

Social dialogue over vocational training in market-led systems

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The involvement of social partners is central to the rhetoric of the European Commission approach to vocational training. This paper explores the development of social dialogue over vocational training at the European level and in Italy and Britain, two member states characterised as having market-led systems. The contrasting experience of the two member states suggests factors that are conducive to promoting greater social partner involvement in vocational training and demonstrates the complexity of developing a European approach.

Social partnership is central to European Commission (EC) rhetoric on vocational training, as expressed in the Cresson White Paper, *Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society*, as well as in the EC programmes developed by DG XXII and its forerunner, the Task Force on Human Resources. In recognition of the strategic importance of vocational education and training (VET) for raising the competitiveness of European enterprises, the EC launched the FORCE (*Formation Continue en Europe*) Programme in 1991, followed by the Leonardo da Vinci Programme in 1995, with a successor programme commencing in 2001. The importance of social dialogue has been reinforced throughout this expanding set of initiatives designed to promote transfer of best practice and to encourage innovation in vocational training.

This paper explores the progress of social dialogue over VET, focussing on two countries that share a common feature in their VET systems with the purpose of establishing factors conducive to social partner influence over VET. After outlining the development of social dialogue at the European level, a typology of VET systems is proposed, from which the two countries are selected for in-depth attention. Recent developments in the VET systems of Italy and Britain, are considered along with the role played in VET by the trade unions in those countries. Finally, a concluding

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section suggests explanations for the similarities and differences between the experience of the two countries.

Social dialogue at the European level

Social dialogue refers to meetings and negotiations between the social partners at the European level as defined in Article 118b of the EC Treaty. Three social partner representative organisations are involved: ETUC (European Trade Union Confederation, or *Confédération Européenne des Syndicats*), UNICE (*Union des Industries de la Communauté Européenne*) and CEEP (*Centre Européen de l'Entreprise Publique*). Meetings between social partner representatives, chaired by Commission officials, began during the mid-1980s and became increasingly significant with the Agreement on Social Policy concluded in the context of the Maastricht Treaty and the subsequent Protocol.

The EC President at that time, Jacques Delors, preferred European-level collective bargaining to imposing harmonised standards, believing that social dialogue would increase the legitimacy and feasibility of EC social policy. Delors reportedly told the social partners in 1985 that the Commission would not introduce further social policy initiatives if they would establish effective social dialogue (Teague, 1989b: 69–70). The social partners first met at Val Duchesse in January 1985 and dialogue continued until November 1987, at which point the process effectively came to an end (Carley, 1993: 114).

There was broad consensus between the social partner institutions over the EC's promotion of employment and training initiatives and attempts to create a common framework for free movement of labour, social security and training arrangements. By contrast, Teague (1989a: 311) noted that 'legislation and other interventionist social policies, and the extent to which a dialogue should be established between the social partners . . . are not regarded in such a universally benign light.' The opposition of UNICE and CEEP to EC labour market regulation (Teague and Grahl, 1992: 81) and EU-wide collective bargaining (Streeck and Schmitter, 1992) is well documented and the ETUC faced a continual struggle to engage employers' representative associations in social dialogue (Dølvic, 1999: 141). The employers limited the effectiveness of social dialogue by claiming that entering into binding agreements was beyond the jurisdiction of UNICE. As Streeck and Schmitter (1998: 135) argued:

By not delegating authority upwards to the European level, employers were, and still are, able to confine institutions like the Social Dialogue to a strictly non-binding, consultative status.

Nevertheless, pressure was growing from the trade unions and some governments for social dialogue to increase social partner involvement in policy making and for a social dimension to counteract the impact of the 1987 Single European Act (Leibfried, 1994). Article 118b, inserted into the EEC Treaty by the Single European Act, obliged the Commission to

endeavour to develop the dialogue between management and labour at the European level which could, if the two sides consider it desirable, lead to relations based on agreement.

Delors revived social dialogue with a meeting in January 1989, inviting the social partners to be consulted on the Social Action Programme. The Economic and Social Committee, created as a forum for social dialogue, drafted the Social Charter in 1989 for adoption at the Maastricht summit. The Charter reflected the need for 'common minimum labour standards' to avoid 'social dumping' (EC, 1993: 46) and 'downward pressure on labour standards' (EC, 1994: 21). While labour standards can be used as mechanisms for raising labour quality and productivity, especially when supported by active labour market policy (Deakin, 1997: 432), employers expressed fears that EC regulation would undermine the competitiveness of European enterprises. Industrialists have argued that future EU social policy should focus on employability and competitiveness rather than regulation, creating employment opportunities to reduce the financial and social burden of unemployment (Nicholson, 1995; Fitzgerald, 1997).

The agreement reached by the social partners on 31 October 1991 formed the basis

of the Social Protocol that was eventually adopted at the Maastricht summit following the opposition of the UK Government to the proposed Social Chapter. The social partners therefore had a determining influence on the characteristics of the emerging EU industrial relations system (Strøby Jensen, Madsen and Due, 1999: 127). When the Social Protocol was adopted as an annex to the Maastricht Treaty of February 1992, the social partnership model became a central theme of the social dimension of European integration (Hall, 1994) and social dialogue increased in importance thereafter (Dølvic, 1999).

In the 31 October agreement, Dølvic (1999: 159) notes,

not only did the ETUC gain significant influence over the constitutional process of the Community, it apparently managed to get UNICE to accept the idea of European negotiations.

Various explanations have been put forward for the UNICE representatives' volte-face, including the changing attitude of key national confederations (Ross, 1995), employers' fears of imposed legislation (Teague, 1989b) and the Commission's exploitation of the tensions between intergovernmentalism and supranationalism (Dølvic, 1999: 170). Social dialogue, especially concerning the Social Dimension, was profoundly affected by the struggles between the 'Euro-corporatist' regulation coalition and the 'Euro-liberalist' free-market coalition (Rhodes, 1992; Streeck, 1995). As a key institution in the latter group, UNICE opposed the Social Charter as interventionist, but continued to support social dialogue as a way of developing 'mutual understanding' (Vogel, 1991: 54).

Much significance was attached to the possibility of implementing social policy through collective agreements involving the social partners (Milner, 1992), partly because it was expected to lead to the emergence of collective bargaining at the European level (Coldrick, 1990; Teague, 1989b). Yet there is still uncertainty over the impact of EU regulation on local industrial relations and there is significant diversity between member states and between EU and national organisations and procedures. Transnational labour market regulation through the Social Dimension and the development of social dialogue through the Protocol was viewed as heralding the emergence of a European industrial relations system. The development of the Social Dimension was primarily a political regulation of employment standards to counteract the economic impact of the Single European Market, while the Maastricht Treaty brought in an institutional dimension by facilitating collective agreements between the social partners (Strøby Jensen, Madsen and Due, 1995: 17). The adoption of the Social Charter, rather than the Protocol, is therefore viewed as the starting point of a European industrial relations system (Strøby Jensen, Madsen and Due, 1999: 125).

Rhodes (1995: 107) notes that in addition to the symbolic importance of social dialogue, it has the potential to develop 'a more substantial form of consensus-based policy formulation.' Streeck (1994: 166), however, believes that

while presented as a Social Dimension project designed to increase union influence, the social dialogue was in fact instituted to strengthen the position of the employers in order to raise their potential stake in supranational institution-building.

While the Social Protocol offers the possibility of negotiating binding European agreements, the ensuing regulations are only effected when the social partners 'develop and adopt them by mutual consent' (Noé, 1996: 41). Since the Protocol is ineffective if either party is reluctant to engage in discussion, social dialogue has only advanced in those areas where consensus already exists between the social partners, arguably the very areas where it is least necessary.

Following the revival of social dialogue, social partner working groups were established on two priority areas: education and training, and problems surrounding the emergence of a European labour market (Carley, 1993: 115). It is significant that the education and training working group made most progress and concluded four joint opinions within two years. Clearly, VET is one area where a high degree of consensus exists between the social partners, so social dialogue can be expected to be especially important, as a recent Commission paper stressed:

Social dialogue and the process of reaching agreement between the social partners at the European level – particularly in the area of vocational training—should form a major component of this community co-operation. Consultation with and between the partners on access to skills has already been advocated in the 1997 *Report on Access to Continuing Training*. Community activity will provide support to the dialogue between and with the social partners (EC, 1997).

Consensus and the involvement of stakeholders is viewed as critical for the success of VET (Finlay and Niven, 1996), and all VET systems 'attain some measure of consensus or they would be unable to operate' (Finlay, 1998: 4). Establishing social dialogue over VET increases both the legitimacy and relevance of training provision. Through involving the social partners in the identification of training needs, the curricula and content of training, the standards and methods, VET systems attain greater legitimacy than if the providers determine these issues. Equally, VET is made more relevant to the needs of industry, thereby reducing the gap between training providers, especially where these are part of the formal state education system, and the end users in the world of work. It is not unreasonable to assume that legitimacy and relevance are important factors affecting the motivation of both employers and employees to become involved in VET.

The involvement of social partners in the VET system is especially important given the changing industrial context. Firstly, there is the adoption of new information and communication technologies and the consequent growth of importance of the knowledge base and intellectual capital within enterprises. Associated with these technological developments are product and process changes that demand continuing and adaptive VET. Further attempts to promote workforce flexibility and adaptability have equally stimulated bespoke training, as has the introduction of team working and quality initiatives. The emphasis on life-long learning in the development of European VET policy has brought a new recognition of the importance of tacit skills and informal routes of acquisition. The rapidity of these changes has reduced the lead-time between training and implementation, as well as focussing attention on the workplace. These issues suggest that there is a need for local social partner involvement in VET at the point of production, complementing social dialogue at the European level.

The value of social dialogue as an instrument for social and labour regulation within the EU depends upon the effectiveness of social partner representative organisations within member states (Bercusson et al., 1996: 154). Given the importance of involving the social partners in VET, a major challenge for developing EU policy to promote social dialogue is the diversity of arrangements in member states (Baldry, 1994). This diversity is apparent in terms of all four dimensions of VET systems identified by Lewis (1997): organisation, strategy, policy and practice. Integrated European training of trade unionists is necessary to improve the effectiveness of social dialogue (EC, 1992) but differences between national VET systems make it difficult to integrate national with European developments in this area (Stirling and Miller, 1998).

The extent to which the social partners have been involved in determining training policy and practice has been analysed in several reports produced by the Commission or its agencies (Blanpain, Engels and Pellegrini, 1994; Theunissen, 1996; Gierorgica and Luttringer, 1997; Aga, 1998). These analyses reveal that experience from EU countries does not converge towards a clearly defined role for the social partners (Halvorsen, 1998). The EC has therefore provided funding to promote convergence through introducing exchanges and generalising best practice through programmes such as Leonardo da Vinci (Adnett, 1996: 126). Differences between national VET systems can be expected to impose constraints on social dialogue and to take these into account a typology of VET systems must be developed.

Towards a typology of VET systems

As Rainbird (1993: 185) notes, training systems are 'embedded in broader systems of social relations with which they interact', so it is necessary to consider these con-

texts in attempting to distinguish VET systems. Four competing conceptual frameworks are commonly used to contrast national systems of industrial relations and vocational training: the institutional model; the Industrial Order model; the market/education model; and the work/school model. Since each contributes something to our understanding of the diversity of VET systems within the EU, they are briefly reviewed below and combined to establish a typology.

The *institutional model* attempts to make generalisations possible through identifying common characteristics of countries according to their national labour market regimes. Rhodes (1995), for example, contrasts the Romano-Germanic approach of strong state regulation with Anglo-Irish tradition of voluntarism and the Nordic approach of state regulation combined with centralised collective bargaining over employment issues. Hyman (1994) contrasts the Northern, Mediterranean and Western European approaches. The Northern European variant involves a centralised, formalised approach, exemplified by the Scandinavian model of social partnership involving strong representative bodies. Extensive legislation on codetermination and workers' rights underpins strictly enforced, centralised and sector agreements between employers' associations and the trade union confederations. Similarly, in Germany, social partnership is an explicit part of the system (see Frege, 1999), sector joint bodies as well as sector agreements are especially important, and at the local level, unions have influence through the Works Councils. The Mediterranean variant is characterised by the political isolation of labour organisations, where government intervention has historically further reduced the influence of trade unions already weakened by employer hostility. After the unrest of 1968, trade unions in France and Italy gained more influence through central, formal agreements, but remain largely ineffective at local level. The Western European approach, as typified by the UK and Ireland, is characterised as pluralist, voluntarist, decentralised and fragmented. The social partnership approach to the Programme of National Recovery in Ireland represented a departure from the UK model of industrial relations (O'Donnell and O'Reardon, 1997), and VET arrangements in Northern Ireland are distinct, so this paper will focus on Britain rather than the UK as a whole.

Lane (1994) employs the concept of *Industrial Order* to explain differences in patterns of industrial relations and systems of vocational training in three European member states. Industrial Order, focussing on the interdependence between industrial organisation and the social institutional environment, takes its specific form as a result of critical historical phases of industrialisation. Thus the state, the financial system, the training and education system, the system of industrial relations and intermediate institutions such as trade associations, are the basic components which shape the development of Industrial Order. Apart from exceptional radical transformations resulting from war and revolution, for the most part Industrial Orders exhibit a high degree of continuity, but a continuity that is subject to continual incremental change. In Germany, Industrial Order entails a high degree of legal regulation coupled with industrial self-organisation and a state structure that devolves much to regional government in the *Länder*. The financial system is centred on the banks, which provide long-term credit and consultancy services to enterprises. In France, Industrial Order has been historically *dirigiste*, centred on the role of the state, both through nationalisation of key enterprises and the regulation of investment through control of the banking sector. The banks are less powerful than in the German financial system, but extend long-term credit to enterprises leading French managers to adopt an equally long-term perspective on investment. Industrial Order in Britain exhibits continuity in state structures and an attachment to voluntarism leading to minimal political involvement in industrial organisation and highly fragmented institutional structures. A powerful, independent financial system has led to a dominance of accountants among higher management and forced managers to seek high, short-term returns on capital.

In the *market/education* model, articulated by Campinos-Dubernet and Grando (1988), a distinction is made between market models and educational models of VET systems. The UK and Italy are characterised as following the market model, where

enterprises are responsible for most vocational training, there are few training institutions external to companies and the volume of training tends to be driven by short-term employer needs. The market model is associated with periodic skill shortages, chronic under-investment in training and employer strategies of poaching skilled labour. France and Germany are associated with the educational model, where external institutions play a major role in training, which is viewed in an educational perspective.

The *work/school* model, outlined by Lynch (1994), distinguishes work-based systems of VET from other training systems such as school-based and government led systems. Among the work-based systems, the emphasis in Germany and Denmark is on apprenticeships, while in France there is an employer training tax system. The common problem with a work-based system is how to encourage providers to supply training in transferable skills. Norway is cited as an example of a school-based youth training programme. Adnett (1996) notes the marked differences in terms of educational attainment between the Northern and Southern countries in the European Union, with the Northern states having a higher volume of attainment at higher levels (university and tertiary non-university). Expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP is highest in the Nordic countries because of the school-based educational system and lowest in Germany where under the dual system apprenticeship is the key route to vocational skill formation. Participation rates for 17-year-olds have risen fastest in Nordic countries and in those states lacking a strong apprenticeship tradition (France, Ireland, Spain). Participation in CVET is high in the Nordic countries and concentrated in the younger age groups and among those with high educational attainment.

The above discussion has highlighted two important dimensions of the structures and processes of VET systems: the *locus* of training, and how it is *regulated*. The key features of VET in the four largest EU member states can be distinguished according to these two dimensions. In terms of its locus, VET is mostly industry-led, with the workplace playing a major role in Britain and Germany, whereas training is education-led and centred on vocational schools in Italy and France. Whereas VET is regulated by the state in Germany and France, in Britain and Italy arrangements are more market-led, with responsibility for training largely devolved to employers. These contextual differences are summarised in Table 1.

Where there is a high degree of state regulation of VET, and extensive institutionalisation, as in Germany and France (Winterton, 1998), the degree and nature of social partner involvement can be determined by political means. In Italy and Britain, however, where the VET systems are ostensibly market-led, competitive and based on weak institutionalisation (Campinos-Dubernet and Grando, 1988) the circumstances appear less conducive to social dialogue. As at the EU level, while social dialogue is not inconsistent with a liberalist, free market approach, it is more commonly associated with a corporatist, regulatory approach. A consideration of social partner involvement in VET in Italy and Britain should therefore reveal some of these tensions. Since the locus of VET is also quite distinct between these two countries, the following analysis should also provide insights into where social dialogue is most appropriate in these different contexts. After briefly reviewing developments in the VET systems and the nature and extent of social partner involvement in VET in each

Table 1: Locus and regulation of VET in four member states

Regulation	Market	State
Focus		
Workplace	Britain	Germany
School	Italy	France

country, some conclusions are offered on the nature of social dialogue in market-led VET systems.

VET and social dialogue in Italy

Brierley (1990: 186) describes vocational training in Italy as 'precarious' because there is no binding legislative framework and no obligation on employers to provide training. Conflicts between the central and local state, the Ministries of Education and Labour, and between capital and labour, increase the ineffectiveness of VET. Apprenticeships have disappeared from industrial enterprises, partly as a result of union opposition to the exploitation of young workers. Education is compulsory up to 14 years of age when the middle school leaving certificate (*licenza media*) is taken, after which individuals may follow academic, technical or teacher routes for further education, or enter state VET schools (*istituto professionale statale, IPS*). Approximately 90 per cent of students nowadays continue in full-time education beyond the legal compulsory age (Jobert, Marry and Tanguy, 1997: 8). There are three alternative routes within the VET system according to the intended destination of trainees (*IPS alberghiero, IPS industriale, IPS artigianale*).

Strong central commitment to social dialogue has resulted in significant national and regional agreements and a tripartite model of VET. Social partner agreements injected a degree of dynamism into a system that is otherwise portrayed as stagnant and slow to adopt much-needed reform (Infelise, 1996: 173). The provision of VET in Italy has been both stimulated by and distorted by two characteristics of the labour market: a generally low level of educational attainment and serious structural unemployment in the South (*Mezzogiorno*).

In the 1970s over 75 per cent of Italians had not attained the level of the *licenza media*, the 14 years school leaving certificate, and this prompted demands for access to remedial education. In 1973 the metalworkers' union negotiated a sector agreement granting individual workers a right to 150 hours education and training per year in order to upgrade the workforce. Many sector wage agreements made since then have extended the 150 hours right to other workers, with the beneficiaries selected by the works council. Such provision, however, is aimed at remedying deficiencies in the education system and cannot be used for VET, nor for trade union education, which were separately provided for, but for 'the cultural improvement of all workers, through the acquisition of new cognitive skills' (Meghnagi, 1997: 255). Priority was given to remedial education because generally low educational attainment necessitated equipping individuals with the basic skills to facilitate their involvement in the further training deemed necessary to modernise production. Low academic achievement has persisted, with 65 per cent of the workforce still below the level of the school leaving certificate in 1992. Nevertheless, 79 per cent of the manufacturing workforce had achieved at least this level and 71 per cent of white collar and managerial staff had attained at least the level of the 19 years certificate (Jobert, 1997: 209).

Unemployment among young people led to serious student unrest in 1977, which was centred in the South, rather than the North, as was the case during the events of 1968. The government introduced active labour market measures under Law 285/1977, including special job placement lists for young people and incentives for employers who hired young people on permanent contracts and provided on-the-job training (*Contratti di formazione e lavoro*). The ineffectiveness of the Act quickly became apparent, as little use was made of the training contract scheme and private companies mainly hired young people on fixed-term contracts. One of the casualties of the failure of Law 285 was the notion of 'job training programmes managed by a tripartite partnership between employers, trade unions and regional authorities.' (Giovine, 1997: 248).

The massive regional disparity in unemployment rates similarly necessitated the adoption of special regional measures for VET. While unemployment in 1992 was 11.5 per cent overall in Italy, in the *Mezzogiorno* the rate was 20.4 per cent and for women below 30 in the South, the unemployed rate was 55 per cent. These disparities

were the driving force for Law 845/1978 that delegated VET to the regions in 1978 (Infelise, 1996: 174). To support the regions in this new role, the training institute ISFOL (*Istituto per lo Sviluppo della Formazione Professionale dei Lavoratori*) was established in 1973. Jobert (1997: 219) notes that the regions were most able to define appropriate training for local labour market conditions, but that this led to fragmentation and inefficiencies in VET provision. Since the regions had no source of funding for their new role, they have been largely dependent on the European Social Fund and state grants (Giovine, 1991) and the separation between public (regional) training and VET undertaken by companies has become more pronounced (Infelise, 1996: 174). Moreover, the problems are most pronounced in the South where the need for VET is greatest, and without a national system of certification and assessment, VET does little to enhance mobility.

The VET system suffers from the dominance of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the economy, the failure of unions to prioritise VET in place of remedial education and the absence of tax concessions or grants to offset the costs of training. It was usual for large firms to train workers, but once trained they often left for better opportunities with SMEs. Some industrial enterprises responded by creating training centres to cater for both internal and external workers, but these are not externally validated. Regional VET outside the state system, much of it supported by the European Social Fund, involves the social partners, but the tripartite model does not function perfectly and the regional government role is the dominant one (Heidemann et al., 1994: 65).

In the absence of publicly funded VET linked to workplaces, a two-tier system of training has emerged, comprising an ineffective formal institutional system and an informal system 'submerged' in SMEs. Brierley (1990: 191) believed that the challenge of the 1990s was 'to institutionalise the submerged system, both to give a greater role to the employers and the unions in negotiating training programmes and to make the training system more effective.' The EC et al., *Compendium* (1996) describes a project in Mestre (Venice) that could prove a model for achieving this ambition by developing VET opportunities in SMEs through forging closer links with large firms.

In 1992 an agreement was made between the regions and the three main trade unions, CGIL (*Confederazione Generale Italiana dei Lavoratori*), CISL (*Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Liberi*) and UIL (*Unione Italiana del Lavoro*), to extend school provision and reform VET legislation. This agreement was followed in 1993 by two formal agreements between the three trade unions and, on the one hand the employers' association *Confindustria*, and on other, *Artigiano*, the association for the craft industries. Such national and regional agreements are essentially protocols recording joint interests and common opinions, whereas sector agreements regulate continuing training (Heidemann et al., 1994: 67). Nevertheless, these agreements indicated the determination of the social partners to become more involved in shaping the reform of the VET system. As Meghnagi (1997: 267) comments, the 1973 agreement was a result of labour's struggle with the employers, but the 1993 protocol represents employers and unions joining forces to challenge the VET system. Significantly, the protocol proposes a permanent system of training needs analysis, jointly managed by unions and employers, to determine regional training provision. While there will inevitably be differences in the interpretation of the protocol, Meghnagi (1997: 267) is confident that a broad consensus exists over the necessary reforms to VET. In particular, the social partners appear to agree on the need to see

the centrality of the work context and of classes in basic education as productive fields for vocational qualification; an apprentice programme; . . . [and] a national system of job qualifications and certification of training.

The unions' preference for centralised action and the relative weakness of local representative infrastructure limits the effectiveness of social dialogue at company level. The creation of ISFOL to promote workers' vocational training was highly significant, but has not been translated into effective VET provision. The Italian unions have made little progress to date in using sector agreements on training to

promote vocational training, both because of the weakness of local organisation and their commitment to remedial education. The deficiencies of the school system and initial training of young people has therefore both distorted VET provision and blurred the boundary between education and training for the trade unions (Heidemann et al., 1994: 61–3).

Social dialogue over VET in Britain

The focus on short-term return on capital employed in British industry results in under-investment in technology and skill formation and a tendency to compete on price rather than quality, which would require sustained training (Finegold and Soskice, 1988; Snower, 1995). Management training is equally inadequate, with an emphasis on practical experience and generalists rather than qualifications and specialists (Johnson and Winterton, 1999). Several studies have suggested that the proportion of people trained to intermediate skills level in the UK is inadequate (Mason and van Ark, 1994; Lloyd and Steedman, 1999). The *Skills Audit* data used by the Skills Task Force shows 11 per cent of the total working population in the UK are qualified at VQ level 3, compared with 14 per cent in France, 29 per cent in the USA and 40 per cent in Germany (STF, 1998: 28). In the case of new entrants to the labour market, 13 per cent are at VQ level 3 in the UK compared with 15 per cent in France, 32 per cent in the USA and 52 per cent in Germany.

Partly in an effort to remedy these chronic skill deficiencies, and partly in order to promote a free market approach, the UK VET system was radically overhauled during the 1980s (Hyman, 1992; Senker, 1992). First, employers were given a leading role in determining local training priorities and in establishing sector-level training arrangements. Second, a competence-based approach to VET was adopted in order to establish a nation-wide unified system of work-based qualifications. Third, initial vocational training was boosted by the introduction of Modern Apprenticeships.

The Employment Department (1989) White Paper, *Employment for the 1990s*, proposed devolving responsibility for achieving an increase in the volume of VET to the local level and increasing the role of employers, 'to return the training problem to businesses' (Ashton, Green and Hoskins, 1989: 150). Employer-led Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) in England and Wales, and Local Enterprise Companies (LECs) in Scotland were created to give employers a major role in ensuring that training provision matches local labour market needs. Sector training bodies were also transformed into employer-led bodies. The Industry Training Boards (ITBs) established under the *Industrial Training Act 1964* were tripartite sector bodies which promoted training through raising funds from a statutory levy on employers and disbursing grants to meet the costs of those employers training employees in accordance with ITB policies and directives. The involvement of the social partners was seen as necessary to establish an 'industry view', which would transcend the sectional interests of employers and trade unions (Rainbird, 1990). Under the *Employment and Training Act 1973*, levy exemptions were allowed to companies that could demonstrate the quality of their own training programmes. The Conservatives replaced these statutory, tripartite ITBs with voluntary, employer-led Industry Training Organisations (ITOs). Following a review of their operation, the *Employment and Training Act 1981* abolished 17 of the 24 ITBs, and notice was given in 1990 that another 5 were to be abolished. Some 120 ITOs came into existence alongside the two remaining ITBs (the CITB in Construction and the ECITB in Engineering Construction).

The Manpower Services Commission (MSC), established in 1973 to create a coherent national policy for VET, published *The New Training Initiative* in 1981, putting the case for 'new standards' to define what people at work should be able to do. Occupational competence was put forward as an alternative to the traditional time-serving approach (Hayes, 1982). In 1986, a *Review of Vocational Qualifications* for the MSC and the Department of Education and Science recommended that new vocational qualifications should be centred on occupational competence, defined as

'the ability to perform satisfactorily in an occupation or range of occupational tasks.' The review led to the development of a unified system of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) based on occupational standards developed by employer-led Industry Lead Bodies (ILBs). In 1997, the Department for Education and Employment published criteria for new sector National Training Organisations (NTOs) combining the functions of the former ITOs and ILBs. By the end of 1999 there were 71 recognised NTOs and the Department expects the number to increase to between 75 and 80 in the near future. The CITB and ECITB are the only NTOs that continue to have statutory levy powers, although Sea Fish Training, established as a NTO in October 1997, is funded through a statutory levy raised by the Sea Fish Industry Authority. The National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) was established to oversee and monitor the NVQ process, accrediting the qualifications certificated by Awarding Bodies. In Scotland, the Scottish Vocational Education Council (ScotVEC) was established to accredit the equivalent Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs). In 1996 NCVQ merged with the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA) to form the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), while in Scotland, ScotVEC was re-named the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). Certificates for accredited qualifications are granted to successful individuals by Awarding Bodies such as the City and Guilds of London Institute, the Royal Society of Arts and the Business and Technician Education Council, which had been the traditional qualifying bodies for VET before the introduction of the new qualifications framework. Acceptance of the new VQs (NVQs and SVQs) has been far from universal, as evidenced by the slow rate of take-up and extensive criticism of the approach (Toye and Vigor, 1994; Leman, 1994; Winterton and Winterton, 1995a; 1995b).

The traditional apprenticeship system, which virtually disappeared during the 1980s, had been criticised for involving unnecessary time-serving, for being inflexible and out-dated, especially in relation to demarcation between trades, and for perpetuating male dominance of skilled occupations (Williams, 1963). Nevertheless, apprenticeship was the main mechanism of skill formation for craft workers in the UK, and the decline in the number of apprentices from the late 1960s exacerbated skill shortages. The ratio of apprentices to total manufacturing employment, fell by 31 per cent between 1969 and 1974, and by a further 54 per cent between 1981 and 1987 (Gospel, 1994: 510). Even after this decline, the number of employees classifying themselves as apprentices fell by one third between 1992 and 1994 (Leman and Williams, 1995). Nevertheless, in 1994, 73 per cent of apprentices in Great Britain were working towards qualifications, ranging from higher level qualifications such as HNC/HND or higher BTEC, through City and Guilds advanced craft or VQ level 3, to City and Guilds craft or VQ level 2. The first prototype Modern Apprenticeships began in September 1994 in 17 occupational areas (including chemicals and construction), and following the experience of this pilot initiative, was extended to other areas. The Modern Apprenticeships in each sector are being developed by NTOs to establish a framework defining the skills, knowledge and understanding the apprentice will develop. A training agreement details the rights and obligations of the employer and the apprentice, and by linking the Modern Apprenticeships to VQ level 3 and above, the intention is to make the system of assessment and accreditation consistent across sectors (Everett and Leman, 1995; Everett et al., 1996).

Heidemann et al. (1994: 11) commented on the 'almost total absence of social dialogue' over VET in the UK. The Conservative reforms that created a market-led system in which employers played an increasingly powerful role (Finlay, 1998: 7) reduced the unions' formal influence at sector level, to such an extent that Fairley (1998: 21) claims they are no longer regarded as a major stakeholder in VET in Scotland. However, the FORCE study of union involvement in continuous vocational training found that union influence had been maintained in sector training bodies, even in the construction industry, where union membership has collapsed through sub-contracting. (Winterton and Winterton, 1993). Similarly, the change in status of the engineering and chemicals sector training bodies from ITBs to ITOs appeared to have made little difference to the degree of involvement of the unions. Social dia-

logue, although it is rarely described as such and does not involve any negotiation, is an intrinsic part of training body practice for all sectors that are unionised and social partner involvement in most NTOs is crucial in the establishment of occupational standards.

Paradoxically, the removal of *statutory* union involvement in the sector bodies actually *increased* union involvement in VET, by stimulating greater union interest in training at workplace level (Rainbird, 1990: 4). Therefore, despite the marginalisation of the institutions of collective bargaining since the early 1980s, where unions are still effective, there is social dialogue over VET at both enterprise and workplace levels, depending upon the structure of collective bargaining (Winterton and Winterton, 1994a). In recent years, the unions have demonstrated commitment to establishing local collaborative arrangements to promote lifetime learning (TUC, 1994; 1995a; 1995b), an approach that has been further stimulated by the new Labour Government's Union Learning Fund initiative.

Since collective bargaining is voluntary, informal and very decentralised in private sector industries in the UK, there is most scope for effective social dialogue at workplace level. The TUC proposed a statutory basis for worker consultation through the formation of Workplace Training Committees (WTCs), formulated along the same lines as health and safety committees (TUC, 1989: 11) and with a statutory responsibility to develop a Training Plan for the enterprise. In the absence of statutory support, the TUC Guidance Note *Joint Action over Training* argued that union negotiators should put training on the bargaining agenda and develop a joint approach with employers. Although statutory underpinning of the training system was seen as necessary to give individuals a right to training (TUC, 1992: 31), individuals' access to training could be promoted through local negotiation (TUC, 1996).

It is difficult to assess the extent to which unions have generally succeeded in engaging employers on training because the overall scope of collective bargaining has contracted since 1980, but there have been model examples of successful Training Agreements (Winterton and Winterton, 1994b: 361). In a study of multiskilling, the cases which exhibited the most significant negotiation over VET were those where extensive work restructuring and highly developed local trade union organisation required management to engage in meaningful social dialogue (Winterton and Winterton, 1997), suggesting a contingency approach to social partnership in the UK.

Conclusions

While Italy and Britain have been characterised as having market-led VET systems, this requires some qualification before proceeding to draw conclusions from the above discussion. Britain's VET system was formerly a tripartite one, at least for the 40 per cent of the workforce covered by ITBs, which were established in sectors where most VET took place. During the 1980s Conservative reforms were presented as de-regulation with 'rational individuals making decisions in a market' (Tanguy and Rainbird, 1997: 115). Yet central control and regulation of VET arguably increased because the NTOs depend upon public finance and training provision through the TECs and LECs is driven by a system of output-related funding. Moreover, NTOs now cover virtually the whole economy, so it the system is both more extensive and more inclusive. Britain's VET system is market-led in the sense that participation by employers is voluntary and (with the exceptions noted above) there is no statutory training levy. There are parallels with Italy, where the VET system is devolved to the regions and state provision, focused on remedial education, is dependent upon the European Social Fund and other public sources of finance. The difference is that arrangements for VET made by employers in Italy are largely independent of state provision and attempts to promote regulated VET through training contracts failed in the market place.

In terms of social dialogue over VET, the experience of the two countries is quite different and on the surface apparently anomalous. In Italy, there is a tradition of statutory regulation of the labour market and political support for involving the

social partners. Despite this statutory support, trade unions have made little progress in translating the rhetoric of sector agreements on training into tangible success at enterprise level, because of the weakness of workplace organisation. In Britain, the social partners may enter into agreements but the state plays a minimal role and the labour market is deregulated. While this deregulated, voluntarist context is less conducive to trade union involvement in VET, even in the absence of statutory support, there is evidence of significant social dialogue over VET.

The apparent anomaly that social dialogue appears to be more effective in Britain, where statutory support is absent may be explained by different motives for dialogue and by the differences in the locus of VET in the two countries. In terms of motives, the Italian approach represents a political commitment that the partnership approach to skill formation will increase value added, thereby maintaining both profits and wages, although union organisation is insufficient to translate this into meaningful dialogue. In Britain the motives for dialogue are more contingent, since it is adopted out of necessity where local organisation requires union involvement to facilitate workplace change. The locus of VET is also important. In Italy the trade unions are weakly organised at local level, which militates against meaningful dialogue, and the situation is exacerbated by a VET system that is centred on school and therefore divorced from the social partners. In Britain, while the VET system is also market-led and of short-term focus, it is grounded in the workplace, making it conducive to social dialogue where there is sufficient strength of trade union organisation. Social dialogue would be enhanced in Italy by altering the locus of VET to the workplace and in Britain by political commitment in the form of robust statutory support.

In both member states, as well as at the EU level, there are limits to reaching agreement over VET through social dialogue because the interests of the different parties are not entirely congruent, despite training being regarded as an area of consensus between the social partners. Employers and employers' associations, along with employees and trade unions, are all 'in favour of' training, but their motives invariably encompass more than an attachment to a highly-educated workforce for its own sake. For employers, the major issue is having a workforce with the competence to perform in accordance with business objectives. For employees, training represents a means of raising and crediting skills and competence, which should provide a route to higher earnings, improved job satisfaction and security, and increased labour market mobility. The representative bodies, employers' associations and trade unions, support these objectives, but may each have a wider agenda. The employers' associations may take a strategic view of training as a mechanism to support job restructuring via multi-skilling and functional flexibility. The trade unions may see training as a route to increasing employee autonomy, as well as maintaining pay rates.

A tripartite approach, bringing the social partners together with state agencies to determine VET arrangements, can also resolve the potential conflicts between the short-term needs of businesses to support immediate activities, the medium-term needs of individuals for employability and the longer-term skill formation strategy of the state. The necessity for such dialogue to take place at enterprise and establishment level is clear from the nature of the changes outlined in the introduction to this paper. In order to make this dialogue effective, VET policy at the EU level needs to accommodate structural differences in national VET systems as well as the different strengths and weaknesses of trade union organisation, while seeking to develop a common approach so that best practice examples can be generalised.

The rhetoric of social partnership entered the UK with the election of the Labour Government in 1997 and Tony Blair's foreword to the *Fairness at Work* White Paper emphasised partnership in place of conflict in industrial relations (DTI, 1998: 3). There is evidently tension in the Labour Government's 'Third Way' between the neo-liberalism of the US Democratic Party and the more regulated approach of the European Social Democrats. While Ackers and Payne (1998) note considerable divergence between the interpretations of 'social partnership' by the main political parties and social partner organisations in the UK, they also conflate social partnership with the

notion of stakeholding. However, stakeholders can additionally include a wider range of interest groups such as consumers, tenants, patients, students and parents whereas social partnership is exclusively concerned with relations between the social partners. Kelly (1998: 61) contrasts social partnership as the ideology of moderation, with conflicting interests as the ideology of militancy. Yet this dichotomy between militancy and moderation is over-simplistic because the reality of workplace relations presents a spectrum of issues ranging from those over which there is an absolute identity of interest between employer and employed to those in which their interests are diametrically opposed.

This combination of conflict and cooperation is especially evident in discussion over VET, which therefore represents a major opportunity to subject social dialogue and social partnership to critical examination. Developing a common framework for social dialogue over VET as part of the EU Social Dimension will greatly facilitate the process in all member states, and especially in more market-led systems like Italy and Britain. Such dialogue at the EU level will inevitably continue to involve cross-class policy coalitions, highlighting 'the complexity of dependence and competition, co-operation and conflict, within and between the organizations of workers and employers at the national as well as the European level.' (Dølvic, 1999: 95).

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Maria Helena André, Confederal Secretary of the ETUC, Micaela Fodringo of the Chamber of Commerce in Genova and John Rodgers of the CEDEFOP Management Board, for their valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Peter Senker and two anonymous referees also suggested improvements.

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