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Introduction: The Industrial Relations of Learning and Training: A New Consensus or a New Politics?

ABSTRACT ▪ The learning agenda has become an increasingly prominent concern of policy-makers at the level of the EU and national Member States, and is often presented as a positive-sum issue around which industrial relations renewal can take place. Yet the dynamics related to this in industrial relations terms are relatively under-explored. This introductory article reviews some of the underlying debates and sets out the main contributions of the articles in this special issue. These show that the new politics of learning and skill poses significant challenges for national systems of regulation, the mode of engagement between the social actors and the capacities and capabilities needed by the social actors to further 'supply-side' industrial relations renewal.
KEYWORDS: learning ▪ partnership ▪ regulation ▪ skills ▪ social partners

The learning agenda has become an increasingly prominent policy concern in the European Union. Set against the Lisbon agenda, learning and skills development are portrayed as central components of a strategy to make Europe the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010. Lifelong learning is now 'confirmed … as a basic component of the European social model' (EC, 2001: 6). The rationale for this is all too familiar. In the context of heightened global competition and economic uncertainty, economies and firms need constantly to upgrade their skills base to remain competitive and, in the case of the EU, respond to the challenge of cheap-wage, low-skill competitors through upgrading strategies based on high skills and quality products. Given the imperatives of capitalist firms constantly to restructure their operations and increase the adaptability and flexibility of labour, workers (and citizens) are exhorted to take increased responsibility for their learning, training and skills development, so that they can remain employable. Some commentators suggest that the challenges of the new global political economy limit the policy options available, or at least considered by politicians;

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learning, training and skills investments are thus seen as benign political goals, compared to the contentious politics of tax, welfare reform and demand management (Cutler, 1992). Thus, as Garsten and Jacobsson (2004: 2) explain:

> The shift of focus in labour market policy discourse from 'lack of employment' to 'lack of employability' illustrates a shift in problem perception and in policy from demand-orientated policies to promote full employment to supply-orientated policies to promote 'full employability'. It also illustrates a shift from a systemic view of the labour market to a focus on individuals and their qualities.

A central concern of this special issue is to explore the challenges and implications, in industrial relations terms, of contemporary labour market policy with regard to learning, training and employability. There has been much debate around a new 'supply-side' industrial relations (Martínez Lucio et al., this issue), and new social pacts based on 'supply-side corporatism' (Falkner, 1997); while learning and training issues are often viewed somewhat optimistically in terms of industrial relations renewal (see, for example, Kochan, 2005). Yet there has been very little detailed empirical examination of what this means, and how it is unfolding in practice. For example, whilst it is accepted that the learning agenda is a central concern of policy-makers, and increasingly the social actors, learning and training issues are rarely scrutinized from an industrial relations perspective or in relation to the dynamics, processes and patterns of industrial relations change, particularly at the level of the workplace. Where learning and training are considered it is typically in relation to the architecture of national training systems and how these interconnect, support and are supported by the formal institutions of industrial relations to form component parts of specific national regulatory regimes (Hall and Soskice, 2001; Maurice et al., 1986).

Yet, as the following articles show, the developing policy agenda around learning exposes extant institutions of industrial relations to many challenges. Consistent and coherent implementation of learning initiatives can be a problem in all regulatory regimes, even if some are more conducive to the development of new, formal frameworks than others. Also, whilst these issues are often considered suitable for mutual gains accommodations and exchanges, both the development and implementation of learning and training initiatives present industrial relations actors with many tensions as they seek to respond to the demands of organizational restructuring and labour market change. Whilst many of the articles assert that learning and skills represent fertile ground for trade unions to extend their role, they also suggest that unions need to develop new 'participation skills' as they develop their own capacities to respond to the new supply-side industrial relations.

Policy Context, National Systems and the 'New' Social Model

The consensus that exists at EU level, and across all EU nation-states, in relation to the learning agenda is more than a matter of discourse. It has been backed by a series of policy pronouncements, instruments and benchmarking criteria. In response to the Lisbon Agenda, the European Commission undertook an extensive consultation exercise which resulted in the Communication *Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality*, published in November 2001 (see Stuart and Greenwood, 2006, for a detailed review). The Communication (EC, 2001) set out the key priority areas to be tackled and established the *building blocks* required for the development of coherent and comprehensive lifelong learning strategies in all member states.

How lifelong learning was to be understood proved quite contentious. An initial definition proposed by the Commission was considered too skewed towards a labour market conceptualization, and was broadened to cover 'all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective' (EC, 2001: 9). Importantly, learning was defined not just in formal terms (or in relation to vocational education and training), but also encompassed non-formal and informal modes.

The suggested priorities for action were generic enough to fit this wide-ranging definition, and included: at European level, valuing learning, information, guidance and counselling and investing time and money in learning; at national, regional and local levels, bringing together learners and learning opportunities, basic skills and innovative pedagogy. Each priority was then linked to specific sets of building blocks such as partnership working, creating learning cultures, improving access to learning opportunities and raising demand for learning. Despite the broad definition, the centrality of learning to the European Employment Strategy (EES), and the Lisbon agenda to which such policy has increasingly been tied, was an underpinning rationale:

> Lifelong learning, therefore, has a key role to play in developing a coordinated strategy for employment and particularly for promoting a skilled, trained and adaptable workforce. This means removing the barriers that prevent people from entering the labour market and limit progression within it. Tackling inequality and social exclusion is part of this. (EC, 2001: 6)

However, no new legislative or regulatory mechanisms were introduced to ensure progress, monitoring and evaluation of the learning agenda at EU level. This was to be achieved through the mechanisms of the EES, the open

method of coordination and the system of annual Joint Employment Reports. At one level this can be seen to support the primacy that Member States hold with regard to the development of education and training systems under the Treaty of Rome (Heyes, 2007). The EU has exhorted Member States to develop learning strategies and policy interventions that are 'adapted to local and national circumstances', and they therefore 'remain free to develop their own coherent and comprehensive strategies, and to design and manage their own systems, *while broadly moving in the same direction*' (EC, 2001: 25, emphasis added).

Yet at the same time, the integration of learning and employability within the concerns of the EES means that the EU is attempting to shape the education and training systems of Members States to a greater extent than ever before. Whilst this is to be achieved through governance modes based upon soft regulation, notably benchmarking and steering, rather than legal sanctions, 'Member States may voluntarily bind themselves in the process' (Leisink and Hyman, 2005: 282). It is also notable that the Commission's deliberations on a new framework for learning across Europe questioned 'how well equipped traditional education and training systems were' to keep pace with economic change, noting that 'traditional policies have tended to focus too strongly on institutional arrangements' and that a 'fundamentally new approach to education and training policies should be developed and implemented within the framework of lifelong learning' (EC, 2001: 7). Whether this is the case or not is a central concern of many of the articles in this special issue.

How well equipped are national training and industrial relations systems to cope with the imperatives shaping the new learning agenda? In simple terms, analyses of national systems of vocational education and training (VET) have tended to focus on the relationship between regulation and training outcomes. In contrast to the neo-liberal mantra that regulation and labour market rigidities impede flexibility, commentators suggest that regulation is needed to produce superior training outcomes and a highly skilled workforce. Why this should be the case has been adeptly explained by Streeck (1989, 1997): decisions relating to skills development and investments are increasingly determined at the level of the workplace. Competitive success will depend on the utilization of broad and high skills, which will need to be produced in abundant supply beyond levels of current need (what Streeck calls redundant capacities). Yet if left to their own devices, it is rational for firms to under-invest in such skills, since trained workers are free to leave the firm and competitors who free-ride are able to poach such skills. To address this classic collective good dilemma, it is necessary 'that the vocational training system should be highly institutionalized, with appropriate legislation and strong trade unions which oblige firms to pursue collective long-term interests' (Regini, 1995: 192). Thus Anglo-Saxon market economies such as the UK systematically under-invest

in training and skills, whereas economies like Germany produce high levels of skills because firms' investment decisions are bound in an institutional complex of 'beneficial constraints' (Streeck, 1997). Thus regulation is seen as important in terms of allowing firms to develop mechanisms to internalize investments in skills, avoiding knee-jerk labour reductions during periods of economic hardship (see, for example, Lloyd, 1999, on the French aerospace industry) and developing more innovative and quality-oriented systems of production (Streeck, 1992).

The key question, with which many articles in this issue grapple, is whether existing systems of regulatory governance are suited, or adaptable to, the demands of the new lifelong learning agenda. The European Commission clearly thinks not. The role of national governments and the social partners in the management of new learning systems also becomes increasingly complex within the EU, given the push towards the supranational level and the increasing emphasis at the level of the firm and the individual. Jessop (2002: 235), for example, notes that the role of the nation-state becomes increasingly uncertain and 'hollowed out' within the overall discourse of supply-side policy formulation. One response is to accept this, but to assert that supply-side measures around a new learning agenda will be shaped by the evolved traditions and cultures of national systems of political economy: national developments will therefore be path-dependent (Hall and Soskice, 2001).

Clearly, this argument is persuasive, but should not in itself be taken as evidence that national models are inherently stable and robust with regard to new pressures and developments for skill formation. Care must be taken in assuming outcomes from supposed national models of regulation. One of the key challenges facing national systems, as the article by Martínez Lucio et al. explores, is the changed definition of skill development itself, with less emphasis on initial systems of training, which are often easier to sytematize, measure and regulate, and more of an emphasis on learning and competence of an informal and non-formal kind. This poses a direct challenge for systems of regulation, governance and interest articulation, because as Crouch et al. (1999: 221) explain, 'although the changeability and flexibility of new skill concepts are shifting emphasis towards further rather than initial VET, it is difficult to organize neo-corporatist involvement in the former'.

Nonetheless, the social partners are increasingly exhorted to engage with the challenges underpinning the contemporary learning agenda, around the need to improve competitiveness and respond to restructuring, and establish new supply-side accommodations. This was explicit in the Commission's Communication (2001: 21) on lifelong learning, which stated that:

> The social partners are invited to negotiate and implement agreements at all appropriate levels to modernize the organization of work, with a view to increasing investment in lifelong learning and to provide more time for

> learning. For example, they should work towards the recognition of all learning activities, including non-formal and informal learning, and integrate this into all aspects of human resource policies and practices at the enterprise level.

Winterton's article explores what this means in terms of social dialogue around learning and training at EU level and in Member States, whilst Stuart and Wallis explore the different levels and forms of new learning partnerships that are unfolding in various Member States. The modus operandi is typically around the partnership model of industrial relations, and partnership working has been identified by the EU as one of the building blocks of comprehensive and coherent systems of lifelong learning. The rationale is, in simple terms, two-fold. First, developments in supply-side industrial relations put increased emphasis on cooperative forms of engagement between employers and unions at firm level, to find common solutions to enhance competitive advantage. Second, and central to this, learning and training are positioned as positive-sum issues around which new, consensual systems of industrial relations can be built. For unions, this is typically understood in terms of the development of new integrative, as opposed to distributive, bargaining agendas, directed at 'occupational interests' and 'qualitative concerns' (Stuart, 1996).

Huzzard et al. (2005), in their study of trade union strategy within key EU Member States, suggest that partnership approaches are becoming more prominent, but that unions face a number of challenges in advancing these: not least in terms of ensuring an effective symmetry between 'dancing' and 'boxing' to hold employers accountable to implementing partnership agreements. Significantly, there is a big question mark over the extent to which learning and training issues are inherently consensual and conflict-free (Stuart, 1996). It is highly likely that union involvement in social dialogue and partnership around learning and training will raise new sets of tensions between the social partners, not least in terms of how interests are defined and for whom (Heyes, 2007). As Martínez Lucio et al. (this issue) argue, the new industrial relations of learning remains political, and hence the way that the social partners 'craft' their way into partnership relations and institutions of regulation should not be seen as a given.

It is against this backdrop that the following articles are presented. They provide an important evidence base to explore the complex levels of regulation that increasingly frame the learning agenda, and the political tensions involved in the new industrial relations of learning. In particular, they consider in some detail the myriad levels of engagement that are evolving in relation to learning, and the diverse and complex languages of skill and learning that are driving such engagement. How this challenges our traditional, and somewhat binary, understanding of national systems, be they coordinated, regulated or liberal, is a leitmotif running through most contributions.

Social Dialogue and New Partnership Innovations around Learning

The article by Winterton considers the possibility of 'developing coherent European policies for increasing social partner influence' in the domain of learning and VET despite the diversity of national systems of VET and structures of social dialogue. As he notes, at EU level there is a strong push for social dialogue over learning and training matters, evident in the agreement between the key social partners (ETUC, UNICE/UEAMPE and CEEP) on a *Framework for Actions for the Lifelong Development of Competencies and Qualifications* and EU sectoral social dialogue more generally. Certainly, 'most European social dialogue sector committees have discussed lifelong learning and have developed concrete actions'. In order to assess whether this is leading to convergence at the national level, Winterton draws on a survey of all old EU Member States to explore the extent of social dialogue over training policy-making and implementation, and initiatives to encourage participation in learning. His analysis is organized in a typology that situates training systems in terms of whether they are state- or market-regulated and school- or workplace-focused.

The characteristics of the different systems 'promote or constrain social partner involvement', but in many respects the 'differences between the countries appear to be less than might be anticipated'. For example, Winterton argues that 'the state-regulated workplace model offers solutions better adapted to labour market needs than the state-regulated school model, while the market-led workplace model is conducive to more flexible and responsive adaptive training'. He notes that pressures towards convergence and divergence occur simultaneously across all EU countries: the demand at EU level for more coordinated social partner action over qualification structures and sectoral competences encourage convergence, but the demands for learning and training that are increasingly workplace-focused and relevant to labour market needs results in divergence. 'The prognosis for social dialogue over VET' is, it is tentatively suggested, 'increasing diversity *within* Member States leading to greater convergence between them'. It may well be that any future convergence is more likely to occur through sectoral activity, but this is an issue for future research.

From a similar perspective, Stuart and Wallis explore in more detail the nature of trade union involvement in the new learning agenda within seven countries (Germany, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Spain and the UK). They explore the different types of *learning partnerships* that are emerging in response to the challenges of sectoral restructuring, focusing on the specific concerns of the steel and metal sectors. Three potential types are identified: *neo-corporatist*, *micro-corporatist* and *local trade union-led learning partnership*. The first type of learning partnership, seen as the epitome of supply-side corporatist exchanges of

a bipartite or tripartite nature, is seen to be strong in terms of the development of formal, institutionalized frameworks, be it at national, sectoral or regional level, and is found in more regulated economies. But they lack a degree of flexibility in relation to the imperatives of workplace restructuring and face significant implementation problems.

The other types of learning partnership afford more flexibility, be it in terms of specific workplace dilemmas (micro-corporatist learning partnerships) or specific individual, as opposed to employer, learning interests (local trade union learning partnerships). A particularly innovative local trade union response was found, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, in the UK market-focused system. The article shows how the development of such learning partnerships creates a new set of challenges for trade unions. These include different approaches to skills development, such as capturing and accrediting informal learning and tacit skills, and how to reconcile the different interests of workers and employers in relation to competence development and employability. There are also broader issues of coordinated governance across the different potential levels of learning partnership and the 'participation skills' that are demanded to engage in such partnerships in an effective manner.

The Politics of the New Skills and Learning Agenda

These key challenges around the different skills concerns of the contemporary learning agenda are explored more systematically in the three remaining articles. Martínez Lucio, Skule, Kruse and Trappmann examine the validation of non-formal and informal learning, looking specifically at evolving bipartite and tripartite frameworks for the transferability of skills in Germany, Norway and Spain. Progress has been made in each country, but in Spain and Norway (which is seen as an exemplar) particularly sophisticated and systematic frameworks have been developed through a series of Tripartite Agreements on Continuous Training and a Competence Reform Programme, respectively.

The authors' central question is whether 'these developments in the regulation of skills formation represent a robust and stable system of supply-side corporatism'. Whilst each of the countries is developing frameworks for accrediting transferable skills, in a broadly path-dependent manner, problems are clearly evident. For example, despite the seeming sophistication of the Norwegian Reform programme, there are very real problems in raising interest and engagement at the local level, whilst in Spain new patterns of immigration are challenging developing frameworks of competence and qualifications. In understanding these developments, it is argued that it is important to recognize that the seeming consensus over the rhetoric of skills conceals an underlying set of tensions. Most significantly, 'it should

not be seen as a given that industrial relations actors will craft their way into the regulation of the new politics of skill, due to the EU's emphasis on the role of the individual in developing their skills and careers'. Thus new departures in industrial relations and supply-side corporatism reveal a new and competing set of dynamics, potential strategic directions and actor-related issues. Again, it is noted that the changing language and practice of skills require 'a highly coordinated set of strategies in terms of social actors, public institutions and firms', but that coordination is thrown into sharp relief by the competing perspectives and needs of employers, individuals and their representatives and the actual capacities of 'the social actors to administer the new regulation'.

The potential tensions associated with the dynamics and strategic directions of new skills concerns are empirically examined in the workplace case studies of Leisink and Greenwood. The study focuses specifically on the context of restructuring at Corus steel plants in the Netherlands and the UK. The article asks, following Lloyd (1999), whether systems of regulation determine specific training outcomes. In the more highly regulated Dutch case the social partners had established a corporate Employment Pact, which created provisions for workers to have their skills needs assessed, and introduced an extensive training programme (Practical Craftmanship Programme) for workers who had not attained a level 2 qualification. Such joint initiatives were missing at the British plants, where the basic skills agenda was trade union-led, shop floor-focused and evolving through the development of union learning centres and agreements.

In conclusion, the article notes that regulation is important in providing unions with a base to sign collective agreements and that such agreements are important in setting the 'conditions of training participation'. However, such institutional frameworks were less effective in determining the 'implementation of training and the *actual participation* of the intended beneficiaries'. Management attitudes, worker characteristics and union activities were more important determinants in shaping participation. Lack of union organization on the shop floor in the Dutch case was problematic in this respect. Thus, despite different regulatory conditions, there was less difference between the plants when it came to 'influencing actual participation in company training programmes'. Indeed, in many ways recent union innovation in the UK cases was more suited to the encouragement of worker participation in learning activities.

The link between national models and workplace practices is explored further in the article by Greenwood and Randle. They examine how the constitution of teams relates to and is shaped by broader patterns of workplace learning and the dynamics of workplace industrial relations. Empirically, the article presents a number of case studies in the steel and metal sectors in Sweden and the UK: a comparison which is particularly useful given the tendency to view the Swedish model as the exemplar of

socio-technical, high-skill, high autonomy teams and the Anglo-Saxon model in terms of lean, management-controlled teams. The authors ask whether different constitutions of teams are associated with distinctive forms of learning, with *developmental* learning (involving critical reflection) related to socio-technical teams and *reproductive* learning (transmission of existing knowledge) linked to lean teams. Their findings suggest that the reality is more complex. The Swedish cases exhibited variety, with the imperatives of increased labour flexibility, cost reduction and union antagonism evident in one of the cases bearing marked similarities to the UK cases. Conversely, innovations in learning of a potentially developmental kind were also evident in some of the UK cases, although this was union-led and occurred largely outside the production domain and the constitution of teams.

Taken together, the contributions provide important insights into the complex challenges and politics of the new systems of supply-side industrial relations unfolding across Europe. The social actors are increasingly exhorted to develop a learning and skills development agenda in response to the economic imperatives facing the EU, yet these are far from consensual concerns. As the social actors seek to respond to the new learning agenda they face significant problems around the governance, regulation and coordination of these new systems and challenges in terms of their traditional representative identities and roles.

Whilst responses are evidently shaped by national training and industrial relations regimes, it is also clear that reading outcomes from a national mode of regulation that is itself increasingly changing is far from straightforward, particularly given the sheer diversity and complexity of the new learning agenda. Simplistic dichotomies (such as regulated versus market economies) often fail to capture the complexities of continuity and change within nation states – the more things stay the same, the more they change! In practical terms, the focus on workplace agendas and the needs of individuals often requires a reorientation of union strategies and a need for new modes of engagement with employers, whatever the national context. Yet such engagement is ridden with tensions around the competing definition, value and purpose of learning and skills. It is also clear that development around the new learning agenda raises a whole series of capacity and capability issues among the social partners.

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