . . . If it was something that was contentious then we might have to send the Director of the JIU to meet someone very senior in the Commission ... Odile Quintin <sup>xi</sup>’ (UK Interview 1).

A further aspect of the mediation of the education OMC refers to attempts to influence its contents by building strategic links with other member states as these ‘fit’ with the domestic policy interests. Our data suggest a desire of the UK to build alliances with particular countries in the EU – different ones for different purposes, despite the widespread view of the UK’s position that it has ‘little to learn’ from its European counterparts in terms of education policy (EAC Interviews 4,5,8). This supports the idea that different member states adopt various policy learning styles in the context of the education OMC, with some seeking to steer other member states towards the adoption of their own policies and approaches (Lange & Alexiadou 2010). On several education issues the UK claims to be leading the way in terms of knowledge, research, policy positioning, and practice, an issue particularly highlighted in relation to higher education, and lifelong learning. The UK sees itself here as a leader in Europe, with the intention of ‘setting the agenda for others’ and thereby potentially shaping other member states’ perception of the ‘policy problem’ and their preferences (UK interview 1, Schmidt & Radaelli 2004:188).

Two groups of countries were identified in relation to ‘alliance building’. Eastern European countries, such as Croatia and Slovenia that are interested in what the UK is doing (UK interview 2), and this materialises mainly through the peer learning activities. Secondly, there are EU member states that again are ‘most interested and in-line with the UK views’, but are qualitatively different from the former group, because there is an admission that the UK ‘perhaps has something to learn’ from them (UK Interview 1). The references here are to Germany and Austria in relation to the vocational sector, and the Scandinavian countries. The UK tries to align itself with these countries in an attempt to pursue a particular policy line, for instance, the creation of a European league table for universities (EAC Interview 4). A discursive construction of ‘policy fit’ here between interest coalitions of member states seeks to pave the way for political institutional change.

### **Changing the Contents of UK Education Policies?**

An analysis of the reception and mediation of the education OMC in member states requires us to examine also the contents of education policy. Our interviews and analysis of the Progress Reports, suggest that the UK shows a very basic level of compliance with the OMC process, and is only concerned with ‘content’ when that is beyond what the country already ‘does’. The civil servants in the JIU that deal with EU matters write the biannual Progress Reports for the UK, which are talked about as merely ‘reporting’ what the UK is already doing. The tendency is to construct a narrative around questions of ‘fit’ with the EU requirements, something that is recognised by Commission officials (EAC Interviews 5, 8).

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The 1997-2010 New Labour government in the UK had adopted a Public Service Agreement (PSA) model whereby any additional public expenditure in England and Northern Ireland was tied to achieving higher outputs. This system of targets for all areas of public life had also been ingrained in the evaluation and investment strategies for education. Targets were largely expressed in terms of learning achievements covering all ages and stages of education. The UK government targets for education, training and life-long learning correspond broadly to the EU, i.e. Lisbon ones – but, they differ in terms of their scope, precision and timelines. We observe from the UK progress reports that there is a straightforward process of setting out UK government policies in relation to key policy themes identified through the education OMC, with an attempt to ‘fit’ these at a discursive level with the EU targets. For instance, item 1.6 of the 2009 Report on the UK’s progress towards the Lisbon Objectives (*‘How we promote the acquisition of transversal key competences in general education, VET, adult learning and teacher training’*) offers the same text that is published on the website of the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency<sup>xii</sup>. This practice of ‘copy and paste’ can be found in a large part of the reports, where the UK clearly shows a lot of activity in each of the areas designated, but not as a result of responding to a new EU policy:

‘The UK has chosen to address the EU benchmarks through its existing system of performance measures. In England, these are based on Public Service Agreements (PSAs). PSA targets use measured outcomes, and results are published for each institution and Local Authority. They are used in funding, and provide a rigorous tool to monitor progress and ensure accountability’. (2007 UK Progress Report, p.3)

This statement is accompanied by a ‘matching’ of the five benchmarks to the PSA targets that relate to education and training. Only in two benchmarks (on *‘early school leaving’*, and on *‘22 year olds completing upper secondary education’*) is there a significant fit between the OMC and the UK target, and, even there, the targets are articulated in slightly different ways and have very different timelines for their implementation. This seems to be similar to other OMC processes, such as Social Inclusion in relation to which Armstrong (2006:95) suggests that the ‘domestic and EU cycles are not synchronised’. For the other three benchmarks it is clearly stated that ‘the UK has no explicit target to address’. Moreover, civil servants in the two government Departments that deal with education consider the five benchmarks as not relevant to their mainstream work. This limited influence of the EU education OMC on the contents of education policies in the UK emerges not just from the analysis of the three UK biannual Progress Reports but is also supported by the UK interview data:

‘we are not trying to tailor our policies to the EU objectives ... .. we would just find ways to count things that we’ve already counted in a slightly different way’ (UK Interview 1)

‘the OMC on HE is very peripherally connected with policy development and direction in the UK and sometimes feels like the OMC is ‘something we do’ because you have to fill the UK chair .... It is often about the presentation of UK policy in OMC terms’ (UK Interview 2).

Hence, there seems little identification of ‘policy problems’ by UK civil servants in response to the education OMC.

### *Limited Interest in Policy Learning*

Further to little reported impact on domestic education policy content, our interview data suggest that there is no real interest among UK policy actors in the Peer Learning Activities (PLAs) organised by the Commission. This is a view echoed by Commission interviewees who perceive the UK as an unwilling or uninterested participant in the PLAs (EAC Interviews 2, 4, 5, 8). UK interview respondents suggested that there is a lack of ministerial interest in the outcomes of PLAs, partly because these are seen as politically ‘weaker’ than the indicators and benchmarks. Moreover, peer learning is not linked to clear policy objectives (see also Lange & Alexiadou 2010), and there is a perceived lack of integration of peer learning with mainstream policy making, with PLAs viewed as a ‘discrete, isolated task’ (UK interview 2). Still, the extract below provides an example of how PLAs can contribute to identifying an area where the UK is not performing as well as it could:

‘Clearly the UK has a different perspective on lifelong learning than does the rest of Europe. Perhaps an appropriate team ... should send a representative to the cluster to learn why so many other states have a different view of lifelong learning .... Although the UK has a more developed adult education system than many other states, our adult skill levels are not as high as in some of our neighbouring countries. Perhaps we have something to learn from other countries’ approaches to key skills’ (OMC Discussion Paper 2010, p.3)

Discourse generated in the PLAs, such as new policy ideas in relation to adult learning, can thus legitimate subsequent political action and potential changes in how UK institutions think about the issue (Schmidt & Radaelli 2004). But, overall, the impact of policy learning on UK education policy content seems limited. Given the change of government in the UK in May 2010 from Labour to a Conservative-Liberal coalition government, civil servants from the JIU told us that the UK is going to be:

‘... less proactive in its approach than under the previous government. For instance, we pushed for the skills agenda to be a priority in Europe. It is unlikely that we will try and lead policy in such a way in future. The new government is not enthusiastic about cross European policy, although it is very interested in international comparisons in education, and learning from other countries’ experiences’ (Email communication from JIU official, 1/11/2011).

This comment would suggest we are entering a period of further ‘surface’ learning in UK education policy formation, and the continuation of mediating OMC initiatives without fundamentally changing preferences.

### **Concluding remarks**

The OMC has been accepted in UK education policy making because of its ‘soft’ voluntary nature, and compatibility with the new public management techniques already used in domestic policy making. But our research suggests that it does not seem to have any discernible impact on the *content* of UK education policy. The biannual Progress Reports and interviews with DG EAC and UK officials indicate that the UK is content to act through the framework of the benchmarks and indicators primarily because of the ‘loose’ fit with similar domestic targets. The lack of

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significant divergence between the general aims of the OMC and UK policy objectives, as well as informal negotiation between the JIU and the Education Committee, successfully steer away from conflicts in relation to education policy, while also not providing any incentives for the domestic policy actors to further institutionalise the OMC. As a result, we observe in the UK a strategy of deflecting education OMC measures which consists of devoting a low level of organisational resources to its reception, and limited communication between civil servants involved in EU and domestic policy work<sup>xiii</sup>. This suggests a potentially even more limited entrenchment than the finding of ‘isolated islands of domestic *support* inside ministries and bureaucracies’ (Citi & Rhodes 2006:477), as to date the main achievement of the OMCs on social inclusion and employment, policy fields that like education are characterized by deep seated different national perspectives (Heidenreich & Bischoff 2008, Zeitlin 2005). The UK is institutionally enrolled in the education OMC. It also maintains a discursive commitment to its continued sovereignty over education policy-making. The perspective of discursive institutionalism thus brings into sharp focus the ‘catalytic role’ (De Ruiter 2010:169) that the Commission plays in institutionalizing the education OMC at the EU level, while at the domestic level the JIU is a key forum of civil servants who act as policy brokers and ultimately gatekeepers in the discursive translation of the education OMC between EU and UK (Dolowitz & Marsh 2000).

Hence, reasons for the deflection of the education OMC can be found both within the nature of the instrument and the specific discursive and institutional positioning of the UK in relation to the EU. Our finding that the ‘soft’ institutional nature of the OMC enables various tactics of deflecting its influence chimes with accounts of the reception of other OMCs in the literature (Hatzopoulos 2007; Idema & Kelemen 2006, Zeitlin 2005). In particular the OMCs on tourism, youth, taxation and immigration are perceived as ‘soft’, because they lack national action plans and targets (Laffan & Shaw 2005). Heidenreich and Bischoff (2008:525) suggest that France has mainly displayed ‘symbolic’ acceptance of the employment OMC, while Gwiazda (2011) notes that the flexicurity concept of the EES had some impact on the formulation of employment policies in Italy and Poland, in particular when political parties that favoured European integration rather than eurosceptics were in power. So, the eurosceptic UK is not the only member state that deflects OMC measures.

It is likely that both the national and administrative contexts but also the specifics of the particular policy field in which the OMC operates will shape the trajectory of its impact. De Ruiter’s research notes differences in the degree of entrenchment between the fields of education and research & development, suggesting that member states are more open towards the education OMC because of its link to the EES (De Ruiter 2010). Within research in education, Grek et al. (2009) note that Finland is considered as a ‘model pupil’ because it has taken on board the discursive link between education and labour market policies, while Sweden is more inward looking and sceptical towards EU education initiatives, though its engagement with the EU is growing. In relation to quality assurance for education Sweden, not unlike England, considers itself as having already achieved the aims of the education OMC (ibid). For Slovenia, Lajh and Štremfel (2010: 75) suggest that the OMC has not imposed ‘deep systemic change’ on education policy-making, but merely induced a ‘passive reception of the EU’s Lifelong Learning Strategy.

Similarly, Slovakia and the Czech republic strive to implement the EU's lifelong learning policy, and not just in response to the education OMC but also EU education reform initiatives during accession negotiations (Štremfel & Lajh 2010:79). Simons (2007) notes that education policy-making in Flanders is being increasingly framed in terms of the benchmarks and indicators including an interest in policy learning, though he does not suggest that there are actual impacts of policy learning.

The literature to date thus provides interesting insights into the education OMC in some countries and in some education policies fields. While our study did not seek to differentiate between compulsory schooling, higher and vocational education, our data suggest that the greater autonomy of the higher education sector compared to compulsory schooling may provide more opportunities for deflecting EU OMC education measures. Our article hence provides the ground work for further research that systematically differentiates between different education policy fields when further analysing the reception and mediation of the education OMC in various EU member states.

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Corresponding author: Bettina Lange, Centre for Socio-Legal Studies, Manor Road Social Science Building, Manor Road, Oxford, OX1 3BU, UK. Email: [bettina.lange@csls.ox.ac.uk](mailto:bettina.lange@csls.ox.ac.uk)

### **Notes**

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<sup>i</sup> We focus here on the UK government and how it defines the domestic agenda in relation to EU education policy. This agenda is received and inflected differently in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales which have interconnected but different education systems. Since 1999 when the UK devolved powers to a Parliament in Scotland, and Assemblies in the other three nations, education has been a 'devolved' matter, although international relations are still handled by the central Westminster government (Cole & Palmer 2011). The reception and mediation of the education OMC therefore comes both within the ambit of international policy handled by the London based national government, and potentially devolved education policy-making in Scotland, Wales and Northern-Ireland. There is evidence that Scotland is more receptive to some EU education policy initiatives than England, but this has to be understood also in light of Scotland's attempt to secure further independence from the central UK government (Dardanelli 2005). Wales is likely to develop a similar approach to Scotland in relation to the education OMC. Welsh Ministers already speak in the European Council on education separate from the UK delegation and in general attempt to influence policy development through informal mechanisms and personal contacts (Cole & Palmer 2011).

<sup>ii</sup> In June 2010 we conducted semi-structured interviews (each 90 minutes long) with two UK civil servants who are the main policy actors involved in the reception of the education OMC. One was

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located within the Joint International Unit (JIU), and the other within the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS). These two civil servants constitute nearly the whole population of participants that could have been interviewed. At the time of the interviews there was another (absent) member of staff, and a more senior manager who had ‘the OMC’ remit as 25% of their responsibilities. We also draw on follow-up e-mail communications with these respondents.

<sup>iii</sup> In January 2010 we conducted eight semi-structured interviews (50-90 minutes) with European Commission officials in the DG Education and Culture (DG EAC), Directorate A (Lifelong Learning: Horizontal policy issues and 2020 strategy), and Directorate B (Lifelong Learning: Policies and programmes).

<sup>iv</sup> The UK civil service documents consist of the JIU Strategic Narrative 2010/2011 paper, the JIU Organisational Chart (May 2010), and, a discussion paper produced by the JIU entitled ‘Open Method of Coordination – An opportunity for the UK in the field of education’ (referred to as ‘OMC discussion paper 2010’)

<sup>v</sup> We examined the following Progress Reports:

(a) European Commission (2005) Implementing the ‘Education and Training 2010’ Work Programme - *Report on the UK’s progress towards the Lisbon Objectives*

(b) European Commission (2007) Education and Training 2010 - *Report on the UK’s progress towards the Lisbon Objectives*

(c) European Commission (2009) Education and Training 2010 - *Report on the UK’s progress towards the Lisbon Objectives*

<sup>vi</sup> In our original research design we defined ‘education’ policy-making as excluding higher education and the Bologna process because more studies have been already published on the internalisation of higher education than other education sectors. Also, in contrast to the education OMC, the Bologna process is based on intergovernmental decision-making and includes a wider range of countries than EU member states. Higher education appears simply as an example used by our interview respondents to illustrate policy mediation. We recognize, however, that the Lisbon strategy and its successor Europe 2020 moved the university sector to the heart of the agenda for economic growth and innovation, by setting a target of at least 40% of 30-34 year olds by 2020 completing third level education, with clear links to the EU’s actions around Research and Development (Gornitzka 2010).

<sup>vii</sup> In March 2010 the JIU had a total of 122,32 (full-time equivalent) members of staff.

<sup>viii</sup> It was set up under the Labour government, to serve the then Department for Children, Schools and Families.

<sup>ix</sup> Another sub-division deals with various EU programmes. The remaining five sub-divisions deal with the OECD and relations of the UK with non-EU countries (Organisational Chart 2010).

<sup>x</sup> The European Scrutiny Committee analyzes the legal and political importance of each EU document and decides which are debated. An Explanatory Memorandum is prepared for each document by the relevant Minister’s office. Documents that are perceived as important are discussed in the Committee’s weekly Reports. Ministers should only agree to EU proposals when these are cleared by the Committee. (<http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/european-scrutiny-committee/>) (Accessed 23 January 2012).

<sup>xi</sup> Odile Quintin was the Director of DG EAC until Jan Truszczyński replaced her in May 2010.

<sup>xii</sup> Linked to the then Department for Children, Schools and Families. ‘The new English secondary curriculum should enable all young people to become a) successful learners who enjoy learning, make progress and achieve; b) confident individuals who are able to live safe, healthy and fulfilling lives; c) responsible citizens who make a positive contribution to society.’ <http://curriculum.qcda.gov.uk/key-stages-3-and-4/aims-values-and-purposes/aims/index.aspx> (Accessed 30 October 2011).

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<sup>xiii</sup> Our research is based on an exploratory, qualitative case study and it is therefore a matter for further research to determine under what conditions interrelated discourses and institutions generate specific manifestations of the reception and mediation of the education OMC in the UK.

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